

## Learning through Play in Ethiopia Meaning, Practices, Opportunities, and Barriers IRC Ethiopia, PlayMatters Project



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**Note:** The authors' views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the PlayMatters consortium, or its partner, the LEGO Foundation.

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# Acronyms/Abbreviations

<b>LtP</b>	Learning through Play
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>KII</b>	Key Informant Interview
<b>ESSWA</b>	The Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists
<b>PHRP</b>	Protecting Human research Participants.
<b>CFGD</b>	Child Focus Group Discussion
<b>PFGD</b>	Parent Focus Group Discussion



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# Executive Summary

There is evidence that supports the use of learning through Playing (LtP) in schools to improve holistic outcomes for children more effectively than either rote instruction or free play. However, the research tradition on LtP in low-income countries like Ethiopia is so low, resource allocation for the purpose is limited, and the level of evidence to inform policy and practice is so thin. On one hand, play is a human activity and designates experiences of, under normal conditions, every child. Children practice play naturally, and they do not wait until adults try to teach them what and how to play. Above all, LtP fosters child holistic development because it is actively engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and joyful in nature. However, culture and social structures shape the nature of play and scaffold its outcomes.

It was in this sense that this study adopted a positive deviance theoretical framework, and a qualitative ethnographic design to answer the following basic questions based on data collected from a community of practice:

1. What does LtP mean to children, educators, and parents in well-performing Ethiopian schools?
2. What does LtP look like in well-performing Ethiopian schools?
3. What barriers and opportunities challenge or facilitate the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at schools in Ethiopia?

Data for the study collected from 19 educators (14 females, 5 males), 61 school children (29 girls, 32 boys), and 62 parents (38 females, 24 males) through video/photo-stimulated KIs and FGDs, and observations. Based on the qualitative data analysis technique employed and major findings identified, therefore, the following concluding remarks were drawn, and implications forwarded.

## Major Findings and Conclusions

### A) Meaning of Play

**a.** Almost all informant groups took play has meanings toward happiness, joy and amusement for children. There is a general tendency to view that play at school or play-based learning is more fit for preschool than for primary grades.

**b.** Caregivers and guardians tended to discourage play and push children to focus on serious businesses of life (i.e., work and study) in preparation for adulthood. Therefore, the caregivers/guardians hold that play is not serious and hence, even if useful, it cannot guarantee adequate preparation for adulthood.

**c.** There is gendered and age division of play: what to play, with whom to play, and when (and how much) to play are all gender-determined. The extent to which adults promote such gendered division of play increases with age; where pre-primary children are not as restricted, even if there is this process of socialization to culture-determined gendered play.

**d.** In conclusion, the dominant conception of play is favors small kids than aged ones, gender-based than mixed, and to be accomplished during free time than integrated with classroom lessons.

### B) Practices and Examples of Play

- a.** School policies support the implementation of LtP in Ethiopia. However,



educators viewed the space for LtP better in ECD centers than in primary schools. Though ECD curriculum and schedules integrate LtP as an integral element of learning, primary school curriculum and school timetables focus on academic contents and use of time for its coverage.

**b.** Classroom observation results also confirmed that LtP implementation is better in ECD centers than in primary schools because of teacher capacity limitations (primary school teachers are less trained for LtP-based instruction), limited practical leadership support, and academic priority. Accordingly, preparation of play-based lessons was, compared to the situation in ECD centers, less practiced in primary schools.

**c.** In view inclusion practices in guided play, gender difference seemed divisive and prevalent at both ECD and primary levels though other diversity issues (such as disability, children from minority groups, and socio-economic status) were not reported nor observed to be barriers to inclusion. Educators tried their level best to make instructional and playful activities to be inclusive. Especially in Somali, however, activities were gender specific, boys and girls play separately in many cases, and even seating arrangements are gender specific due to cultural norms.

**d.** Level of support from school leadership showed varying findings. At the ECD level, leadership support in LtP implementation was viewed as appropriate. At the primary level, however, findings showed that the nature of leadership support inclined towards monitoring.

**e.** Examples of guided play in ECD vary by level, sex, and context. While building blocks and use of flash cards are common in ECD centers, storytelling, singing, and physical exercise centered activities that do not necessarily relate to the content of the lesson were the main strategies in the primary context. In the case of free play, while ECD activities converge to sliding, spinning, and jumping, primary school children focused on running and football for boys, and rope skipping and cultural dance for girls.

**f.** In general, LtP integration in classroom lessons remains a challenge in primary education, with better practice at preschool level.

### **C) Opportunities and Barriers**

**a.** The existence of supportive education policies and rich local culture with indigenous forms of play and games are the two basic opportunities that can give context to the implementation of LtP.

**b.** The findings also identified barriers that can affect effective implementation of LtP. These include limited space available for LtP, especially in the primary education curriculum, weak leadership support for LtP, large class sizes, negative parental attitudes towards play-based learning, unsuitable infrastructure, hindering pedagogical beliefs and competence of teachers and limited budget and resources.

In summary, the findings indicated both contexts and challenges ahead for effective implementation of LtP. Though the theoretical ground (policy provision and willingness of educators) is encouraging, practical strides in implementing LtP shows more gaps than achievements.

## Recommendations

Based on the conclusions reached, the following implications and action points are recommended for better progress in the sector:

**1.** Awareness creation campaigns and workshops should be organized on the nature and importance of play as well as the responsibilities of stakeholders in its implementation with a focus on the school community, parents, and policy makers.

**2.** The status of LtP conceptualization and implementation calls for designing capacity building or orientation schemes of stakeholders including:

**a)** Supporting compilation of different child play activities from different cultural and school contexts aimed at enriching pedagogical options in schools.

**b)** Developing training manuals for caregivers and community awareness creation purposes

**c)** Developing training manuals for educators on how to integrate LtP in lesson plans.

**d)** Designing gender inclusive framework in schools to ensure equal participation and learning of both sexes.

**3.** Findings showed resources limitations for the implementation of LtP in both ECD and primary schools. Cognizant of the scarce resources for education, thus, creating capacity in developing play materials from locally available materials, and need-based purchase of play materials as appropriate should be prioritized in future endeavors in the area.

**4.** Findings revealed that teacher capacity in implementing LtP is limited. For the sake of ensuring sustainability, therefore, LtP should be integrated into the teacher education curriculum in colleges of teacher education for ECD and primary grades.

**5.** The literature on LtP implementation in Ethiopia is very thin. Thus, supporting initiatives and research projects should get the attention of stakeholders to inform policy and practice.





# Background

PlayMatters (2020–2026) is a project focused on children whose education and social development has been affected by displacement and trauma. The project intends to reach 800,000+ refugee and host-community children across three countries: Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. The initiative introduces an intervention guided by the principle of Learning through Play (LtP) methodologies to build children’s resilience and cultivate holistic learning for children ages 3–12+. PlayMatters is led by the International Rescue Committee and includes Plan International, War Child Holland, Innovations for Poverty Action, and the Behavioral Insights Team in partnership with the LEGO Foundation.

## What Is Learning through Play (LtP)?

PlayMatters aims to promote Learning through Play (LtP) in different settings to improve children’s holistic learning. LtP is a “methodology for enhancing children’s cognitive, social, creative, emotional and physical skills through the integration of child-centered and play-based interactions into homes, communities, ECD centers, and primary schools” (PlayMatters, 2021). LtP is based on the premise that play is not purposeless, but a process that improves brain structure and function and facilitates the process of learning by helping children to pursue goals, ignore distractions, and build resilience. Key ingredients of LtP include; (1) children being actively engaged, (2) relating new experiences to what they already know (i.e., play being meaningful), (3) children enjoying a task for its own sake and the thrill of surprise, insight, or success after overcoming challenging experiences, (4) iteration—trying out possibilities, revising hypotheses and discovering new questions, and (5) social interactiveness—so that children are able to communicate thoughts, share ideas, understand others, enjoy being with others, and build stronger relationships. The PlayMatters consortium has committed to building the evidence base through rigorous research across the program cycle.

## Learning through Play in ECD Centers and Primary Schools

There is evidence that supports that the use of LtP in schools can improve holistic outcomes for children more effectively than either rote instruction or free play (Yogman et al., 2018), but it is largely from stable communities or developed country contexts. Research on the issue in developing countries, resource scarce or humanitarian contexts is very thin. On one hand, play is a human activity and designates experiences, under normal conditions, of every child. As asserted by Huizinga (1949), it is a bold reality that play precedes even culture and experiencing play does not wait until humans try to teach children what and how to play. However, culture and social structures shape the nature of play and scaffold its outcomes.

There is ample evidence that play has far-reaching and multifaceted contributions to human development. Play involves physical and psychological aspects, gives meaning to action, brings children together, facilitates sharing of emotions, and enhances intellectual functions (Huizinga, 1949; World Bank, 2015). As early literacy and numeracy are the foundations of learning, later achievements, and career development (Glass, 2002; French, 2013; Neumann et al., 2013; DES, 2011; Antoni & Heineck, 2012; Duncan et al., 2007; Dugdale & Clark, 2008; Purdie et al., 2011), play energizes the learning process of these two critical learning skills in early childhood (Weisberg et al., 2013; Kellock, 2015) and even beyond. The work of Vygotsky (2016) also showed how play contributes to the development of self-control, guided by facing and overcoming challenges. Play is a physical act, enhanced by self-evaluation based on performance in the play process.

Above all, play, a natural child activity (LEGO Foundation, 2019), is contextual and affordable for intervention (Kellock, 2015). As much as play can be supported by technology and socioeconomic developments, it is also practiced differently in each society, and each society has attached beliefs around how and when to play. As much as play is personal and social (or cultural), it is also universal and catalyzes global differences (Shuhidi, 2012). Pedagogically, play offers the power to connect home, school, and global phenomenon for better interaction and learning competency (Zosh et al, 2017).

Play has a universal dimension in nature (practiced by all children and every society), and at the same time, it is context-specific in practice and implementable with resources at hand. For example, in many areas of the world, children use local resources such as small stones, sticks, and locally made balls for play activities. Play's duality—its universality and its contextualization—makes it an affordable intervention strategy for disadvantaged children or those with learning difficulties.

Yet, despite its intrinsic advantages, play is often underutilized as an educational tool in classrooms. Hilke Meijer (2022) reports:

**“ One of the main contributing factors to teachers not implementing play-based learning is the many different and conflicting perspectives and personal beliefs about play and how it makes an impact on early childhood pedagogy. Some teachers do think that play has a positive impact on learning; however, there are some that do not support the inclusion of play in early childhood education. This view is also held by parents as they see play as being mutually exclusive from learning.”**

That teachers fail to have positive beliefs about learning through play, as explained in the literature, is due to lack of awareness and lack of competence, which in turn may be due to lack of training and support. Researchers who have sought to understand the issue (Cheng 2001; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Gray & Ryan 2016; Howard 2010; Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019) have done research on teachers' views on early child education, and one of their findings is, besides policy and parental resistance, teacher education and qualifications are major barriers for the adoption of learning through play. Other researchers (such as Gray & Ryan, 2016) have indicated that teachers' limited understanding of learning through play has a strong effect on teachers' beliefs. The researchers further explained that a lack teacher training results in conceptualizations of play as a free, unstructured, child-directed activity only. Thus, because of this misconception, teachers find it hard to plan for and integrate learning through play in their classrooms.

Research findings in LTP implementation in schools show additional factors worth considering in the area. These include conduciveness of physical environment (Beaver et al, 2008), school infrastructure (Barrett et al, 2019), teacher capacity gaps (Teberg, 1999; Lim, Bahauddin & Aziz, 2018), shortage of budget (Richter et al, 2016). Such diverse factors influencing play-based learning underscore that play is both universal and context-specific in nature. Thus, the hindrances to play-based learning seem to be just as universal and context-specific as play itself.

This study focused on understanding learning through play in Ethiopia, as it exists and as it is impacted by learning through play programs. Ethiopia is a multicultural and multilingual society with tremendous implications to classroom instruction and activities. The Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (FDRE, 1994), cognizant of the diverse social settings and constitutional provision (FDRE, 1995), recommends the use of mother tongue medium of instruction, curriculum decentralization, and participatory approaches for the purpose of enhancing relevance and quality of education. Resulting developments in preschools and primary education in this regard show a growing trend in the use of mother tongue language as the media of instruction, including in refugee camps (MoE, 2002), but not regarding learning through play.

Despite mentions of learning through play as one technique of participatory pedagogical approaches in policy and curricular documents in Ethiopia, evidence on the nature of play and challenges to its maximum implementation have not been explored so far. Generally, there is little evidence from low-resource contexts on how to assist educators in overcoming the challenges they face in implementing Learning through Play, and almost none from humanitarian settings (INEE, 2019). Much of the evidence on learning through play that leverages child development and learning is from the developed world. This does not, however, mean schools in low-income countries or refugee settings are not using learning through play as appropriate. Nor does it indicate the absence of play activities (guided or free) in schools to enhance learning in its totality—physical, social, cognitive, creative, and emotional. Thus, this study was a formative one, primarily aimed at learning from the practices of schools that use a positive deviance approach or an appreciative theory of learning. Specifically, the study intended to answer the following basic questions:

1. What does learning through play mean to children, educators, and parents in well-performing Ethiopian schools?
2. What does LtP look like in well-performing Ethiopian schools?
3. What barriers and opportunities challenge or facilitate the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at schools in Ethiopia?

## Theoretical Framework

Approaches to change traditionally follow the needs-based paradigm which focuses on what a community lacks or needs (Lapping et al., 2002). This aligns with the traditional “diffusion of innovation” paradigm which is an outside-in and expert-driven approach to solving problems (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019). In this sense, the approach is viewed as more of a deficit approach, rather than an asset-based approach, to bringing change (Baxter et al., 2016). Basically, it focuses on what the community or team could not obtain and is viewed as imposed, (often top-down); it often overlooks local solutions. While this approach may work well in addressing specific technical challenges, it works less well where development requires learning and behavioral changes on the part of beneficiaries (Nel, 2018). In these contexts, asset-based approaches, founded on bottom-up principles, are more appropriate for solving development problems, and ensuring reasonable and sustainable changes.

One example of such approach is the positive deviance theory that recognizes grassroots-level strengths and explores how, and why, things go right to learn from these successes (Baxter et al., 2016). Positive deviance (PD) is an approach that identifies what is going right in a community to amplify it, as opposed to focusing on what is going wrong in the community and fixing it with outside expertise (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019). It is a behavior labeled deviance due to its departure from the normative, and positive because it results in enhanced outcomes (Heckert, 1997 in Ref 5). The people who display positive deviance are called positive deviants; they are “people who exhibit good outcomes against the odds” (Lapping et al., 2002). The positive deviance approach capitalizes on a type of resilience the community (or its members) has already developed. Phrases such as appreciative inquiry, asset-based model, and asset-based community development are interchangeably used for PD (Lapping et al, 2002). Paying attention to the discovery of the wisdom a community or a team of actors or even individuals already have (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019), PD is a bottom-up approach that tries to identify and learn from those who demonstrate exceptional performance on an outcome of interest (Baxter et al, 2016). It is based on the observation that in any community there are people whose uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, despite facing similar challenges and not having extra resources (Baxter et al, 2016; Hanlon, 2011). Within this frame, change is led by internal agents who, with access to no special resources, present social behavioral proof to their peers, that problems can be solved. This situation is in turn celebrated for sustainability and ownership by potential

adapters (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019). It should be noted that positive deviance is not a substitute for the traditional diffusion of innovation paradigm; it expands the solution space at hand and is tested in practice (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019).

The PD paradigm is based on a few assumptions. One of these is that “there are a few deviant individuals whose uncommon behaviors or practices enable them to outperform or find better solutions to pervasive problems than their neighbors with whom they have the same resource base” (Sternin, 2002). The other assumption is that “problems can be overcome using solutions that already exist within communities,” building on the belief that often the wisdom to solve intractable social problems lies within the community (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019).

PD requires vacating our comfort zones. It involves psychological empowerment whereby employees become willing to break out of stagnant mindsets to take a risk and try something new (Hanlon, 2011). Therefore, in using positive deviance as a change strategy, there is a need to identify the deviant and successful behavior, disseminate it and mobilize/work to convince the community to adapt the lesson of experience. This is also an attempt to make deviant behavior a norm of practice.

Adapting PD as a change/development approach involves at least the following four stages of action:

**Stage 1:** Identification of high-performing individuals/sub-teams (i.e., the deviants) through routine data collection.

**Stage 2:** Data-based generation of a hypothesis on how positive deviants succeed.

**Stage 3:** Testing hypothesis using more representative data; and

**Stage 4:** Wider dissemination of the positive deviant practices (Bradley et al, 2009 in Ref 2).

In this process, programs need to be cautious of the three sequential groups of determinants that describe the causal pathways (Lapping et al., 2002): (a) risk factors—those are socioeconomic conditions that are not easily or quickly modifiable; (b) enablers—determinants of behavior (e.g., knowledge, skills, confidence, norms, availability of time, etc.) that tend to define the success; and (c) behaviors—evidence-based practices associated with better performance. These determining factors need to be assessed and documented as programs adopt the PD approach.

In attempts made to identify the positive deviant practices, experts adopt various strategies. One of them is the Positive Deviant Inquiry (PDI) (Sternin, 2002). This is a tool that enables us to discover the unique practices/beliefs that enable the PD members of the community to outperform or find better solutions to problems than their peers. PM project too asserts that learning through play serves holistic child development because of its focus on actively engaging, socially interactive, iterative, joyful, and meaningful activities in a learning context. In this regard, the PD approach is celebrated for several advantages, including the following. It is:

(1) Cost-effective; sustainable; and internally owned and managed (Sternin, 2002, Baxter, 2016)

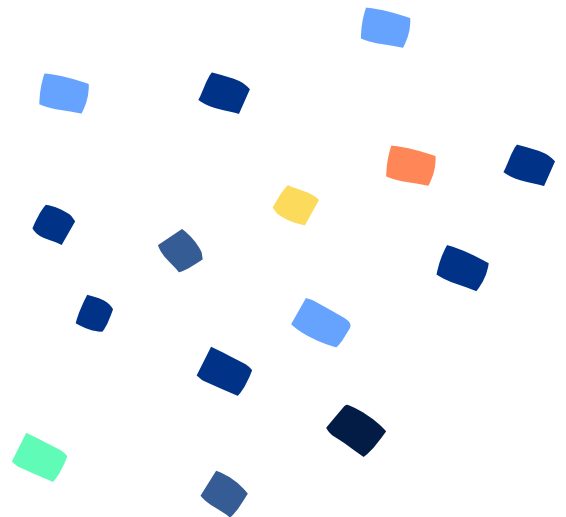
(2) Implementable based on already available resources, rather than what they need to have (Lapping, 2002; Baxter, 2016)

(3) Feasible for strategic change within current resources (Baxter, 2016)

(4) Closer to potential actors in terms of solution implementation.

(5) Demonstrable that deviance is a source from which most innovations start (Hanlon, 2011).

Positive deviance is a double-faced phenomenon (Babalola, 2002); the behavior could cause negative reactions. Because they are different from others, positive deviants may be negatively stereotyped by their peers. Where the positive deviance approach is about making the behaviors of the positive deviants the norm of the organization or the work team, one of the likely challenges is that every worker may consider himself/herself as having a unique work behavior that is equal to the behavior of the person identified as the positive deviant. This may result in some kind of resistance. There are opportunities that necessitate the use of PD approaches: limited resources; effort towards finding local solutions (e.g., the Ethiopian good practice synthesis strategy); and the inherent tendency of some people to do well through their own initiative even through challenging phases.





# Methods and Procedures

## Theoretical Approach and Design of the Study

This study adopted a qualitative approach with specific focus on ethnographic case study design to answer the research questions, drawing on the positive deviance theoretical framework for sampling and analysis. Oriented by PD theory, the ethnographic case study design was adopted to learn from the sample schools as communities of practice, sharing similar experiences in the same working conditions. Hammersley (2006) indicated that ethnographic research is an appropriate method of research data collection and allows researchers to more deeply comprehend issues in practice. It is a form of social and educational research that emphasizes the importance of studying firsthand what people do and say, and the reasons for these actions in particular contexts. This usually involves lengthy contact, through participant observation in relevant settings, and/or through relatively open-ended data collection tools designed to understand people's perspectives. Accordingly, the study teams stayed for over eighteen days in each school and collected data through group reflections, interviews, and observations.

## School Selection Criteria, Sampling Process, and Sample Sizes

As time and resources did not allow the study to be conducted throughout the country, the team selected a few regions as sample research sites. Thus, following the PD approach, school selection criteria were developed and discussed at study team and PlayMatters staff levels. The selection criteria included the following basic points. The school had to:

- Provide education to refugees and/or host communities.
- Have better experience in implementing LtP and inclusive teaching and learning.
- Not be a PlayMatters school as of 2021.
- Have strong leadership to support teachers and involve community.
- Have diverse background students (language, culture, and special needs education)
- Have a requisite minimum number of (early-year) students/sections.
- Be accessible in terms of security, distance, and transport.

In the site selection process, one of the major considerations was widening the likelihood of studying schools that could serve as the positive deviants. In the process, the schools/ECDs were identified through extensive search for well-performing schools implementing learning through play. The process integrated four major activities—getting reports from the IRC/PLAN field offices regarding potential schools for the study (with focus on refugee setting schools in Somali, Gambella, Benishangul-gumuz, and Afar), collecting information through snowball sampling techniques, consulting relevant educational institutions and experts, and conducting field visits with two co-researchers to make the final decision on sample schools. The expert visits took place from March 14–18, 2022, to two sites (in the Hawassa and Jigjiga areas), which were decided on because of preliminary findings. Widening the search scope was not possible because of time and resource constraints.

Regarding the site visits, the decision process included:

- (a) Discussions with district (woreda) education officials and experts in Hawassa, and IRC education experts in Jigjiga field office who were engaged in the process based on virtual discussions with the study team. This resulted in the identification of a total of 20 schools (ECDs and primary) from the two areas (10 from each level) for further investigation. The

school selection visit in the Somali region covered both refugee and host community ECDs and primary schools in Kebribeyah and Abwarre, as well as public schools in Jigjiga town.

(b) Visits to potential schools and discussions with head teachers or deputies regarding student population, teacher profiles, class sizes, results of mentoring on teaching effectiveness, perceptions of learning through play, and willingness to host a study. Additionally, the researchers visited classrooms of better performing teachers who had been recommended by respective head teachers. Likewise, selected children (based on their activities during classroom observation) and representative parents were consulted to gather information regarding their experiences in LtP. The final sample schools were determined by the study team, in consultation with IRC experts, through discussion on the field reports prepared and shared.

**Table 1: Sampled schools and number of participants**

Site	ECD/Primary School	Head Teacher (Interview)			Teachers Interview & Observation			Children (Group Reflection)			Parents (Group Reflection)		
		M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Jigjiga	Farah Mogul Primary	-	1	1	3	1	4	7	8	15	3	13	16
	Awbarre Refugee ECD	-	1	1	1	3	4	8	7	15	6	9	15
Hawassa	Nigist Fura Primary	-	1	1	1	3	4	9	6	15	7	9	16
	Nigist Fura ECD	-	1	1	-	3	3	8	8	16	8	7	15
	<b>TOTAL</b>	-	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>62</b>

Table 1 presents types and number of data sources for this study. The sample included two primary schools (Farah Mogul and Nigist Fura) and two ECDs (Abwarre and Nigist Fura). Data for the study was obtained from four school leaders, 15 teachers (five females and ten males), 61 children (32 boys and 29 girls) and 62 parents (24 males and 38 females). Though selection of school leaders was a deliberate sampling (by virtue of the position each held), teachers and children were included based on the PD principle; the team selected those participants who school leaders identified as better performing and those more capable of sharing their views with researchers, respectively. Parent selection, however, was totally a function of the selection of children.

## Data Collection Tools

The study was a whole-school study that covered observation of all guided play activities and free play activities, within classrooms and outdoors, and included individual and group interviews. The three data collection tools were videos/photos of elicited key informant interviews, group reflections, and observations.



## A) Key Informant Interview

1. Four school principals as key informants, females in all cases.
2. Eight teachers of grades 1-4 and eight teachers of ECD—included based on the recommendation of the school principals, deputy principals, and introductory discussions with the potential sample teachers.

## B) Group Reflections

1. **Children:** Even though the plan was to select 15 from each site, more children were identified because all the parents/guardians might not have been able to come to school for the key informant interviews. Children were selected in collaboration with classroom teachers (key informants).
2. **Parents:** Parents of all the children were invited to school by the head teachers and teachers orally or using a letter (a case in Nigst Fura) that defined the purpose of the invitation to participate.

## C) Observations

1. **Classroom Observation:** Classroom observations were intended to capture guided play-based learning experiences in formal lesson presentations. In some cases, teachers were anxious, so researchers conducted familiarizing visits to classrooms as a first step to the actual classroom observation process. Obtaining consent from each teacher, videos and photos were taken as appropriate, and selected videos/photos were used for parent and children group reflections as well as head teacher and teacher key informant interviews.
2. **Free Play/Recess Observations:** Repeated observations of the free play sessions (almost all were recess periods) were made during the two weeks' stay at the school. Videos and photos were taken during all the observations. Notes were also taken from each free play observation session. Finally, videos from four of the specific play sessions were taken for analysis according to the prepared rating scale/indicators.

# Ethical Considerations and Cultural Sensitivity

This assessment received ethical clearance from the International Rescue Committee's Institutional Review Board in August 2021 (Protocol EDU 1.00.021) and from ESSWA (The Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists) in March 2022. Each researcher also participated in online training and obtained certification for successful completion of a web-based training course on protecting human research participants, SBER, provided by PHRP Online Training, Inc. In the field, while collecting data, consent from parents and educators, and assent from children were obtained before the data collection took place. Information obtained has been kept anonymous and is being used solely for the purpose of informing this study. Furthermore, for anonymity purposes, codes were used in describing the sources of data for this study. The codes included data sources, school, and country codes. For example, the first parent focus group discussion (FGD), child FGD, and teacher interview in school 502 were coded as PFGD1502\_ET, CFGD1502\_ET, and T1502\_ET respectively, where parent, child, and teacher are labeled as P, C, and T, respectively, and the number '1' stands for first. For School Leaders (SL), the codes included the acronym SL as well as school and country codes, i.e., SL502\_ET.

# Data Organization and Analysis

During the fieldwork, one of the major activities was to enter the data into templates, which were prepared to make sure that the important opinions of the study participants and the

points noted during the observations were accurately captured. Photos and videos taken/made were also carefully filed.

The data analysis approach in this study focused on qualitative interpretation of data using the basic questions as organizing themes—the meaning of play, practices of play, and opportunities and challenges—using the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. Understandings were enriched and refined through repeated reading of the field notes and reviewing the videos and photos obtained during the data collection process. In general, the analysis of data focused on identification of findings in the perspectives of the participants. Interpretation and coding (the assigning of themes), however, included the personal judgments and reflections of researchers in view of the cultural context, trends in current literature, and practical issues in context.

## Results

This section covers the presentation of data obtained through the different data collection tools, and a discussion of major findings identified. In doing so, the basic questions are used as organizing themes by level (ECD and primary).

### Meaning of Learning through Play (LtP)

Teachers' actions in schools and what stakeholders expect from schools depend on how those expected actions and roles are understood by the teachers and the stakeholders. Particularly, in an era when teaching is less didactic and more engaging (Cheng, 2012); where parents are active supporters of schools' actions (Đurišić and Bunijevac, 2017), and where students are co-designers and essential determinants of teaching approaches (Gunckel and Moore, 2005), joint actions without founded and accurate understanding will be fallacious. That is why stakeholders' conceptions of play and learning through play are essential considerations in studying the place of play-based pedagogy in school. Accordingly, this part of the report is devoted to analysis of stakeholders' notions of play and learning through play. We took a broader view of the subject notion and tried to consider not only the meaning of the above two terms (i.e., play & learning through play) but also such issues as participants' personal experiences of play, benefits of play, cultural expressions of play, and gender and play, as well as the influences of age and home background, all of which have repercussions on and/or are connected to the stakeholders' notions of play.

#### Definition/Conception of Play

The informant groups (school leaders, teachers, school children, and parents) were asked what they mean by play or how they define the word play. Unfortunately, none of them tried to provide a precise and direct definition of the term. This is connected to the very complex nature of what it means to play (Cheng, 2012). The informants rather provided some descriptions that talk about play—fairly close to what Hartzell (n.d.) presented in his five types of definitions as intentional definitions (listing set of properties constituting the concept defined) and ostensive definitions (providing a sample of the things denoted by the concept). The informants talked about play in terms of its nature, its importance, and what it is in the lives of the children. For example, the primary school teachers defined play as “a sign of liberty and freedom for the children” (T2102\_ET); “an activity that relaxes our mind and body” (T2501\_ET); and “a pleasant activity that makes people happy” (T1501\_ET). With the same tone, a grade 2 teacher provided the following extended understanding of play:

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**// Play is what enriches thinking and helps intellectual development. It helps children to develop broader understanding and view of the world. Play is their freedom for the children. In fact, to be ill-disciplined and to be free are two different things. Children must exercise freedom while also learning to be purposeful & responsible (T2102\_ET)."**

Similarly, the school leaders said, play is "a motivator for learning" (SL502\_ET); "their soul for students" (Interview with school leader SL102\_ET), and "something that is enjoyable, and what makes us happy and active" (SL501\_ET).

These definitions from the educators (i.e., teachers and school leaders) underscored that play refers to an activity that motivates children, makes them happy, is enjoyable, relaxes them, and is connected to the very essence of children, i.e., their soul. These conceptions reflect what Shahidi (2012) referred to as the social and biological nature of play: an activity that people intentionally engage in for enjoyment (socially constructed) and one connected to the very soul of the child (biological).

We were curious to learn how the other two groups of stakeholders (i.e., groups of children and parents) see or try to understand what play means. A group of primary school children conceded, "Play is what makes children happy." They added, "In school, teachers allow us to play because they want us become happy" (CFGD1102\_ET). Another group of children said, "Play is an activity that helps to forget sadness or any bad feeling" (CFGD3 502\_ET). For a third group of children, the teachers allow them to play when they want to please them. Thus, play for them means a path towards happiness. Even though these descriptions by the children lack detail, their opinions are consistent with those of the educators. They, nevertheless, emphasized happiness and avoiding sadness in their conception of play.

Parents and guardians were asked what they mean by play. One parent said, "Play means joy and physical activity" (PFGD1502\_ET). Reflecting back on their childhood experience of play, another group of parents conceded that, "Play used to refresh their mind and helped them fight worries" (PFGD1102\_ET). The group of parents also saw the value of play even today, the memory of which makes their lives more meaningful; for this group of parents, "If one doesn't play while a child; s/he doesn't have memory as adult, and absence of memory makes life meaningless." Still another group of parents said, "Because it is their time, children have to play" (PFGD2101\_ET). In general, the parents expressed their opinions in stronger terms: play as something that is joyful, makes children happy, helps them fight worry, and makes life meaningful when remembered during adulthood. A very important point is the view that children should be allowed to play because it is the time of life where children should be free to play.

There is consistency across all the informants' opinions of what they think play is. Yet, while the informants underscored the enjoyment, happiness, and fun function of play for the individual child, they never brought in a description of play as carrier of culture nor as agent of socialization, which according to Shahidi (2012), are both essential functions of children's play.

Another issue worth consideration was how the informants understand learning through play and what they mean by that. Among the related questions raised in connection to this were whether the stakeholders (informants) believed in the use of play in the classroom, opinions on how play aids the teaching-learning process and play and diversity, as well as what type of play-based pedagogy they encouraged. According to Zosh et al. (2017), learning through play is about continuity—the bringing together of children's spheres of life, i.e., home, school and the wider world, and doing so over time. Informants seemed to understand learning through play as crucial for positive, healthy development, regardless of a child's situation.

For one of the school leaders, teaching using play means "using what children bring with

them to facilitate learning. This may mean using whatever makes the child happy, what the child knows for the instructional process" (SL102\_ET). With a related yet slightly different stance, a teacher wanted to emphasize the purposeful use of play and a need for careful planning when he said, "It is essential to employ short plays for classroom. Such plays should be related to the purpose of the lesson; not to end up with purposeless activities" (T1102\_ET). When asked about the instructional value of in-school free play, the teacher underscored the difficulty in controlling the kind of activities children engage in. Yet, she appreciated its value in giving children the opportunity to enjoy their choices and for teachers to take some rest from everyday hassle. She said:

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**// Regarding the in-school free play, I think it is very difficult to control on the type of play children play out there. Yet, it is rest for teachers who have been tiring and it is an opportunity for children to relax and enjoy themselves (T1102\_ET). "**

For this teacher, free play does not have much pedagogical value as far as planned teaching is concerned. But still, it serves one of the very purposes of children's play discussed above: relaxation.

In sum, the educators (teachers and school leaders) saw learning through play as making use of playful activities which children like engaging in it as a medium for facilitation of learning. Yet, the fact that the educators emphasized careful planning and the absence of any instructional use of free play indicates that the educators tended to emphasize more or valued the didactic (i.e., control-based) approach to instruction. This point should not implicate that leaving children alone to enjoy themselves through free play is bad. It was only to determine if teachers could consider any potential for using free play as one more opportunity to further enhance or extend classroom learning.

The parent groups were also asked for their opinion about learning through play. One of the parent groups conceded that, "In the school context, play is a situation where the teacher prepares and organizes activities in the way the curriculum invites" (PFGD2102\_ET\_AK\_18-04-2022). Another group of parents stressed a need for seriousness in organizing learning through play in school. The group conceded:

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**// Using play to facilitate learning is not sheer making the children play. It is not just free. There should be time for play. We need to teach them about the idea of time and about using their time properly. That is very important in their lives. (PFGD2102\_ET). "**

Once again, this conception of learning through play has much to do with a need to guard the teaching-learning process from a lack of seriousness, for which play is often blamed. Another group of parents doubted the possibility of playing in the classroom and, in a way, questioned what learning through play is in a school context. They held the opinion that "there was no such thing as playing in classroom during our days. How can they play in the classroom where the space is limited—sometimes over 70 children in that small room" (PFGD1102\_ET). These parents seemed to imagine play activities which are only physical, and which involve mobility. They tended to see that the way the classroom is organized and the limited space available was not conducive for the kind of playful activity they imagined. A very important opinion here is that there are group of children who share similar opinions as the parents regarding learning through play. One of the groups of children was heard saying, "Play is one thing and lesson /learning is another!" (CFGD2 102\_ET). While these and all other parent groups are concerned about issues of seriousness of learning through play, there seemed to be broader difference among the parents of primary graders and the preschoolers. Particularly, parents of the primary grade children feared that attempt to combine play and learning may boil down to non-serious play activities and this reduces the students' opportunity for learning the "desirable" academic skills. Beneath these opinions, it is possible to see that play is taken as a non-serious activity, leaning towards one end of the serious-non-serious dilemma of children's play (Parker, Thomas and Barry, 2022).

In general, the informants refrained from defining play conceptually. They just appreciated the value of play and the space it occupies in the lives of the children. This is not to imply that the informants hold erroneous conceptions of play. Nevertheless, all important stakeholders need a conceptual discussion of and training on how play is utilized in classrooms, how to promote play both in school and out (in the community), and the place of free play in and out of schools.

Play-based teaching is about appreciating whatever strength every child brings to the classroom. Such appreciation is expected to be reflected in what teachers think, say, and do. A critical analysis of the discourses of some of the teachers does not happen to match this broader and strength/asset-based conception of play-based pedagogy. For instance, one of the teachers from Hawassa frequently used terms such as weak students, disruptive children, poor children and the like when referring to her students during the interview. Contrary to that, the essence of play-based pedagogy is founded on the assumption that the playing child has something to make use of as a medium to understand the lesson. So, there is no way to be labeled as a weak student. Given that, it is very difficult to claim that all the teachers hold accurate conceptions of teaching. This calls for focused intervention.

### **Personal Experiences of Play**

It is believed that a human's early experiences have a determining effect on their latter behavior. Often, this means that someone acts and believes the way s/he was brought up to because child upbringing is a cultural practice (He et al., 2021). Therefore, in a situation where there is a shortage of focused teacher preparation and training on play-based pedagogy and where the dominant teachers' beliefs and practices do not match the very idea of the play-based pedagogy, it is expected that what teachers bring from their upbringing and school experiences (as children) tend to influence their current teaching practice. That seems to be the reason for the adage, "A teacher teaches the way s/he was taught" (Oleson, Matthew & Hora, 2013), even though this may not always hold true as a determinant of teachers' practice.

The teachers, the school principal, and the parent groups were asked about their experiences of play as children. Almost all reported that they loved to play, that they had no time for play as they wished mainly due to workload, and, with few exceptions, that their parents discouraged them from playing and wanted them to concentrate on serious business (work and study). As a result, the informants reported, they saw the school as the place where they had received the opportunity to play as they liked.

Regarding this, one of the primary school teachers (female) said, "As a child I used to love playing. Yet, I always had something to do after school to support my busy mother. So, the school was where I played. I particularly longed for sports session" (T2102\_ET). Another teacher (female) said; "I grew up with my uncle. Though I loved playing very much, I was not given permission to play outside. I grew up working indoors, mainly supporting my uncle's wife. School is where I used to play" (T1102\_ET). Yet another teacher (also female) reported: "I had no time for playing as a child. I only had a very short time to play after lunch at about 1:30 p.m. when I grew a bit older. Then, I used to go to the endless work" (T3102\_ET). There was also a teacher who said, "As a child, I was very silent in the family. So, I can't say I had played much. Nevertheless, I used to play smaller plays whenever I got the opportunity" (T4102\_ET). Similarly, a preschool educator also opined, "When I was a small child, I used to play different cultural plays with my age mates. Yet, as I grew up work and study took precedence. Every adult discouraged me from playing and to concentrate on rather serious business of life" (T2101\_ET). A teacher from another site reported, "During my childhood, I used to play cultural plays whenever I got free time" (T4522\_ET). These excerpts from the teachers' opinions indicate that they were all working children, and most of them had no time for playful activities. This may mean that play was not given due attention in their upbringing and may in turn mean, they don't have adequate lived experience regarding play.



The school principals also shared the same opinion, that they were not given separate time to play as they grew up in their communities. Their guardians usually expected engagement in some serious work assignments once they returned home from school. Therefore, their personal experiences tell those children's play was not in the interest of the guardians. Any play the educators (teachers and school leaders) reported to have taken part in as children was due to the sheer initiative of the children themselves (e.g., during herding or while looking after siblings).

The parents' groups were asked about their personal experiences of play during their childhood.

A group of parents from the Somali region conceded, "We have good memory of our childhood play. We played various Somali cultural plays" (PFGD2502\_ET). Similarly, another group of parents from the same region said, "When we look back and remember our childhood days, we feel happy. We used to play many things, including climbing trees and preparing car models from locally available material" (PFGD1502\_ET). Almost conceptually similar opinions were heard from the following parent (female), who is from Hawassa:

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**// I used to love playing very much. My parents worried because they fear that we may quarrel with other children. So, they did not allow us to go out and play freely. Therefore, I had to devise reasons to go out. My reason was collecting firewood. Once I go out to the forest, I quickly collect the wood, prepare my bundle, and go to play with my age mates. We intentionally devise this to meet and play. I remember this (PFGD1102\_ET)."**

Similarly, another parent reported: "I remember my childhood time, there was no condition which makes me afraid. I used to play with my age mates. I used to play using soil, mud, and similar materials. My childhood was full of fun" (PFGD1101\_ET). Still another parent remembered how he connected work and play in the following excerpt:

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**// I was born and brought up in a rural area. We were observing and learning from what our parents and elders, brothers and sisters used to do. When I was around the age of 5, I started looking after a herd of animals. I used to take the animals to grazing land. During my stay with the animals, I used to play sometimes with other children and sometimes alone. (PFGD1101\_ET)."**

One of the parents also said, "I can't express the happiness I used to experience when I was playing during my childhood, and I used to get upset when someone calls me or wanted me to do something discontinuing my play" (PFGD1501\_ET). While all the informants reported that they used to work as children, the parents' groups seemed to have experienced more playful events compared to teachers. One likely reason for this difference could be explained by the backgrounds of the two groups of respondents. In general, the teachers were more educated than most of the parents and after school they had to work. In most cases, attending school in rural Ethiopia means sacrificing one's childhood time due to the opportunity cost of schooling. The child is expected to compensate for what the family missed by sending him/her to school (Kenea, 2019). Hence, the child, when back from school, is expected to engage in productive activities apart from doing homework and assignments given from school. On the other hand, most of the parent groups were less educated (compared to the teachers) and obviously spent most of their childhood years working, often looking after herds if it is a rural area. Children who herd have some time to play in the field with their age mates (or alone), whether or not the family encourages that. The informants' childhood experiences in connection to play seem to represent the reality of most Ethiopian children: more work and less play. This can have an important implication on the value the stakeholders attach to child play in general and learning through play in particular.

### **Importance of Play**

Literature on learning through play emphasizes the developmental value of play. For instance, play is said to enhance the development of physical, cognitive, social, emotional and creative skills of children (Li, 2022). Other writers underscored that play has educative, health and

wellbeing, economic, social, and developmental benefits (Manwaring & Taylor, 2006). These writers are also concerned about the undesirable impacts of not playing on every aspect of a child's development.

The informants were asked what they think about the importance or benefits of play in their context to see how well their discourses coincided with these documented benefits of play. The responses were varied yet seem to concur with the theoretical assertions provided above: that play supports intellectual development and enriches thinking; makes children happy; promotes physical development; enhances creativity; helps children identify their own talents, strengths, and shortfalls; and promotes social and identity development. For example, a primary school teacher asserted, "Play enriches thinking and helps intellectual development. It helps children to develop broader understandings and views of the world" (T2102\_ET).

For another teacher, when engaged in proper play:

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**// Children learn to love and become happy. Learning through play encourages integrity and intimacy. Children's movement in learning through play is essential for mental and physical well-being. It builds their body and makes them happy. Through play, children become creative (T3102\_ET)."**

Another primary school teacher also opined:

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**// When children play, they imagine various real-life activities and situations. They bake bread where there is no dough (buko); construct houses where there is no wood or brick. They do these from what is available in their surroundings—e.g., mud. They imagine various roles—for instance, act as father, mother, and children, driver, teacher, etc. All these—from what is available in their surroundings—are educative. We can bring similar experiences to the classroom, why not! (T2102\_ET)."**

The opinions of the school leaders were not very different from those of the teachers. For instance, one of them said, "Play helps children to know their potential and current abilities. It enables them to know what they should improve to compete with others" (SL502\_ET). These assertions generally coincided with the perspectives from the literature cited above regarding the benefits of play.

Attempts were also made to see whether the kindergarten (KG) educators hold the same views or as the primary teachers. One of the KG leaders remarked, "Play contributes to the physical, mental, and social development of the students. It also enhances the process of socialization... and stimulates interest in learning" (SL501\_ET). Similarly, another KG school leader said, "When children play together, they develop communication and social skills. For instance, when we make them count a handful of gravel, we help them develop mathematical abilities" (SL101\_ET). Another KG teacher also said, "Play has multiple benefits including relaxation and social interaction. It also increases their readiness for learning" (T1501\_ET).

In its totality, there is no observable difference between the opinions of primary and kindergarten educators regarding the benefits of play. Similarly, even though there was a tendency to see more benefit for preschool children than for more grown primary school children in everyday practices, parents also opined that play enhances development and motivates for further developmental activities for all children. For example, a parent of a KG child reported, "Play makes children very happy. It is life for children. They enjoy it. When children are not allowed to play, they become angry and cry" (PFGD1101\_ET). Similarly, another parent of a KG child said, "I play with my child at home. Unless they play, children cannot be happy, and development hindered" (PFGD2101\_ET).

Regarding instruction, the informants indicated that play improves/supports learning for children and is a very useful aid to learning. For the informants, "using play in learning motivates the learner" (T3102\_ET; CFGD3502\_ET), "makes them to creatively think about what



they learn" (T3101\_ET; T3102\_ET), "promotes holistic development of the children" (SL101\_ET; T4102\_ET), and "makes school enjoyable place for the children" (T1502\_ET; SL501\_ET). The informants also appreciated that unless teachers create easy classroom atmosphere through the medium of play, the schoolwork will be repressive and boring (T1102\_ET). For the informants play is also "a special way to make learning relevant to the lives of the children" (T2102\_ET) because, as mentioned above, play maintains continuity between home, school, and the wider world. This makes authentic learning real and achievable.

Almost all the respondents opined that there is no gender difference in what the children get from engaging in playful activity either at school or elsewhere. (SL101\_ET; T4502\_ET); indicating that all benefit from play in their own rights. Despite such beliefs, the actual involvement of children in playful activities has some gender dimensions as will be discussed in the subsequent subsections. In general, play occupies a central location in the lives of the children. As one of the school leaders said, if left alone, children play everywhere, every time and in every situation. It is highly advisable that adults should capitalize on the importance of play as a medium for planned learning and development. Contrary to that, classroom observations revealed that in the real context of teaching and learning as well as in the whole process of instruction, there is a tendency to focus on the serious business of life; and a tendency to doubt play's contribution. This is a real paradox and requires careful intervention.

### **Cultural Expressions of Play: Who, What, Where and When?**

Contextual factors such as culture and socio-economic landscape play an important role in conceptualizing play. Regarding this, Zosh et al (2017) stated:

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**/// Our environments (including the materials available when playing in a home, in a yard, in urban environments, in rural environments, etc.) also frame play, as do the peers, adults and other people we engage with. Play is also constantly influenced by the culture, values, and beliefs in the home as well as in the community at large (P. 13)."**

Who gets priority or opportunity to play, what kind of play to engage in, with whom to play, when to play, and where to play are very much influenced by the prevailing culture, values, and beliefs. This sub-section of the study, therefore, attempts to examine these situations within the case schools and preschools as well as the surrounding communities. Admittedly, some of these points have been partly addressed in the preceding sections and this section further details findings based on the opinions of the informants.

One of the means through which culture influences play is through determining gender roles. In other words, in a cultural setting, gender is believed to be an important determinant of who gets the opportunity to play (Mayeza, 2016). The informants unanimously attest that the opportunity for play is limited more for girls than for boys. These points from the informants (Hawassa) say much about the situation: "I always had something to do after school to support my busy mother" (T2102\_ET); "After school I had no time to go out to play with my age mates" (T1102\_ET), and "the only time I had for play was the recess period at school" (T2102\_ET). These informants—all females—underscored that, in a family where there are boys and girls, the boys enjoyed relatively more opportunities to play than the girls. This is mainly connected to the gendered social division of labor in a particular culture. A group of parents conceded:

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**/// Girls do not go out to play. It is not common. Why? Because other girls of the neighborhood do not go out. Particularly, the control on girls grows rather tightening as they grow old. Humanly, the girl also leans towards supporting her mother (PFGD2102\_ET)."**

A primary school teacher said, "In school boys and girls are treated equally in terms of the opportunity to play, but I don't think so at home because of the cultural issues. Parents keep girls at home and boys may play outside" (T4502\_ET). For another group of parents, "There is this tendency to think that girls will learn to stay out if they are allowed, a bad habit that may

be taken to wifehood” (PFGD1102\_ET). Similar opinions were expressed by a teacher when she said, “After school girls stay at home in many cases, and boys can play outside with their peers as long as they are free” (T3502\_ET). Similar points were stressed by another teacher:

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**// I think the pressure on girls is much more once they are at home. Even the best mother does not allow her girl child to play equally with boys. This is connected to the belief that if a girl child stayed outside with boys, she would develop bad behaviors(T1102\_ET).”**

While the above citations are from primary school teachers and parents, those of preschool did not tell such gender differences. In fact, one parent clearly stated the answer for that: “Since the preschool children are very small, we give equal opportunities to both of them, and girls are not as such required to do other tasks at home at this stage” (PFGD2501\_ET). Once again, this trend indicates the growing focus on the serious business of life (work and education) as the children grow older.

In general, the problem seems two-fold of limited opportunities for play of older children: (1) indoor duties, and (2) the culturally-imposed limitations on girls as they grow older. So compared to those in the preschool, it is the primary school girls who are restricted in terms of play-based interactions with boys as well as in terms of having time for play.

When it comes to instruction-related plays at school, one important feature of play in the case of the Somali region (i.e., Jigjiga) is that girls and boys sit in different rows. So, especially when play-based activities are presented, there are no opportunities to play together (for boys and girls) even if they want to play or the teacher wished to arrange cross-gender play opportunities. In the case of Sidama (i.e., Hawassa), the sitting arrangement is mixed, and teachers can arrange co-playing situations. Nevertheless, strict gendered division of play is observed at both geographic areas (schools), particularly when the pupils are to choose what to play and with whom to play. That means there are separate types of play expected for boys and for girls.

Regarding this point, a teacher from Somali stated, “Boys and girls are different. Culturally, they do not sit together and do not play together in class because of the culture and the religion... With regard to gender and play, football is good for boys and traditional singing is good for girls” (T4502\_ET). Similarly, a school leader from the same geographic area opined:

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**// Boys and girls play separately because of cultural elements. There are restrictions. For example, girls should not play football with boys. That is not culturally accepted because they should not open their legs wide enough or cloth pants (SL502\_ET).”**

Contrary to that, one of the educators from ECD reported that the play opportunities are almost the same: “In our ECD both boys and girls are given equal opportunity to play, most of the games are played by both boys and girls” (T2501\_ET). Nevertheless, reports from the teachers attest that there is a tendency to opt for particular play even at the KG level, and such options tend toward the gender division reported above. For instance, boys often prefer to play with boys and girls with girls, and play such as skipping [jumping] rope is preferred by girls, while boys prefer to play football. An opinion from a teacher in KG (Hawassa) supports that. She reported,

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**// In the classroom since I arrange myself, I mix boys and girls. However, when I make it voluntary usually boys and girls do not mix. Girls and boys create separate groups. Outside classroom free play is typically gender based (T2101\_ET).”**

This is a good indicator of the strength of cultural influences on children even prior to them joining the first grade. Therefore, the cultural influences have already started even in kindergarten, though as mentioned by some respondents, the situation is not as pronounced as in the higher grades.

As presented above, with transition to primary schools and increases in age, the impact of the gendered social division of labor grows more pronounced. At the same time, there is evidence that the kinds of play as well as the level of engagement in play shows some changes with age. For instance, the informant teachers reported that over-aged children in grades three and four play less than their classmates of lower age. Related to this is the fact that most of the children in the school were working children. Particularly, children from the Sidama region (Hawassa) live with others (i.e., non-biological parents/guardians) who brought them from rural areas. These children attend school by serving their guardians with home duties. Therefore, such children had much to worry and ponder about life, leaving no time to think about play. One of the primary school teachers described, “Many of the children are working and overaged” (T4102\_ET). Similarly, another teacher reported,

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**“ There are a good proportion of working children in my classroom who reside with non-biological parents who brought them from rural areas. Such children have no time to do their assignments let alone taking part in plays. These are children with adult roles (T1102\_ET).”**

From these quotes, it is possible to learn that the extent to which children take part in play is highly conditioned by the cultural context, which determines the gender role as well as the value attached to children’s play. Children’s ages and home backgrounds also have important repercussions on how well children take part in playful activities in the community (at home) as well as at school.

## LtP Practices and Examples

Pedagogical practice in classrooms may be a function of many variables, such as school policy, curriculum structure, teacher capacity, and classroom situations. Though the relationship between theory and practice is not unidirectional, since one shapes the other, what matters most in an educational setting is practice. Practice, in this case, refers to the curriculum-based interactions between the teacher and children to realize learning. However, as indicated by Aras and Merdin (2020), there is no consensus yet on what constitutes practice and implementation of play-based learning. This part of the report, therefore, presents and analyzes the practices and examples of LtP to understand the extent and effectiveness of pragmatic issues. Findings from ECD and primary levels are presented in an integrated but sequential manner with a focus on guided and free play. Data from KIIs and FGDs are presented first, followed by observation results.

### School Policies on LtP

Analysis of findings from KIIs and FGD sessions showed that there is conducive policy for implementation of LtP in preschools. Teachers and head teachers of both ECD and primary schools indicated that the education policy and support system center the implementation of active learning, participatory approaches, and play-based teaching methods at the grassroots and national levels. In this regard, the national ECCE policy says this: “Play will be used as the main means of enhancing the child’s learning experiences” (MoE et al., 2010, p. 23). The Curriculum Framework for Ethiopian Education (KG–Grade 12) also reflects that one of the principles that shapes the curriculum is children’s active participation in the learning process (MoE, 2010). Thus, the understanding of teachers and head teachers aligns with the policy provision in the country.

Similarly, school leaders in both ECD and primary levels in all the research sites are viewed as supportive of teachers in areas like monitoring, classroom visits, co-teaching, and encouragement for teachers (T1502\_ET; T3502\_ET; SL101\_ET; SL501\_ET). However, the type of support at the primary level did not seem encouraging when it comes to LtP implementation

specifically. No mention was made regarding such support, especially at primary level. In fact, one primary school teacher had this to say: “As far as I know, no specific support on the implementation of LtP by school management” (T4502\_ET).

Time for free play was another issue discussed with data sources. There were varying views that can be categorized by level. While ECD teachers and head teachers alike provided confirming responses, primary teachers displayed more doubt. The accounts of preschool teachers below show this:

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**// Play is included in the daily activities of the school and the classroom period is allotted as follows: 5 minutes for greeting, 15 minutes for play, 10 minutes for drawing, and 5 minutes to arrange playing materials, and 5 minutes for reading stories. The time for playing is sufficient. There is no time constraint for play since it is incorporated in the daily schedule of the school, and I always try to involve students in different activities as much as I can (T1501\_ET)."**

Another preschool teacher said, “Most of the time I give them [children]10 minutes free time in the class and let them play with class objects for about 15 minutes and 15 minutes to play outside the class” (T4501\_ET).

The only comment regarding time to play in preschools (by SL501) was regarding the length of time children could stay at school, usually 8:30 a.m.–11:30 a.m. (for three hours). This was perceived as too short to engage children in many activities, including LtP. Evidence from the primary level, on the other hand, showed that break time is considered the convenient time for play. Teachers and children indicated that there is no sports subject in the curriculum, nor time allotted for play in the school timetable. The only agreed upon time that children can play is during break time. Time to play for children outside of classroom is also affected by contextual elements such as religion. A primary school teacher from Somali described how children have spare time to play when adults go for prayer on Friday, a typical cultural practice. A teacher gave an account of experiences and said, “Play outside the classroom is not that much developed or practiced. On Fridays, children have time to play because they have free time when teachers use longer time for pray” (T3502\_ET). Another teacher gave a similar response and indicated, “Play outside the classroom is limited. However, on Fridays, we only teach two periods in the morning and children stay outside of classroom playing freely until end of the school time since they become free” (T4502\_ET). It is not possible to find supporting evidence on the trend of children’s time to play in Ethiopia due to a scarcity of studies in the area. However, the lack of clear allocation of time to play for primary children aligns with trends at the global level. A systematic review of literature by Gleave (2009) showed that children’s time to play is on the decline partly because of competing school demands such as academic activities.

One common precaution made around play by parents, children, and teachers was the possibility for physical injury resulting from involvement in playful activities. Data showed the need for a careful selection of play types and adult monitoring during play. The following example represents the views collected from the field: “Teachers do not allow playing games that may hurt us or cause a problem. The school has formally announced not to play that kind of game during the morning flag ceremony. We would like to play as older students do, but we are not allowed to do so” (CFGD2102\_ET). FGD parents described a similar view regarding the consequences of unguided play. A father in one of the FGDs said this:

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**// There is a difference between my childhood period and today. For instance, my son comes home with wounds, and when I ask him what has happened. He said, “I am hurt while playing.” Why is it special that children hurt today than during my school days? It puzzles me. I sometimes think of considering changing school. However, where do I take him? It is all the same. There are various mischievous plays today. Recently, my son was hurt three times. It is disturbing me. I feel the play types are normless and that is why children are injured during play. I am tensioned, frankly speaking, and the school must do something to minimize the consequences of play” (PFGD1102\_ET).**



Such views are good input for policy reviews and considerations. The general indication was, however, that though the implementation of LtP faces certain obstacles, school policy generally supports play-based learning except when there are safety issues that may result from engagement in play activities.

### **School Leadership Support for LtP**

School leadership is one of the enabling factors in promoting and implementing LtP. Parker and Thomsen (2019) stated that no pedagogical approach is characteristically effective unless defined in view of enabling factors for the fidelity of implementation of LtP. Of the list they provided, school leadership commitment and knowledge to support teachers' practices is critical. It was in this sense that leadership contributions were assessed in this study.

Generally speaking, data analysis of leadership support at ECD level indicated that school leaders support teachers in different ways, including sharing teaching load when they are overloaded or feel discomfort, providing orientation for newly deployed teachers (SL501\_ET), helping teachers in play activities (T2501\_ET; SL101\_ET), and monitoring in general (T2501\_ET). Shortage of materials, however, seemed a recurring problem that school leadership could do little to address in the presence of shortages in budget (T1501\_ET).

Support systems in the sampled primary schools also showed similar findings in terms of school leaders' support efforts—monitoring, sharing teachers' loads, when necessary, purchasing of materials such as balls, enhancing participation of parents, and motivating teachers. In some cases, support from school leadership on LtP was viewed as insufficient because of the focus on curriculum implementation and managerial issues, rather than on classroom methodology aspects. This finding is also very much related to the limited capacity of school leaders regarding play-based classroom instruction. (T3502\_ET; T4502\_ET; T1102\_ET). In an interview, a primary school teacher said, "The school leadership provides general support for teachers and not really specific to implementation of LtP techniques since there is limitation in capacity and availability of resources" (T3502\_ET).

### **Parental Support for LtP**

There is ample evidence on the contributions of parental involvement in the education of their children. Research shows that parental participation plays a key role in quality enhancement, sustaining changes and narrowing down achievement gaps of disadvantaged children (Bertram & Pascal, 2016). Thus, this study collected data on the nature, extent, and outcomes of parental participation at both the ECD and primary levels.

Mixed views were obtained from the ECD level. For example, a school leader indicated that parents participate in convincing other parents to send their children to preschools, managing bullying behaviors of some children, and even playing with their children (SL501\_ET). Some parents followed up on the academic progress of their children, but did not necessarily know what preschool is all about (i.e., that it is meant to lay the foundation for primary grades but not as regimented) and complained about why their child had not quickly mastered letters and numbers. Teachers who try to use an LtP approach are perceived by parents as wasting time or just not doing their job because play is considered non-academic (T2101\_ET; SL101\_ET). In other words, their concern is about achievement and not about the process. Some teachers believe that parents do not participate in LtP as expected because they are engaged in economic activities (T3101\_ET; T1501\_ET). Parents themselves agreed on their limited level of participation in supporting LtP. In one FGD session, a participant said, "To be frank, we are not involved in the play activities in the school" (PFGD1101\_ET).

At primary level, the data collected for and analyzed in this study did not support parental involvement in implementing LtP. Parents do not come to school to understand more about their children's learning (T2102\_ET; T3102\_ET; PFGD2102\_ET). "Some parents are not even happy

when children play in school" (T1102\_ET) and others don't allow their children to go out and play when they are at home (T2102\_ET). In general, parental participation in support of LtP implementation in primary schools was found to be limited due to reasons such as limited awareness and school priority on resource mobilization (SL502\_ET).

## Preparation of Play-Based Lessons

Evaluation of the situation at both the ECD and the primary levels revealed important findings. At the ECD level, teachers develop lesson plans based on the play activities of children. Taking the time to plan what and how to teach was the focus in developing daily lesson plans. One of the ECD teachers said the following:

**// I plan what I am going to do and how I am going to do it. I also plan what materials to use. These all take time. It takes me about 3 hours a day to plan. The time required for planning play-based learning is longer than when it is not. If it is not play-based, the time required may be half of the time I need for play-based preparation (T2101\_ET)."**

Also, lesson plans are developed for each area of learning in the ECD centers. "I use play to teach numbers, alphabets, environmental science, personal hygiene, or personal skills such as washing hands, cleanliness, politeness, greeting, and taking turns during discussion" (T1101\_ET). In this regard, varied methods such as "songs, small group interaction, building blocks, and puzzles are indicated in the lesson plans" (T3501\_ET).

At the primary level, developing lesson plans (on paper) did not seem mandatory at Farah Mogul primary school (T1502\_ET; T2502\_ET; T3502\_ET; T4502\_ET). Nigist Fura teachers, however, confirmed that they prepare lesson plans. As is the case with the ECD teachers, there seemed a consensus among the sampled primary teachers in Nigist Fura on the view that integrating LtP into lesson plan preparation takes longer time than otherwise. "It takes me one hour and half to prepare a lesson with a play method, but I can finish a lesson preparation that is not play-based in 30 minutes" (T3102\_ET). Another teacher from the same school indicated that flexibility is important. "Sometimes you have to plan (think) in advance; at other times you have to create on the spot" (T4102\_ET). In other words, teachers make efforts to make their instruction or delivery of lessons more engaging and participatory depending on the actual situation at classroom level even if it was not included in the lesson plan. However, the center of efforts remains limited to cognitive aspects of learning with little or no deliberate impact on socio-emotional, physical, iterative and motivational components.

### Play as a Method of Teaching: Its Space in Daily Lessons

It has become clear that teachers and head teachers perceived play as one method of teaching. While this was a consensus perspective, integration of LtP in daily lessons had more confirmatory evidence with ECD teachers than with primary educators. Data analysis by level showed that play at ECD centers is perceived as part and parcel of the school curriculum and instructional process. Children play inside and outside of classrooms, and before, during, or after classes. "Using play is using participatory teaching methods" (SL101\_ET) seems a shared view at the ECD level. ECD teachers use both local and readymade materials in LtP. Cups, leaves, sticks, flash cards, and small stones are some of the local materials being used in ECD centers for playful activities. "GOBO" is, for example, a cultural play in Somali ECD that requires group participation using cups and leaves. Other common field-based play activities include fitting (ordering), singing songs (e.g., forming the letters A, B, C when singing the alphabet), number cards, jumping and climbing, and balls.

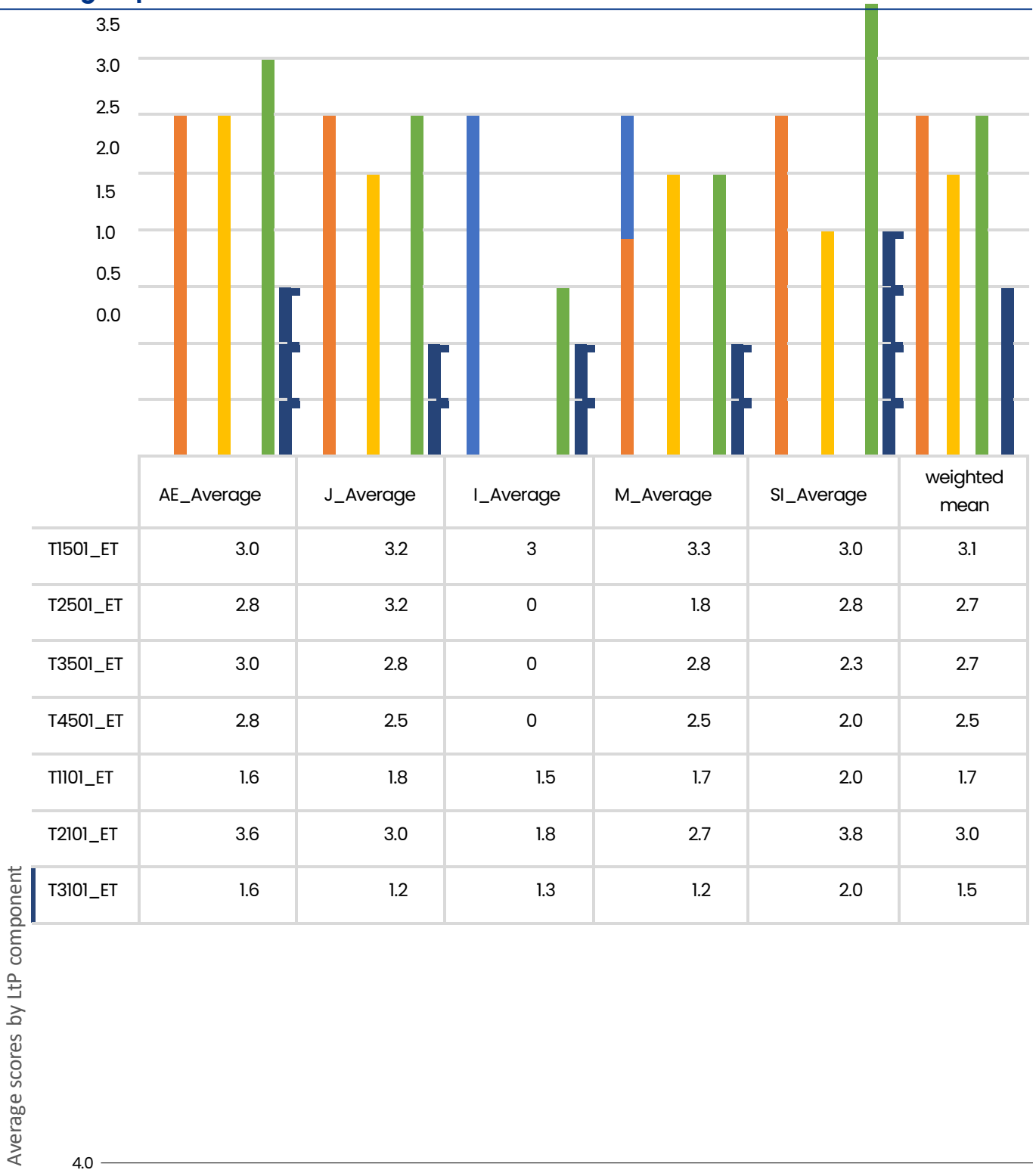
**Figure 1: ECD Children Playing**



Observation results (using a rating scale) of guided and free play activities at ECD centers also indicated similar lessons, but the degree of visibility of the characteristics of LtP (joyful, meaningful, iterative, socially interactive, and actively engaging) did not concur with expectations. Figure 2 below shows average lesson observation results (Y-axis) based on the LtP components (X-axis) for each of the seven teachers observed, i.e., Actively Engaging, Joyful, Iterative, Meaningful, and Socially Interactive respectively. The figure also includes a weighted mean of the results in the same order.



**Figure 2: Shows that seven ECD teachers were observed using a four-point rating scale with focus on visibility of the five LtP components. Results show the following important lessons**



- a)** Overall, five of the seven teachers observed were rated as above average in implementing active learning methodologies that reflect the five characteristics of LtP. Two of the teachers achieved below average mean value in implementing LtP.
- b)** The classroom observation results indicated that only one of the teachers showed a better performance in demonstrating the iterative component of LtP. Of the six teachers observed, however, indicators of the iterative characteristics were either nonexistent or minimal in visibility.
- c)** As there were better performing teachers in addressing the five LtP characteristics, there were consistently low performing teachers as well in all the LtP characteristics.

From Figure 2 the defining characteristic of the implementation of LtP in ECD classrooms showed capacity gaps on the part of teachers because of relatively low average scores of teachers and lack of balanced performance in each of the five LtP components. The descriptive part of the observation results also indicated the following important points: (a) teachers use available materials such as building blocks, flash cards, and sports materials during instructional process; and (b) the most common instructional techniques observed were role play, small group work, singing songs, counting manipulatives (sticks or stones) in number learning, and using puzzles; (c) preparation of teaching materials from local resources was limited; (d) though focus was on cognitive domain, activities like group activities, role plays, building blocks, and singing songs were viewed as appropriate for emotional, social, physical, and creativity components of LtP as well; and (e) the types of play observed in the preschools in different classes and at different times (during the stay of the researchers) were more or less similar. Classroom instructions had similar patterns over the course of time (question and answer, small groups, building blocks, singing songs, physical activities like running, etc.) despite variations in content and level.

Integration of LtP in daily lessons and use of play as a method of teaching in primary schools did not seem to occur as it did in the ECD context. In ECD, play is perceived and implemented as an integral part of child learning. Evidence from the primary level, however, showed more hurdles than achievements. Teachers and school leaders do believe that play is one of the active methods of teaching. However, implementation is a problem, and it stems from teacher training limitations and a curriculum structure that does not include play-based lessons. Interviewee teachers indicated that “the policy supports participatory teaching methods, but in practice, teachers focus on whole class question and answer method” (SL102\_ET). Teachers also said that the 40-minute period is too short to allow children to play or practice learning through play (T1502\_ET\_; T1102\_ET; T2102\_ET).

The views of interviewed teachers and the observation results show that primary teachers did not use play as a method of teaching but as an energizer to minimize fatigue. In many cases, examples of play-based lessons practiced in classes were not so much related to the content of the curriculum but entertainment such as storytelling, cultural dances and singing songs (T3502\_ET & CFGD2102\_ET), or sitting down and standing up (T1502\_ET). Observation results support the same conclusion that classroom methods mainly focused on question-and-answer techniques in a whole class approach. Teachers wrote the content of the lessons or questions on chalk boards, children copied it and then explanation and question-answer interactions continued until the class ended. The observation data, collected using a rating scale format in the sampled primary schools, is summarized in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: Classroom observation rating results based on the five components of play\_Primary**

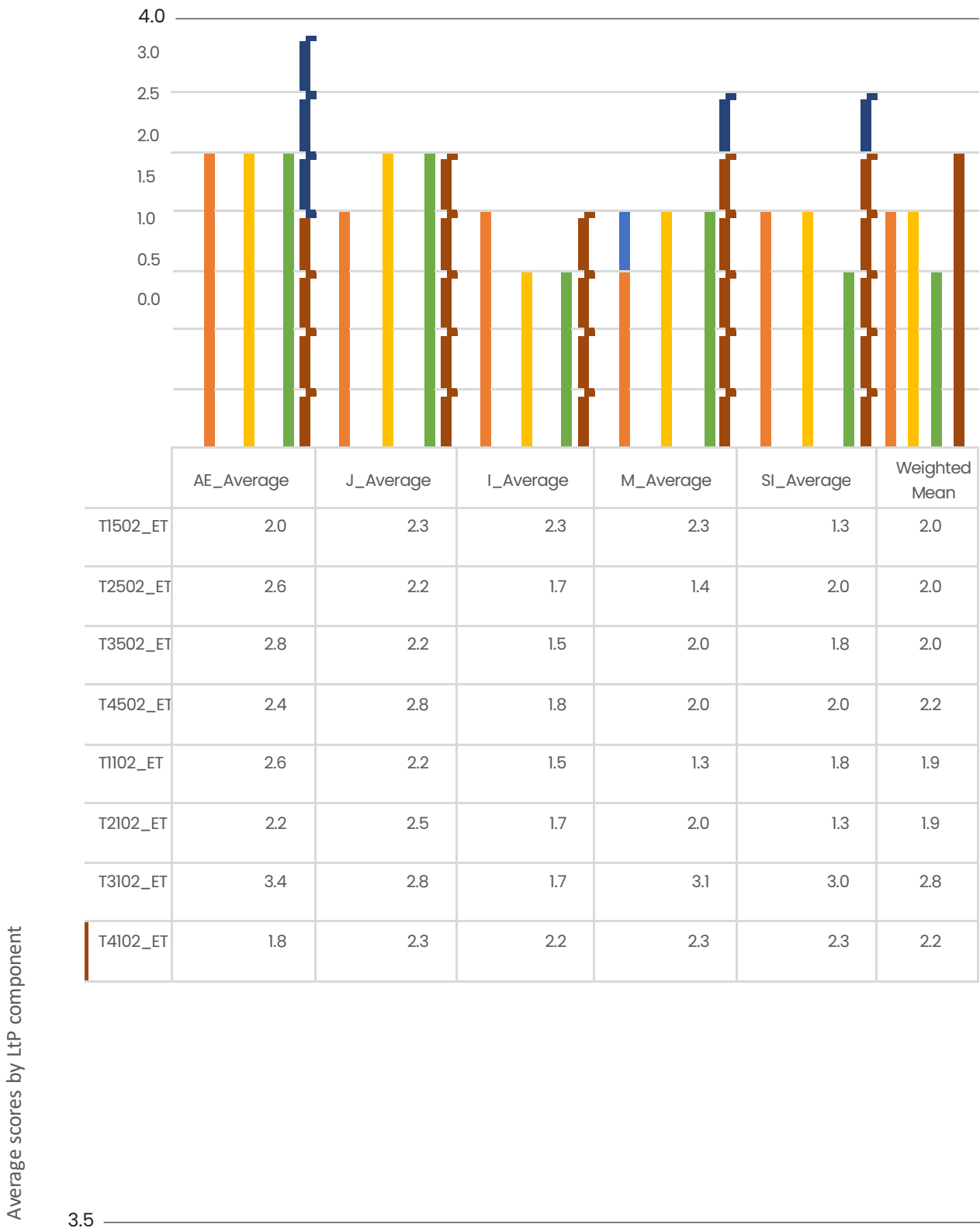


Figure 3 presents classroom observation data describing the status of integration of LtP in daily lessons and the use of play as a method of teaching. In general, use of play-based learning in the observed classrooms was not evident at all. The major accounts indicated that use of the question-answer methodology was common in all instructional practices, i.e., encouraging children to participate through reading/listening, thinking, and sharing views on the question at hand. However, the effort to involve children in the instructional process, whether that was called participation or play, was rated using the presence of the LtP characteristics as evaluation criteria. Results in this regard showed that, despite individual teacher differences, the areas of “actively engaging” and “joyful” seemed comparatively visible from the instructional process. The status of implementation of the LtP characteristics by the observed primary teachers, however, fell at an average or below average in the rating scale measurement. In conclusion, analysis of the integration of LtP in daily lessons revealed a below average rating of instructional process as it relates to LtP characteristics, and that general use of methods focused on mere entertainment (with no clearly defined relation to the lesson of the day). Furthermore, the instructional process was viewed as focusing on cognitive aspects of development more than on social, emotional, physical, and creative elements. This was because the primary level children had a paired seating arrangement (facing the chalk board) and were given task-based interactions with priority on mastery of content rather than socialization or creative use of acquired/acquiring knowledge. At Farah Mogul primary school, because of religious norms, seating arrangement was gender-based, i.e., boys and girls sit in designated rows, and mixing was not allowed.

#### Teacher Training on LtP

Instruction is essentially a result of curriculum-based teacher-student interaction to realize certain objectives. Effective instruction, then, requires teachers to know the content, the child, and teaching methods, and be able to implement them (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In line with this, play-based learning implies the need for a basic competency in understanding what LtP is and how to practice it in the classroom. It was in this sense that data on the needs for teacher training was collected to understand the context for effective implementation of LtP.

Participant ECD teachers and head teachers confirmed that they had training on how to teach in preschools in general and on play-based learning in particular. Some also indicated their participation in short-term workshops focusing on play-based learning in preschools (T2101\_ET; SL101\_ET; T3101\_ET; SL501\_ET; T2501\_ET; T4501\_ET). The training courses were viewed as relevant for the professional development of the teachers. One of the teachers said that preschool requires not only developing technical competency but also confidence and patience, important for the development of good relationships with children. In fact, “Children read the face of the teacher easily and decide either to approach the teacher or run away” (T2101\_ET). Another teacher said, “Use of LtP makes children happy and motivated to learn, and I recognize that different subjects need different types of play. One for all may not work effectively” (T3101\_ET). According to another teacher, LtP is not only for the children’s benefit, “I believe, from practice, that training on play-based learning helps teachers to develop their teaching methods and good skills of understanding each child” (T1101\_ET). Teachers also shared their training needs to make the implementation of LtP certain. Two of the issues mentioned were drawing skills (T2501\_ET) and effective communication (T4501\_ET).

Another important point raised here was the training of head teachers on LtP. Participant ECD teachers and head teachers believe that such training is necessary to support teachers and increase the sustainability of LtP practices. One important comment recognized the commitment of school leaders. Changes and innovations need leadership and “I know school activities are boring and commitment of leadership sustains changes the momentum of change” (SL101\_ET).

At the primary level, teachers and head teachers believe that LtP is important for quality

improvement and is one aspect of child-centered methodologies. However, all interviewed teachers and head teachers reported no experience in LtP-related training. The following statement best summarizes the views obtained from primary schools: “Any training that adds on to what we already know may be very useful, but we had no training in this specific topic at all” (T1102\_ET).

### Gender and Inclusion in LtP Implementation

Theoretically all participants (teachers, children, head teacher, and parents) from both the ECD and primary levels seemed to believe that every child has the right to play, and play should be inclusive. Teachers also shared their experiences in making classroom instruction inclusive (of boys, girls, children from different social background, and children with disabilities) through use of mixed groups, encouraging inclusive participation in class and outside. However, when it comes to practice, different cases and personal experiences were identified in both the ECD and primary levels. One school leader shared: “I believe in the importance of making play accessible to all children, and sometimes I try to connect those who are not involved with others. I ask them what they want to play, and I play with them” SL501\_ET.

In ECD, there was no major inclusion issue raised regarding disability, social background, or gender when it comes to inclusive classroom instruction. Teachers treated children equally in class activities, arranged mixed seating, gave opportunities to participate (answer or ask questions), and provided group assignments. Observations and discussions with participants, however, showed some problems in free play. For example, after watching a video of boys and girls playing together, FGD children appreciated that because it was not a usual activity in their context. “During free play activity, ethnic, religion or language background is not [an] issue but gender [is]. There is no mix between boys and girls in most cases” (CFGD1101\_ET). One reason identified was “because parents orient their daughter to play with girls since playing with boys may result in physical injury” (CFGD2101\_ET). After watching a video on play, FGD parents too commented by saying: “Boys and girls play equally since they are small kids, they do not know much about gender difference. They mix up in class while they sit and do play together. The teacher is also aware of this” (PFGD1101\_ET). The implication here is that had the children been aware of gender difference and its implication, they might have been playing separately. Another reason that seems to summarize the situation is the following:

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**/// Sometimes differences are observed during free play. Especially when teachers are not around or guiding, boys want to dominate and disengage girls. Especially during free play, the boys do not want to allow girls to use the play materials in the school premises. They [boys] forcefully push them [girls] and take the play material. One boy can push three or four girls because they give up easily. Usually, boys tend to disturb girls while they are playing for no apparent reason. These all are reflections of the culture (SL101\_ET).”**

These facts were mainly lessons from Nigist Fura ECD. There was no such issue in Awbarre ECD center, and the accounts of the researcher showed comparable involvement of both sexes.

At the primary level, grouping according to gender was the most widely visible difference during free play, as previously discussed. Classroom observation accounts showed that teachers try their level best to include each child in the process of learning. However, gender matters even in seating arrangements in Farah Mogul primary school and in free play in both primary schools. That is, in Farah Mogul, boys and girls sit in separate rows because of cultural and religious norms. In free play, boys tend to engage themselves in physically intensive activities such as football, but girls focus on skipping rope. Lessons and examples in classrooms were gender sensitive and gender considerate. Question and answer methods involve both boys and girls almost equally; there was no account of exclusion because of gender or any other difference. Nor was negative content observed in free play that may affect the rights of the other gender, group or individual. It seems rather natural to play outside of classroom based on gender classification because of religious and cultural influences, and social expectations.



## Examples of LtP in ECD Centers/Primary Schools

Given the level of autonomy to make decision regarding timing, type and intention of play, learning through play generally falls into three categories: (a) free play, where children have the authority to engage in their own preference; (b) guided play, where a teacher or an adult selects a play for a reason(s) and children perform as per the rules set; and (c) mutually directed play, where teachers and children share responsibility in selecting and directing LtP activities (Pyle, DeLucab & Danniels, 2017). This study, however, categorized playful activities as free and guided only, and examples under the latter might reflect elements of directed play activities.

### (a) Examples of Guided Play

Analysis of examples of play from the lessons observed and discussions with participants indicate that play-based learning is not a well-developed approach in the schools. Disaggregated data analysis, in fact, showed better integration of LtP in the ECD centers than in the primary schools.

In ECD centers, data analysis of examples of guided play showed learning by touching things, using concrete (physical) representations such as flash cards and building blocks, interacting with one another, and practicing skills such as writing. Methodologically, the commonly used and cited examples of guided activities in ECDs were the use of building blocks, flash and number cards, and repetitive instruction using accessible instructional materials. Furthermore, when children lined up for flag ceremony, “they do some teacher-led physical exercise, just to make them active” (T3101\_ET).

At the primary level, technically, play was found to be less integrated with daily lessons. Thus, observation, interview, and FGD results showed that storytelling, singing, physical exercise (like stand up–sit down), and individual participation were the guided active learning methods commonly practiced by teachers in the study primary schools.

### (a) Examples of Guided Play

outside of classrooms. In ECD centers teachers accompany their students even if it is breaking time to minimize physical injury. In terms of timing, free play takes place before the start of classes, during break times and at the end of the school time. Some examples of free play learned from the ECD context include the following types:

(a) Hide and seek—children play this in small groups. One child closes their eyes until the other player have hidden in different locations and distances. The seeker then opens their eyes and tries to find the hidens. Then, the first child found is the next seeker in the process of playing.

(b) Playing on the swing—a seat suspended by ropes or chains that allows a child to move back and forth.

(c) Seesaw—a board balanced in the center, two persons sit on opposite ends and take turns pushing their end up.

(d) Using a slide—a sloped plank or block that helps children to slide down. Children climb up and sit down at the top, place themselves on the slide, and due to gravity, are propelled at an angle all the way down to the bottom.

(e) Spinning—children turn around and around as quickly as they can.

(f) Dropping handkerchief—all children but one sit in a circle looking inward. One child goes around outside the circle and silently drops a handkerchief behind a player in the circle, and that player then chases and attempts to catch the one who dropped the handkerchief before that child can get to the vacated place.

Some of the play activities may not be school or level specific. For example, parents, children, and teachers indicated that ECD and primary level boys are engaged in preparing guns, bicycles, cars, and balls from locally available materials and engage themselves in activities like jumping, football, hide and seek, and running. Girls, on the other hand, focus on skipping rope, traditional dance, pretending as if they are mothers and taking care of their dolls, and making houses or other household materials with mud and small stones. Parents added, “competitive running and phone games” to the list of free play practiced by boys and girls (PFGD2501\_ET; PFGD2102\_ET). In fact, the parents commented that, unlike their days, children are less creative because many of the play materials are either mobile guided or industry products that do not encourage children to prepare their own play materials using their own imagination.

Though the above types of play might not be age specific but rather gender-based play, there were additional free play examples observed from Farah Mogul primary school outside of classroom settings. These include:

- (a) Balloon play—both boys and girls run after a floating balloon and try to touch it to make it continue floating. Children run in the direction it takes them.
- (b) X, O—This was observed in Farah Mogul primary schools. This play needs a three-by-three square (with 9 spaces), and pen or pencil. It takes two children at a time; one is ‘O’ and the other ‘X’. They take turns filling the spaces, and the child who manages to fill three consecutive spaces with his or her letter first will be the winner, and the cycle continues.
- (c) Ay-Ay—At Farah Mogul primary school, we saw children playing Ay Ay. Ay Ay is a play that involves a small hole in the ground and 11 small stones. The player should play by throwing up one stone up (called uri), grab as many stones as possible out of the ten stones in the hole, and hold the thrown stone before it hits the ground. Failing to do so makes one the loser and a chance is given to the next player in the round.

Furthermore, though we could not observe children engaged in such play, discussions with participants on cultural play in the two regions revealed additional examples:

- (a) Examples from Somali culture—Baluul (marbles game), Baluusha (marbles and stones), Cad madow (head or tail type 1), Imbili. (lid), Harsh-madax (head or tail type 2), Kushineeto (small car), Nacashnacash (run and catch), and Xarig, (rope skipping).
- (b) Examples from Sidama culture—Maaxaansho (hide and seek), Diiddo (spinning tops), Shiiro (dirt sledding: long stick-short stick), Qoocca (throw and catch), Kootayyo (long high jump), Qolle (street hokey), and Qale (Sidama version of lawn dart).

Finally, this study requested child participants to draw their favorite play activities. Analysis of resulting drawings and preferences showed that their interest or imagination converged on football. Most of the children drew two football teams actively playing in a football field. From all the presentations and discussions, it is feasible to say that the practice of LtP is not well-developed but better integrated in ECD settings than at the primary level. With age and grade level increases, academic standards tend to focus on subject content, gender-based play becomes visible (especially where gender norms are encouraged), teacher capacity limitations to integrate LtP into daily lessons become critical, and application of LtP diminishes.

## LtP Implementation Opportunities and Barriers

This section focuses on opportunities and barriers of LtP implementation in ECD centers and lower primary grades (1-4). Interviews with teachers and school leaders, focus group discussions with parents and children, and observations were used to extract findings. The opportunities findings are followed by barriers, which are aimed at providing data-supported deductions and action points.

## Opportunities

Opportunities in this context refer to enabling conditions for the use of learning through play in the ECD centers and lower primary education (grades 1-4). From the findings, the following issues are identified as opportunities: supportive policy landscape and rich local culture with indigenous play and games.

### Supportive Policy of Education

One of the enabling conditions for implementing LtP in ECDs and lower primary schools is the existence of a supportive policy environment. Ethiopia enacted a national policy framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in 2010. The policy clearly recognizes the paramount importance of play in the holistic development of children. It takes play to enhance children's learning and underscores the role of mother tongue language or the language spoken in the catchment area as an important medium. According to the policy, child-centered and play-based education includes culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate, and inclusive indoor and outdoor materials and activities (MoE, MoH & MWA, 2010). The 1994 Education and Training Policy (FDRE, 1994) as well as the 2018 Education Development Roadmap of Ethiopia (MoE, 2017), recognize the value of a locally relevant and meaningful educational approach; at the center of which is play-based learning. For instance, the Education Development Roadmap recognizes play as an essential component worth consideration during curriculum development and its implementation.

Besides favorable education policies at the central (federal) level, which support learning through play, supportive school level policy is essential. One of the school principals (SL101\_ET) revealed that the existing school policy is supportive for learning through play. For her, this is observable from the routines they do every day. She reported:

One of the enabling conditions for implementing LtP in ECDs and lower primary schools is the existence of a supportive policy environment. Ethiopia enacted a national policy framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in 2010. The policy clearly recognizes the paramount importance of play in the holistic development of children. It takes play to enhance children's learning and underscores the role of mother tongue language or the language spoken in the catchment area as an important medium. According to the policy, child-centered and play-based education includes culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate, and inclusive indoor and outdoor materials and activities (MoE, MoH & MWA, 2010). The 1994 Education and Training Policy (FDRE, 1994) as well as the 2018 Education Development Roadmap of Ethiopia (MoE, 2017), recognize the value of a locally relevant and meaningful educational approach; at the center of which is play-based learning. For instance, the Education Development Roadmap recognizes play as an essential component worth consideration during curriculum development and its implementation.

Besides favorable education policies at the central (federal) level, which support learning through play, supportive school level policy is essential. One of the school principals (SL101\_ET) revealed that the existing school policy is supportive for learning through play. For her, this is observable from the routines they do every day. She reported:

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**// In the morning when children arrive at school before they commence classes, we are supposed to spend some time outside of class with them. They play freely. Then we teach them some community values and hygiene through story and song during the flag ceremony. We also make them do some warmup exercises. This is the routine activity which we do every day. This is the result of the policy of the school (SL101\_ET)."**

Similarly, one of the ECD teachers indicated that "the regional education bureau and the city education office often advocate for a policy of play-based education" (T3101\_ET). Likewise, one of the leaders in the ECD schools depicted that the schools support learning through play:

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**// When children come to school, they are already familiar with play. They are at the play age. School is a new environment for the children. As the school is a new environment for them, providing direct teaching and making instruction sheer using the blackboard is unnecessary. Denying them from play is not appropriate. Thus, the policy supports and encourages learning participatory through play (SL101\_ET)."**

These points, both from the policy documents and the informants, indicate that the policy that dictates the schools' routine activities supports play as a method of teaching—supporting the claim that there is enabling policy landscape.

### **Supportive Policy of Education**

The local culture and indigenous play and games are important resources which schools (both ECD and primary) can use in teaching children at different levels. There are some research studies on the conception of play and the importance of using local culture, indigenous play, and games in Africa in teaching children. For example, Ng'asike (2014) has pointed out that African natural contexts provide children with enormous play opportunities. Stressing the necessity of indigenous play, Bayeck (2018) and Ogunyemi (2016) revealed that there is consensus among various authors that the different forms of indigenous play can promote children' learning and holistic development.

Abdulai (2016) and Agbenyega, Tamakloe, and Klibthong (2017) discussed that indigenous play-based pedagogy refers to the use of indigenous play forms as the main context of learning to promote teaching, learning, and development. The peoples of the study regions (Sidama and Somali) have their own unique culture, religion, language and play types (see listed above). The existence of such cultural play activities is a huge opportunity to employ indigenous play-based pedagogy in classroom instruction.

There are a few good practices in the employment of indigenous play-based pedagogy in Africa. Freshwater et al. (2008) have reported that music and physical play have successfully promoted the appreciation of linguistic diversity and learning of mathematics in Kenya. In another study Agbenyega, Tamakloe, and Klibthong (2017), have studied African folktales and have found out that African folktales, particularly Ghanian Anansi stories, have huge potential in developing academic and higher order thinking skills in children. The researchers argue that Anansi stories can be used to teach academic concepts to children as an Anansi story easily lends itself to a discussion between the teacher and the children, thereby providing the teacher the opportunity to evaluate children's understanding and to make all the necessary adjustments during lesson delivery, hence promoting children's understanding of curriculum concepts. Similarly, traditional play and games in Ethiopia in general and in the study, are areas that can be used to promote effective learner-centered instruction. Examples include those listed above, such as marble games and rope skipping. It is essential that teachers know about such opportunities and are prepared to make use of this enabling environment. To make the policy promise a reality, teachers need appropriate support to ease the burden caused by test-driven and content-based education.

### **Barriers**

Barriers in this context refer to the conditions which are obstacles for the successful implementation of learning through play. From the data analysis, the major barriers identified include limited space for learning through play given in the curriculum, weak leadership support, large class size, negative parental attitudes towards LtP, unsuitable infrastructure/ school environment, hindering pedagogical belief, teacher capacity limitation and shortage of budget and resources.

## (a) Limited Space for “Learning through Play” in the Curriculum

The space or value given to learning through play in the curriculum is important for successful implementation of play-based pedagogy. However, the data collected from teachers, school principals and children have revealed one of the barriers for the successful implementation of learning through play is the limited space in the school curriculum, especially at primary level. Here are selected opinions of primary education teachers in the sampled schools:

Source	Opinion
T3502_ET	My school curriculum does not include play, it simply focuses on content.
T4502_ET	The school curriculum is content-loaded and is not supportive for LtP. There is no sport period in the school curriculum.
T4102_ET	Bulky textbook (excessive content).
T2102_ET	In practice the gender and inclusion of play is not as it is expected to be conducted in the classroom. We tend to focus on teaching the content directly, for instance, through writing notes. One reason for that is to focus on finishing the portion and the other is that introducing the play needs a little bit of creativity.
T2502_ET	The use of play mainly depends on the teacher. For example, the management does not identify LtP implementing teachers.

When they believe that the primary curriculum does not include play-based learning and teaching, it is less likely that the teachers will use LtP pedagogy. Emphasizing the same, a lower primary school teacher at one of the sample schools said:

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**// The curriculum in my class is not supportive for play-based learning. It is content-focused and covers many things. The teaching approach also gives priority to content coverage rather than on achievement of competencies or the learning outcomes. The way the curriculum is designed is not attractive; nor is it supportive for active learning methodology. If need be, I must try on my own (T2502\_ET)."**

The same teacher further explained:

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**// The textbooks have contents like grammar, but it is not organized in a way that promotes active learning methods. Even pictures are rare. In fact, there are no textbook copies for children. The challenge in our case is the textbooks are not appropriate for learning through play, the focus is on content (knowledge structure). The timetable is also overcrowded, and we must rush to cover content; there is no space for flexible programming too."**

The importance given to the coverage of the prescribed curriculum (textbook) at the expense of real learning has been mentioned to be a critical barrier to the implementation of play-based pedagogies. A primary school principal said this:

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**// One challenge against participatory pedagogy is the idea of covering the annual portion. Teachers focus on covering the given portion at the expense of skills acquisition. They do so because they are accountable for lagging in terms of portion coverage, not in terms of students' failure to achieve the required level of skills or competencies, in general" (SL102\_ET)."**

Even within the primary education level, the problem goes on worsening as the grade level increases because of regional and national examinations that focus on mastery of curricular content. So, the important challenge is how to reconcile participatory and learner-centered teaching while academically preparing children for the national examinations. This calls for an intervention in teachers' capacity development. The principal was, nevertheless, aware that content-focused approaches alone won't prepare children for life and said:



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**//** What is the value of finishing the textbook content if child holistic development is not the central issue? For a child who could not read, asking to copy two chalkboards full of notes has no value. We ourselves write notes on the chalkboard and we read it. This is only exhausting our flesh. Nothing more than that. [...] We have seen this in our lives. We taught children several pages of books, yet they did not learn. Education could not help children even to write their names at grade 8. We are producing a generation good at copying answers. That is all! (SL102)."

Integrating LtP into curriculum would involve shifting instruction from a transfer-oriented to a constructive approach where children can investigate issues by themselves. An interviewee teacher also shared a similar experience on how schools force teachers to focus on making children pass exams instead of equipping them with the necessary skills such as social, emotional, creative, and communication skills achievable using a learning through play approach. The teacher said:

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**//** The school leadership wants to pass students because if they fail more, they will be accounted for that, not for skills acquisition of every student. Once, I failed four students and I was ordered not to fail more than one. So, I had to re prepare the student card (pass certificate) (T4102\_ET)."

This finding aligns with several studies indicating that teachers usually focus on academic teaching to meet the expectations of authorities and parents. According to Kane (2016), over-emphasizing academic achievement and placing less importance on play in schools is related to the broader culture of schoolification—a trend that makes teachers feel pressured to focus on activities that boost academic achievement. Lynch (2015) and Ranz-Smith (2007) have conducted research on similar issues in the United States and have found out that teachers, in their attempt to cover curricular standards, often sacrifice play for “pencil and paper” learning and mandated activities.

Besides the emphasis on content coverage, the issue of providing quantitative evidence that children have learned the prescribed curriculum has held back implementation of learning through play. Research conducted by Jachyra and Fusco (2016) and Baker (2015) has uncovered that teachers are expected to demonstrate evidence of learning through documentation and quantitative results, and this makes it difficult for them to implement play in their classrooms. In general, in spite of the policy rhetoric that supports the utilization of play-based pedagogy, the situation on the ground does not reflect proper utilization of a play-based teaching and learning approach.

### **(b) Limited Leadership Support**

School leadership plays vital roles in the design and implementation of innovative ideas like learning through play in schools. However, data from the field revealed that leadership support is limited, especially at the primary level. During an interview, a teacher (T1502\_ET) explained that there is no support from school leadership on implementation of learning through play because of capacity limitations, both technical and material. On the same issue, another teacher from a different sample school has also confirmed that leadership support is limited and said:

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**//** The school administration did nothing to make learning through play accessible to all students. There are some teachers and even school leaders who complain when children go out to the field for sport period. I can't say everyone in the school understands that children learn from play. They don't believe children learn through play (T3102\_ET)."

Mendenhall et al. (2021) in a study on teacher professional development and play-based learning in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda have emphasized that teachers are at the center of implementing play-based learning. However, the researchers cautioned that to deliver quality education, teachers urgently need more and better support, including from school leaders, specific to the contextual and material realities in which they work.

One of the teacher interviewees reported that school leaders do not encourage teachers to take their students out of class for the purpose of learning through play. The teacher said, “When I take children out of class, the principal may ask why the children are outside. Thus, I keep the children in class all the time even if I believe they are bored” (T4502\_ET). A related opinion was heard from a school principal (SL502\_ET) who pointed out that there must be time for playing but the school leadership does not encourage teachers to let children play during classroom instruction. This is a good indication that the school leader conceives of play as an activity of free time outside classrooms.

There are studies that focused on the importance of leadership support in the actual implementation of learning through play in schools. For instance, Mendenhall et al. (2021) clearly underlined the tremendous role school stakeholders can play in the effective implementation of play-based learning in schools. For these researchers, play-based learning is strongly influenced by a wide and diverse constellation of individuals and institutions.

The limited support by the school leadership is also reflected in the resources and material support they provide to teachers. The interview data has revealed that primary teachers have serious resource problems that hinder implementation of learning through play. One teacher had the following to say:

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**// I request for instructional resources and unsuccessful requests always frustrate me. How could you implement learning through play if the school says, “There is no paper/ tape/pen/pencil...” If the leaders say, “No” for teachers’ requests, why are they in the position in the first place? According to my knowledge, budget disbursement is to fulfill such needs, but it is paradox as to how they work with school budget. Nevertheless, I don’t want to lose hope and get frustrated and stop my duty (T3102\_ET).”**

The above quote from the interview implies that leadership support for the success of learning through play at primary level is limited. Another teacher (T3102\_ET) said this: “I got no support from the school administration. I didn’t see any teacher in the school using participatory learning method and no incentive for using it” (T3102\_ET).

Teberg (1999), stressing the paramount importance of leadership support, has pointed out that teachers need more than just knowledge and skills. Teachers need encouragement from leaders and interest groups to reach the goals they defined for their children to realize their full potential.

### **(c) Unsuitable School Physical Environment**

A suitable school environment in this context means the appropriate conditions of the school reflected in its buildings, classrooms, playgrounds, size, and neatness of school compound and quantity and quality of other amenities. Today, there is not much doubt regarding the positive role that conducive school environment plays in proper learning and development of children (Maxwell, 1998; Neill, 1982). Hence, it can be assumed that school environment is one of the factors that affect the implementation of play-based pedagogy in schools. The data collected from the sample school through various means have shown that one of the barriers for the implementation of learning through play in the sample schools was unsuitable school environment.

Different authors have given their suggestions around what the physical environment of outdoor playgrounds of preschools should look like. For example, Chowdhury & Choudhury (2002), Curtis, (2003), and Daniel (2016), have explained the role of the outdoor playground in stimulating children to play and enhance their physical strength. According to Beaver et al. (2008) too, the physical environment is also a learning resource by itself (as a playground) and a source of material for play activities.

Interviews with the educators (i.e., school leaders and teachers) have given the picture of the

school environment. One of the teachers said:

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**// The challenges are that the classrooms are small, and there are many children in one class. The space of the compound allocated for pre-primary is also limited. It is not enough for the children to play, run and do activities as we wish" (T2101\_ET)."**

Another interviewee teacher maintained the same idea: "Learning through play requires wider compound, and playground, but we do not have this in this school" (T1502\_ET). The school leaders also shared similar concerns about the school physical environment. A school leader reported this:

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**// The size of the playground is limited. The challenges are related to the availability of enough space (playground). On the contrary, the school student population is large compared to the size of the physical space of the school. (SL502\_ET)"**

Commenting on a similar challenge another school leader (SL101\_ET) asserted:

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**// I cannot say the environment is conducive. Because the school compound is small, children require wide area to play freely. They also need favorable classrooms and an attractive environment. (SL101\_ET)"**

The researchers of this study visited the sample schools and saw, firsthand, each school's physical environment. When we gauge the physical conditions of the sample schools against the physical environment of quality preschool (which is described above), the sample schools have unsuitable school physical environment, and this is one of the barriers for the implementation of learning through play.

#### **(d) Large Class Size**

Class size (number of students in a classroom during a lesson) is one of the critical challenges of implementing learning through play in teachers' classrooms. Observation results showed disproportionality between number of children and classroom sizes in almost all cases. It was common to see fifty or more children attending their lessons in about seven-by-seven-meter classrooms (i.e., a 49 square meter area). That means, there is less than 1 m<sup>2</sup> of space for each child. This situation is contrary to the suggestions of researchers (e.g., Smith & Connolly 1980) who suggest between 30 and 50 square feet or 2.79 to 4.6 square meter of usable space per child as an ideal size for indoor environments. Classrooms with less than 25 square feet or 2.3 square meter per child generally lead to an increase in aggression and unfocused behavior on the part of children. Practically, there was not enough space for children to move around and play in the study areas. Teacher perceptions and observation results too confirm these findings.

The opinions of the educators (school leaders and teachers) reflect the same situation in both preschool and early primary grade settings. For instance, a primary school classroom teacher said this: "In my school, the critical challenges are related to large class size, especially with the 40 minutes period, very difficult to use play and involve all children in the process of learning" (T1502\_ET). A school leader too pointed out that class size is the major problem in using learning through play in schools:

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**// The size of the rooms we use as classrooms are below the national standard. They are small. However, the classroom serves a large number of children. The national standard for preschool is between 30 and 40 children per class. Here 60 children are in one class in this preschool. The reason is that the demand from the community is very high. Such large number of children in one class constrain teachers to use the participatory teaching as they wish. For children to play they need space in the room (SL101\_ET)."**

National standard documents in Ethiopia show that a classroom should not be less than 56 square meters in size (seven by eight meter) and the ECD and primary class sizes are set at 30 and 50 learners respectively (MoE, 2018a; 2018b). In this case, the policy suggests, in the same order, an area of 1.87 and 1.12 square meter per child to enhance implementation of interactive

methods such as LtP. Hence, the match between classroom spaces and class size does not even concur with national guidelines.

Another school leader, too, expressed that “The rooms are small but number of students in each class is high, which is higher than the national standards” (SL502\_ET). The same concern of large class size was mentioned by another school leader:

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**// Class size is one of the most important challenges in our case. Especially in terms of screening, identifying, and supporting students, large class size is a critical challenge. For primary grades, it is expected to be 40-50 per class. Now we have over 70 in most of our classrooms... With the 40 minutes session, it is very difficult to use play and involve all children in the process of learning. (SL102\_ET)”**

Teachers have also indicated that class size is one of the major constraints to employ learning through play in their classrooms Teacher (T2502\_ET; T3502; T4502\_ET; T2101\_ET). They believed they can't use playful activities that involve physical movement in a class with over 70 students. Several studies concur with this result. For instance, a group of researchers, namely, Mendenhall et al. (2021) have indicated that several studies attribute large class size and inadequate classroom infrastructure as hinderances to teachers' uptake of play-based learning. Similarly, Moland (2017) reported why teachers in Nigeria failed to implement learning through play; teachers were forced to revert to direct teaching methods due to large class sizes, inadequate space for play-based learning in the classroom, and rigid scheduling. A different study by Barrett (2007) in Tanzania showed that teachers were trying to individualize learning for children's needs but were seen struggling due to overwhelming class sizes.

Others emphasized challenges in maintaining order in crowded classrooms. A participant teacher in this study noted, “Children shout because they are many in number” (T2102\_ET). Griffitt and Veitch (1971) also showed how discomfort in classrooms resulting from factors such as high temperatures, high noise levels, and overcrowding can instigate interpersonal disputes, hostility, and even violence.

The problem of managing large numbers of children is not only a concern in the classroom. Teachers have mentioned that the problem extends to outside to classroom playgrounds. A teacher reported, “We have large class size, about 85 students. I don't take my children outside the class. Because if I do so, they will spread out in the field, and it will be a big challenge to bring them back to class” (T3102\_ET). While the teacher's concern is valid, a more surprising situation is that there is no other alternative designed by the teacher or the school to enhance free play than to keep them in class.

In general, as discussed by Dzamesi and Heerden (2020), overcrowded classrooms force teachers to use more teacher-centered teaching and limit opportunities for social interaction among children. From the findings of this study, the impact of large class size on LtP implementation was more pronounced at primary level than in ECD centers. The evidence collected and classroom observation made also give enough reason to argue that the available space determines both the type of play possible and the communication inside the classroom.

### **(e) Issue of Time and Absence of Assistants**

Research shows that the duration of time children spend in school has an impact on their learning. Banerjee and Duflo (2011; cited in Barrett, Peter, Alberto Treves, Tigran Shmis, Diego Ambasz, and Maria Ustinova; 2019) have reported that the short length of school days is one reason for the low academic development of children. They cited India as an example; in India, school days on average last for only three hours per day and the academic outcome of school children is poor. In contrast to this, the OECD countries have school days lasting six to eight hours per day on average and the academic outcomes of children is higher compared to those countries which have fewer hours in the school day.



In the sample schools the preschool children spend three hours (8 a.m. to 11 a.m.) and the lower primary school children spend only four hours (one shift). During the focus group discussion, some parents disclosed that the time children spend in school is limited, and they suggested a need to extend it. Studies by other researchers (e.g., Fesseha and Pyle, 2016; Hope-Southcott, 2013; Hu et al., 2014; all cited in Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019) identified time pressure as the most prevalent challenge to engaging children in play-based activities.

The issue of understaffing is also a major issue in the implementation of learning through play at the pre-primary level. Orkin et al. (2012) referred to the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education documents related to early childhood education and indicated that the ministry has clearly fixed this issue in the document. The provision says, “Early childhood teachers will be assisted by assistant teachers, who should have attended school between Grades 8 and 10 and hold Health Volunteer or Health Assistant Certificates” (MoE, 2018c). However, understaffing is still one of the major challenges in schools. A teacher commented on the challenges s/he has faced due to the absence of assistant teachers in school:

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**//** Recently, one of the teachers in the other section is on leave and I am supposed to teach a large class by mixing the two sections together and it somehow limits my ability to use learning through play. In addition, when I am not able to come to school due to personal problems, there is no one to substitute for me. (T4501\_ET)”

A similar opinion was expressed by another teacher:

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**//** The big number of children in one classroom, i.e., around 60 students in a class, is a challenge for one teacher. When I deal with a group of children some others engage in some unnecessary activities. [...] I am doing my best, but it would have been better had an assistant teacher been hired. I do the class cleaning work, arranging the class all by myself. (T2 101\_ET)”

Another teacher expressed the problem of the lack of assistants this way: “the workload is a big issue for me. I teach many children alone. Some children want to learn, some want to play, some want to disturb (need attention). It is difficult to manage that by one person” (T3 101\_ET). These teacher interview findings support conclusions drawn by previous research studies (Hegde and Cassidy, 2009; Lynch, 2014; Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019), which revealed that, in addition to time constraints and large class sizes, understaffing is one of the barriers for the successful implementation of learning through play.

#### **(f) Parental Attitude Towards Children’s Play**

Positive attitude and support from parents are essential for teachers to discharge their responsibility of helping children learn better and grow. Especially if teachers are going to use innovative teaching approaches like learning through play, positive attitudes and support from parents is paramount because play is cultural, play needs time, and the parents, as members of the community, hold certain values about play.

From field data, this study found that positive parental attitudes toward learning through play tended to be low. One parent said, “We encourage children to learn and not to play in schools. We want our children to play but should be under the guidance of the teacher and not free by themselves.” (PFGD1502\_ET). Another parent opined, “During class time, we do not expect children to play. We want them to learn. Play should be a free time activity” (PFGD2502\_ET). Still for another parent, “Play consumes time, and this may reduce the time needed for study” (PFGD1102\_ET). Similarly, a fourth parent noted, “Play attracts the attention of children and may be done at the expense of academic activities like doing homework” (PFGD1102\_ET). From the expression of the parents, it is possible to infer that parents understand play and learning as two separate activities. They understand learning and teaching should take place in the classroom with due focus on academic development. According to the understanding of the parents, play is an extra activity which should be done outside of the classroom. For some of these parents, even free play at school should be under close supervision of teachers. Thus, the



parents, while rejecting combining play and learning in the classroom, do not support free play without adults' supervision.

School leaders were asked about parents' attitudes towards children's play. One of the school leaders stated, "Parents' resistance for children to play during classroom instruction is another barrier to utilization of learning through play" (SL502\_ET). Supporting this, another school leader also opined that parents do not consider play as useful compared to academic work:

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**// Parents expect their children to read and write within a short period of time. They consider learning is [only the] ability to read and write. Some parents even report to the officials that their children are not learning well because they are not able to read and write. This misconception has to be corrected. Learning is not only writing and reading, but learning can take place through playful activities which may not be seen in the notebooks of the children. (SL101\_ET)"**

Thus, according to the school leaders, the views that parents hold about play have significant impact on the extent to which the classroom teachers implement or use play-based pedagogy.

Teachers agree with school leaders regarding the attitude of parents towards learning through play. For instance, one teacher said, "Some parents come and complain why their children are wasting their time playing instead of learning in classes" (T2502\_ET). Such parents, while not the majority, tend to hold an undesirable perception of play in classroom/school context. Likewise, another teacher reported, "There are children and parents who do not accept this idea of learning through play. They don't encourage teachers. If teachers talk about play, parents are not happy" (T4102\_ET). Once again, the teachers underscored some parents' misunderstanding of play-based learning or even the role of play in a school context. Several studies concur with this result. For instance, Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland and Wollscheid (2019) have indicated that the awareness and expectation of parents regarding what and how preschool children's education should be given is one challenge for many ECE practitioners in translating play-based curricula into practice. For these researchers, parents variably focus on school achievement and school preparedness from early on and are unwilling to acknowledge the value of play in their children's preschool activities. If that is about preschool, it is not difficult to imagine the challenge when it comes to early grade primary schools.

Parental attitudes toward learning through play is low in general, and specifically, parents do not accept the same type of play for both boys and girls. One parent said, "I do not allow my girl child to play football because she should not open her legs wide" (PFGD1502). Another parent, when explaining how play is gender-based, portrayed his/her position first by asking question and then answering it. "Why do we not have female athletes from Somali despite their physical appropriateness (long and thin)?" (PFGD2502\_ET). The parent answered the question s/he asked him/herself by saying, "Girls are not allowed to wear pants (short trousers). Any dressing that exposes the body of girls is not culturally acceptable and Somali girls cannot participate in athletics." In terms of cultural norms, still there is no change when it comes to female and male roles.

Research by Fung (2009), Fung and Cheng (2012), Baker (2015) and Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland & Wollscheid (2019) has revealed that parents are very concerned about the academic learning of their children and this has become an obstacle for teachers, who cannot conduct their professional duty in line with their beliefs. Thus, teachers are forced to spend their time on direct teaching and evidence of learning achievement that they can show, such as worksheets, drills, and homework. The present finding concurs with these assertions.

## (g) Teachers' Pedagogical Beliefs and Competence

The pedagogical belief of teachers is one of the major factors for the effective implementation of learning through play in schools. If teachers hold constructive beliefs, they can invest their time and energy into trying to implement learning through play even in the face of external obstacles, such as the existence of limited resources. On the other hand, if teachers do not have positive beliefs about learning through play, even though the policy obliges them, they may not make use of learning through play in their teaching. Thus, teachers' beliefs has become one of the most important issues in the study of implementation of learning through play. For example, Pui-Wah and Stimpson (2004) and Pyle, De Luca, & Danniels (2017) have indicated that recent qualitative research on early childhood education has turned its attention to teachers' beliefs, practices, and barriers with play-based learning pedagogies.

A teacher stated his/her conviction regarding play and said, "I don't take my students outside the class, and they don't need ball and ropes. I don't need resources that are used outdoors. I show my students from the book" (T2102\_ET). This clearly implies the teacher does not believe in the importance of learning through play. S/he does not see the significance of integrating learning and play and does not accept that learning through play can be used in teaching any subject. His/her statement also implies play takes place only outside of the classroom and, for this, different materials are required. This goes with the findings by some researchers (such as Fung & Cheng 2012; Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019) which indicates the narrow understanding of play as free play only.

Another interviewee teacher believed learning through play is important, but s/he believed learning through play is more appropriate for preschool. The teacher said, "I feel that play is more useful in preschool and very early grades than in the higher grades. I say this because as the class increases the depth of academic content covered increases. For instance, in the lower grades using songs is very common and appropriate" (T4102\_ET).

During a reflective discussion with children, the children shared their own perspectives about their teachers' beliefs regarding learning through play. The children reported, "We play with our friends. Teachers do not play with us, but Environmental Science and Amharic teachers usually have fun with us telling jokes. [...] They don't allow us to play. They insist on studying instead" (CFGD2102\_ET). This again gives good evidence on the belief of teachers regarding learning through play. Christie & Roscos (2006) and Vu et al (2012) have pointed out how different actors in the system including teachers view the value of learning through play and commented administrators, policy makers, and some teachers in the early childhood programs who perceive play as a waste of instructional time rather than as a way of enhancing learning outcomes. This, however, does not have to be the case.

Research findings indicate that teachers' beliefs regarding LtP as a pedagogical tool matter a lot to its success. For example, Baker (2015) noted that teachers' perspectives and personal beliefs about play have a large impact on their pedagogical practices. It is true that teachers' beliefs and status of LtP implementation are affected by level awareness and competence. Findings in this study, however, showed that despite limited training and capacity, teachers did not show or share negative attitudes towards LtP use in their respective classrooms.

From the field data it is observed that teachers feel that they lack the competence to execute learning through play. One teacher spoke about his/her limitation in terms of competence and said, "I do not feel I am equipped to apply learning through play because I did not get training and I do not have relevant materials for teaching at all" (T2502\_ET). Another teacher also stated that s/he lacks the required know-how to use learning through play. S/he reported, "I don't have enough knowledge and skill to teach through participatory methods. If there is training, I would be glad to receive it to enhance my capacity" (T3102\_ET). On the same issue, another teacher has to say this:

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**// I believe I have some limitations. There are some packed materials provided to us to use in our teaching. However, since we were not given training on how we are going to make use of them, I have not opened and used them till today. I need additional training. (T3101\_ET)”**

The issue of competence is further mentioned by other teachers whose opinions are stated as: “I do not ever feel I am well enough to participate in play activities” (T2501\_ET); “I do not feel I have the necessary capacity to use learning through play” (T1502\_ET); and “I do not feel I am equipped to use participatory methods because I have capacity limitation to implement such methods” (T3502\_ET). These opinions concur with the findings of Lobman (2005) who reported that many teachers in early childhood classrooms are not prepared to implement learning through play.

As can be understood from the above, teacher beliefs and competence are significant bottlenecks for the effective implementation of learning through play. Here it is worthwhile to indicate the required competence of teachers if they are going to effectively use learning through play in their classroom. According to Graue (2010), good teachers must have the following attributes: strongly value play, are able to set the stage for meaningful play that has authentic, intellectual content, and take an active scaffolding approach to play.

### **(h) Shortage of Budget**

In order for schools to function effectively and meet requirements in terms of expenses, they need to have a budget and a system of utilizing it. The amount of budget allocated by competent authorities and how easy it is to execute it matters a lot for educational institutions. One of the major barriers identified by this research for the implementation of learning through play is inadequate budget. A school leader from one of the sample schools during the interview pointed out that shortage of budget is a critical challenge:

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**// There is no separate budget for preschool for the purchase of materials. Most of the play and teaching materials for preschool here have been either donations or provided by the city education office. Still there is scarcity of finance to get some materials needed for teaching and learning. (SL101\_ET)”**

Another school leader lamenting the shortage of budget reported:

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**// Budget shortage is a very significant challenge. It is what incapacitates us. For instance, we have two standing sources: the block grant and the school grant. For the former we have 10-15 birr per student per year. For the latter we have 50 birr per student per year. Imagine what I can do with this. (SL102\_ET)”**

The school leader further elaborated how the shortage of funding is affecting the operation of the school:

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**// This preschool is a public school, it has limited funding. Thus, many things are missing in our school to make the school conducive and participatory. The school leaders and teachers usually make a lot of effort to make the school and classrooms attractive and meet the needs of children. (SL101\_ET)”**

The shortage of budget is mentioned in all the sample schools as one of the major barriers for the implementation of learning through play. Another school leader confirmed the shortage of budget as a major challenge and explained they have “no materials for learning through play in the classrooms. There is no budget at all for material purchase and learning through play resources” (SL502\_ET). The shortage of budget has led schools to make children and teachers get involved in the production of learning materials. School leader (SL102\_ET) confirmed this and said “There is problem of budget. Yet, we have some materials to be used for learning and teaching which are prepared both by the teachers and the students.” The shortage of budget has also made schools to compel children contribute financially for the purchase of play materials. An interviewee teacher (T2102\_ET) has revealed this “I don’t have materials that I kept for play. Students contribute to buy some resources like ball, rope and so on.” Likewise,

during reflective discussion, children (CFGD3102\_ET) have also disclosed that they (i.e., the pupils) pay for the purchase of materials for the schools. The children said, “in the school there is shortage of play materials (e.g., balls, nets, etc.). So, every student in grade four and above contributes money to buy play materials to play with.” This situation, while contradicting the idea of free primary education for all, is another burden on the children who are already doing their schooling under difficult situations. Such a shortage may also mean the government (i.e., the education bureau and the local administration which allocate the budget for the school) does not pay adequate attention to procurement of play materials. The undesirable impact of such budget shortage on quality of learning in general and quality of play-based learning has been researched globally (Richter et al., 2017; Zubairi & Rose, 2017; Kim, et al., 2022; Orkin, et al., 2012). Thus, it can be claimed that shortage of budget is one of the major barriers for effective implementation of learning through play.

### **(i) Shortage of Play Resources**

Play resources in this paper refer to the definitions given by Jones (1972). The concept includes all resources in a learning setting as anything natural or artificial, real, or imaginative, visual, or invisible, big, or small, structured, or unstructured, props or loose parts, which a child or a teacher or groups can use for teaching, fantasy, recreation, encourage creativity or can be used to enrich their play. From this definition we can understand the concept of play resources is wide and does not only refer to only tangible (real) resources.

The issue of play resources is one area of interest in research. Some researchers have come up with findings that support the significance of play resources. For example, Montie, Xiang and Schweinhart (2006) and Lim et al (2018) have found that when there are variety of play resources and when children are allowed to use them, their cognitive performance will be high. The researchers have indicated a positive relationship between the availability of play resources and positive cognitive performance.

Other researchers (Addison et al., 2010; Gandini et al., 2005; cited in Lim et al., 2018) have uncovered that appropriate material and equipment are helpful to stimulate children’s creativity in children. Prentice (2000, cited in Lim, et al., 2018) has found out that appropriate material and equipment are also helpful to boost young children’s confidence to be inventive. However, the scarcity of play resources is found out to be one of the barriers for the effective implementation of learning through play. The sample teachers have expressed there is shortage of play resources. One of the sample teachers said:

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**“ I don’t have enough resources to use in class for learning through play activities. There is nothing from the school. I brought some materials from home. My daughter supports me in some of them. My daughter provides me with some resources because she is keen on drawing and catering, and does things related to that. (T3102\_ET)”**

Another teacher (T3101\_ET) has also pointed out the paucity of play resources: “We do not have enough resources for learning through play. Some musical instruments, some puzzles and materials can help to integrate learning through play.” The dearth of play resources is repeatedly raised by teachers. Yet another teacher disclosed, “There is scarcity of materials for implementation of learning through play” (T3502\_ET).

The shortage of play resources as a barrier for the implementation of learning through play is mentioned by many of the sample teachers repeatedly. In addition to those indicated above, some of their ideas are summarized below.

## Source            Opinion

T1502_ET	We have this time very limited materials for active learning pedagogy.
T1502_ET	There is lack of relevant resources and shortage of textbook for learning through play (LtP)
T4502_ET	We do not have materials for learning through play in this school.
T2501_ET	There are some materials, it is not sufficient for the children.
T1501_ET	There are times I could not get materials I requested on time and this situation discourages me.
T4102_ET	There is an extreme shortage of materials. In fact, many of them are not accessible. The school is not doing well to get them.
T3101_ET	We have some constraints such as shortage of materials to fully apply play.
T3101_ET	The shortage of appropriate books.

School leaders also share the same views regarding the shortage of play resources. One of the school leaders revealed: “No materials for learning through play. There is no budget at all for material purchase and purchase of learning through play resources” (SL502\_ET). Another school leader has in the same way explained the shortage of play resources: “There are some concepts that we couldn’t address by using the available materials” (SL501\_ET).

Some researchers who have conducted research on play resources have reported that shortage of play resources is one of the barriers for successful implementation of learning through play. Bakar et al. (2015, cited in Lim et al., 2018) has, for example, reported that inadequate play materials and equipment are hindering play in preschools. Some researchers who conducted studies in Ethiopia also have also reported similar findings. Studies done by different groups of researchers (i.e., Rossiter, et al., 2018; Teferra & Hagos, 2016; Woodhead et al., 2017; cited in Kim et al., 2022) revealed a few barriers limiting access and quality of preprimary education provision in Ethiopia. According to their research, the lack of trained facilitators/ teachers, limited availability of curriculum and teacher guides, a lack of adequate classroom facilities, insufficient developmentally appropriate learning materials and playgrounds, and insufficient pay for teachers are some of the major constraints.

UNESCO-IICBA (2010) conducted country case studies on early childhood care and education (ECCE) in selected sub-Saharan African countries including Ethiopia. Its research findings also revealed that lack of children’s books, toys and other relevant educational materials is one of the major constraints in preschool education and care. In the 2010 National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ethiopia, it is clearly stated that there is a lack of culturally relevant story books and play materials for the preschool children. The situation at the primary level is not any different. Though limited, available evidence characterizes the context of play-based learning in Ethiopia as unsuitable because of the prevalence of large class sizes and poor material supplies for the purpose (Mendenhall et al, 2021).

Overall, as it can be seen from the field data and the research findings, shortages of play resources are one of the big challenges for the effective implementation of learning through play in Ethiopia.





# Concluding Remarks and Implications

This study was primarily aimed at learning from the practices of schools (ECD centers and primary schools) in implementing Learning through Play (LtP) pedagogy. Specifically, the following basic questions shaped the process of inquiry:

1. What does Learning through Play mean to children, educators, and parents in well-performing Ethiopian schools?
2. What does LtP look like in well-performing Ethiopian schools?
3. What barriers and opportunities challenge or facilitate the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at schools in Ethiopia?

The inquiry process adopted positive deviance theory in selecting study schools and an ethnographic case study design in processing and identifying lessons from the schools as communities of practice using interviews, FGDs, and observation techniques. The data collection process covered a total of 19 educators (14 females, 5 males), 61 school children (29 girls, 32 boys), and 62 parents (38 females, 24 males). Using qualitative data analysis techniques, we identified major findings, and in this section, will provide concluding remarks and implications for forward action.

## Major Findings and Conclusions

### 1. Meaning of Play

- a. The general tendency is that all the informant groups took play as a means of happiness, joy, and amusement for children. It is not an end by itself nor is the content related to the actual classroom lesson.
- b. The informants unequivocally indicated that even though they loved playing as a child, their opportunity for play was constrained by the expectations to support household activities. Care givers/guardians tended to discourage play and push children to rather focus on the serious business of life (i.e., work and study) in preparation for adulthood. Therefore, the guardians hold that play is not serious and hence, even if useful, it cannot guarantee adequate preparation for adulthood.
- c. Gaps or inconsistencies among informant groups about play and what they wish to promote for the children was observed, which indicate some gap in the adults' awareness of play and learning through play. There is a general tendency to view playing at school or play-based learning as more fit for preschool or younger children than it is for primary grades.
- d. There is gendered division of play; what to play, with whom to play, and when (and how much) to play are all gender-determined. The extent to which adults promote such gendered division of play increases with age, where pre-primary children are not as restricted, even if there is this process of socialization to culture-determined gendered play.
- e. In conclusion, the conception of LtP focuses on its motivational aspects, not necessarily its incorporation into lessons, and it's clear that interviewees mostly viewed LtP as more appropriate for preschool learners. Play in schools also has gender dimensions, driven by religious, cultural, and social norms, which lead to boys and girls playing separately.

### 2. Practices and Examples of Play

- a. School policies support the implementation of LtP because the system of education in Ethiopia adopted active learning pedagogy as a guiding instructional principle. However, educators viewed the space for LtP better in ECD centers than in primary schools. Though

ECD curriculum and schedules integrate LtP as an integral element of learning, primary schools' curriculum and school timetables focus on academic content and use of time for its coverage.

**b.** Educators and caregivers support the use of LtP in schools despite their fear of a shortage of instructional time and the likelihood of physical injury in practice, respectively.

**c.** Classroom observation results too confirmed that LtP implementation is better in ECD centers than in primary schools because of teacher capacity limitations (with primary teachers less trained for LtP-based instruction), limited practical leadership support, and an emphasis on academic deliverables (e.g., test scores). Accordingly, preparation of play-based lessons was, compared to the situation in ECDs, less practiced in primary schools.

**d.** Inclusion in implementing LtP—Though other diversity issues (such as disability, children from minority groups, and socio-economic status) were viewed as well-addressed by the school community and less problematic in school settings, gender difference seemed divisive, prevalent at both ECD and primary levels. Educators try their best to make instructional and play activities inclusive but can only do so in guided activities. There was a consensus among participants in classifying free play as gender specific—i.e., boys and girls play separately during free time. In Somali, even seating arrangements are gender specific due to cultural norms.

**e.** The level of support from school leadership showed varying findings. At the ECD level, leadership support for LtP implementation confirmed the appropriateness of LtP as a pedagogy. At the primary level, however, findings showed that the nature of leadership support leans towards monitoring and general support and was not specifically supportive of the implementation of LtP as such.

**f.** Examples of guided play in ECD centers varied by level, sex, and context. While building blocks and the use of flash cards are common in ECD centers, storytelling, singing, and physical exercise-centered activities that do not necessarily relate to the content of the lesson are the most prevalent play activities identified from the primary context. In the case of free play, while ECD activities involve sliding, spinning, etc., primary school children focus on running and football (for boys), and rope skipping and cultural dance (for girls).

**g.** From the above findings, it can be concluded that LtP is positively viewed by participants, the setting is rich in cultural play activities conducive to LtP, and school policy supports its implementation. Practices and examples, however, do not give adequate evidence for its implementation in classroom instruction mainly due to the limited capacity of teachers, the content-focused curriculum structure, and the limited resources available.

### 3. Opportunities and Barriers

**a.** From the analysis of data collected, the existence of a supportive policy of education and local cultures rich with indigenous play and games are the two basic opportunities that can facilitate the implementation of LtP.

**b.** The findings also identified a list of barriers that can affect the effective implementation of LTP. These include limited space available for learning through play, and, especially in primary education curriculum, weak leadership support for LtP; large class sizes; negative parental attitude towards play-based learning; unsuitable infrastructure; a lack of pedagogical belief in LtP; insufficient teacher capacity to implement LtP; and limited budget and resources.

In summary, the findings indicated both context and challenges ahead for effective implementation of LtP. Though the theoretical groundwork for LtP (policy provision and willingness of educators) is encouraging, in practice, the implementation of LtP shows more gaps than achievements.

## Recommendations

Based on the conclusions reached, the following implications and action points are suggested for a better pace of progress in the area:

- 1.** Awareness creation workshops should be organized to present the nature of play and its capacity to increase learning, as well as outline the responsibility of stakeholders in its implementation with focus on the school community, parents, and policy makers.
- 2.** The status of LtP conceptualization and implementation calls for designing capacity-building opportunities or orientation schemes for stakeholders, including:
  - a.** Supporting compilation of different child play activities from different cultural and school contexts aimed at enriching pedagogical options in schools.
  - b.** Developing training manuals for increasing parental and community awareness.
  - c.** Developing training manuals for educators on how to integrate LtP into lesson plans.
  - d.** Working towards gender integration (involving both boys and girls equally in similar play activities) with due attention to cultural values and implications to maximize the advantages and minimize gender division in learning opportunities.
- 3.** Findings showed resource limitations for the implementation of LtP in both ECD and primary schools. Recognizing the scarcity of resources for education, stakeholders should focus on creating capacity in developing play materials from locally available materials and finding a way to prioritize need-based purchase of play materials as appropriate.
- 4.** Findings revealed that teacher capacity in implementing LtP is limited. For the sake of ensuring sustainability, LtP should be integrated into the teacher education curriculum within colleges of teacher education for both ECD education and primary grades.
- 5.** The literature in LtP implementation in Ethiopia is very thin. Thus, supporting initiative and framing research projects should earn the attention of stakeholders, to ultimately inform policy and practice.



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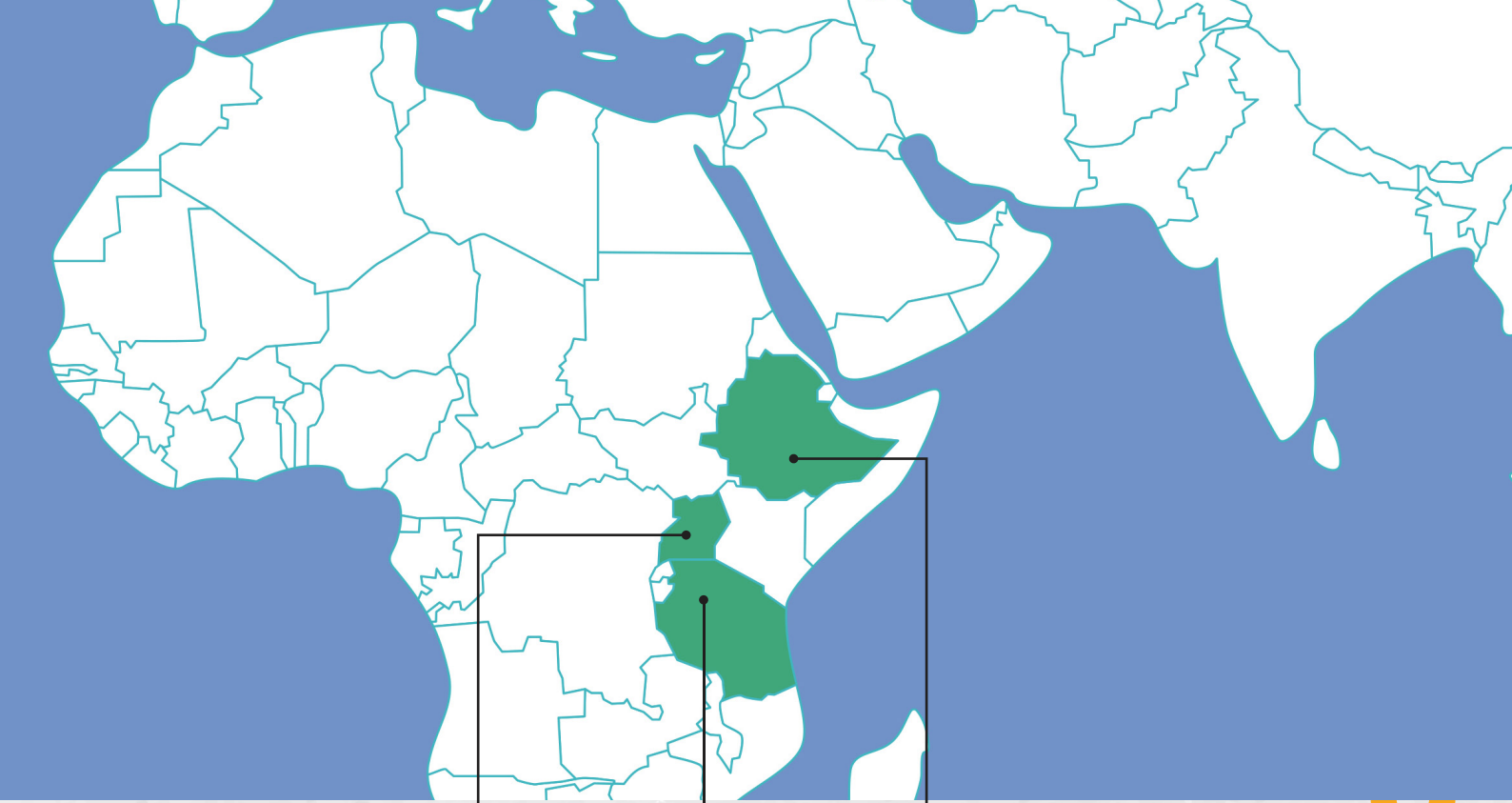




Zenebech Yesuf, a Grade II teacher interacts with learners during a mathematics lesson.

**Derk Weyra Primary School,**  
PlayMatters ERM, Dessie, Kombolcha,  
Ethiopia





### Uganda

*Kyegegwa, Isingiro, Kikuube,  
Lamwo, Arua, Madi Okollo,  
Terego, Obongi, Yumbe,  
& Adjumani Districts.*



### Tanzania

*Kasulu, Kibondo &  
Kakonko Districts*



### Ethiopia

*Benishangul Gumuz,  
Gambella, Afar, Tigray  
& Somali Regional States.*

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