

PlayMatters

Evidence Brief: PlayMatters Ethiopia Implementation Research Findings on Key Outcomes

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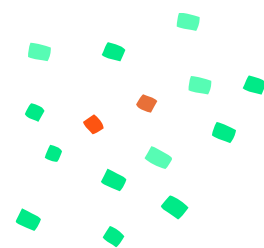
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In partnership with



The LEGO Foundation



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through PlayMatters implementation research in 18 primary schools in the Somali region of Ethiopia during the 2023–2024 school year, researchers found the following baseline–endline changes in relation to PlayMatters’ theory of change:

- Head Teachers improved their perceptions of LtP and support for teachers
- Teachers’ occupational well-being significantly improved
- Teacher classroom practices significantly improved
- Children’s holistic learning significantly improved
- Children’s well-being significantly improved

These findings provide strong evidence that PlayMatters’ theory of change is working as expected, which will be further evaluated through a forthcoming impact evaluation.

BACKGROUND

PlayMatters is a teacher professional development intervention focused on supporting pre-primary and primary teachers to use Learning through Play (LtP), an active teaching and learning methodology, to deliver curricular content in protracted refugee contexts in Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania. The intervention includes six components at the school level: teacher training, training for school leaders to deliver school-level teacher continuous professional development (TCPD), school management training, community engagement, teaching and learning materials, and safe school infrastructure. PlayMatters ultimately aims to improve holistic learning and well-being for children living in conflict and crisis.

Through a collaboration between researchers from Addis Ababa University and the International Rescue Committee, an implementation research study was conducted in PlayMatters schools during the September 2023 – June 2024 school year in Somali region, Ethiopia. The study examines the validity of PlayMatters’ theory of change as well as the quality and fidelity of implementation. This brief summarizes findings from the following research questions (a sub-set of the broader study research questions):

1. What baseline–endline changes do we observe on Head Teachers’ reported support for teachers and perceptions of LtP?
2. What baseline–endline changes do we observe on teachers’ instructional practices (use of teaching and learning materials and child-centered pedagogical practices)? What changes do we observe in their levels of knowledge, motivation, attitudes and behaviors towards LtP? What changes do we observe in their well-being?
3. What baseline–endline changes do we observe in children’s literacy, numeracy, social-emotional, and creative skills and in their mental health and well-being?

METHODOLOGY

This study draws from a sample of 18 primary schools (8 refugee, 10 host community) in the Somali region of Ethiopia. From baseline to endline, the research team found an approximate attrition rate of 24% of children and 32% of teachers due to repatriation, absenteeism, and for teachers specifically, leaving the profession.

Sample Size Table	Baseline	Endline
<i>Head Teachers</i>		
Head Teacher Survey	16	16
<i>Teachers (1st to 5th grade)</i>		
Teacher Survey	166	113
Classroom Observation	163	110
<i>Children (2nd to 4th grade)</i>		
Holistic Learning and Well-Being Assessment	424	322

For each population, surveys were administered by trained enumerators as follows:

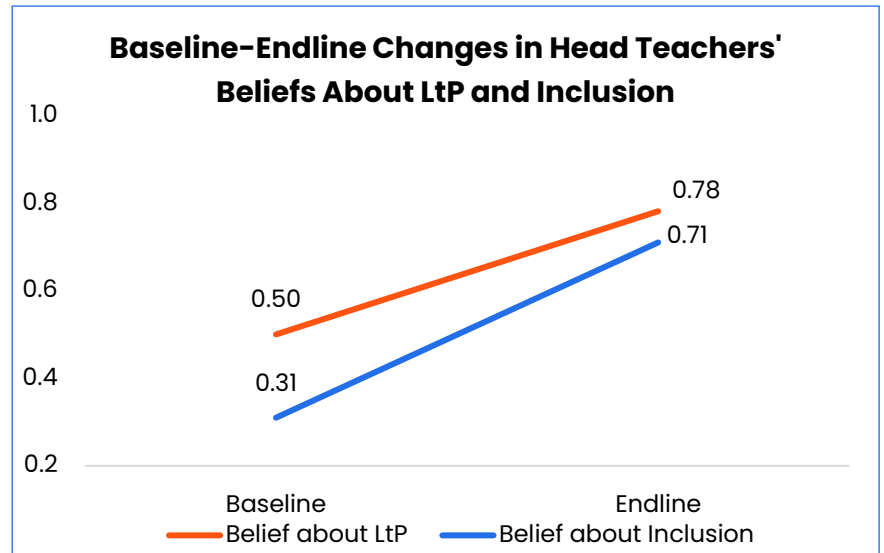
- **Head Teacher Survey:** Scale on conducted activities, Scale on Perceptions of LtP
- **Teacher Survey:** Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale, Scale on Perceptions of LtP, ASSETS (Well-being Assessment of Skills and Supports that Enable Teachers to Succeed)
- **Classroom Observation:** Teacher Classroom Observation Scale (Time on Task, Materials available and used, Quality of learning environment, Teacher instructional practices, Classroom management practices, Student engagement)
- **Holistic Learning and Well-being Assessment:** EGRA, EGMA, SERAIS (Conflict resolution & emotional regulation), ACES (emotional recognition), Empathy, Choices, Kiddy-KINDL (well-being), Moods and Feelings Questionnaire

FINDINGS

Key Finding 1: Head Teachers Improved Their Perceptions of LtP and Support for Teachers

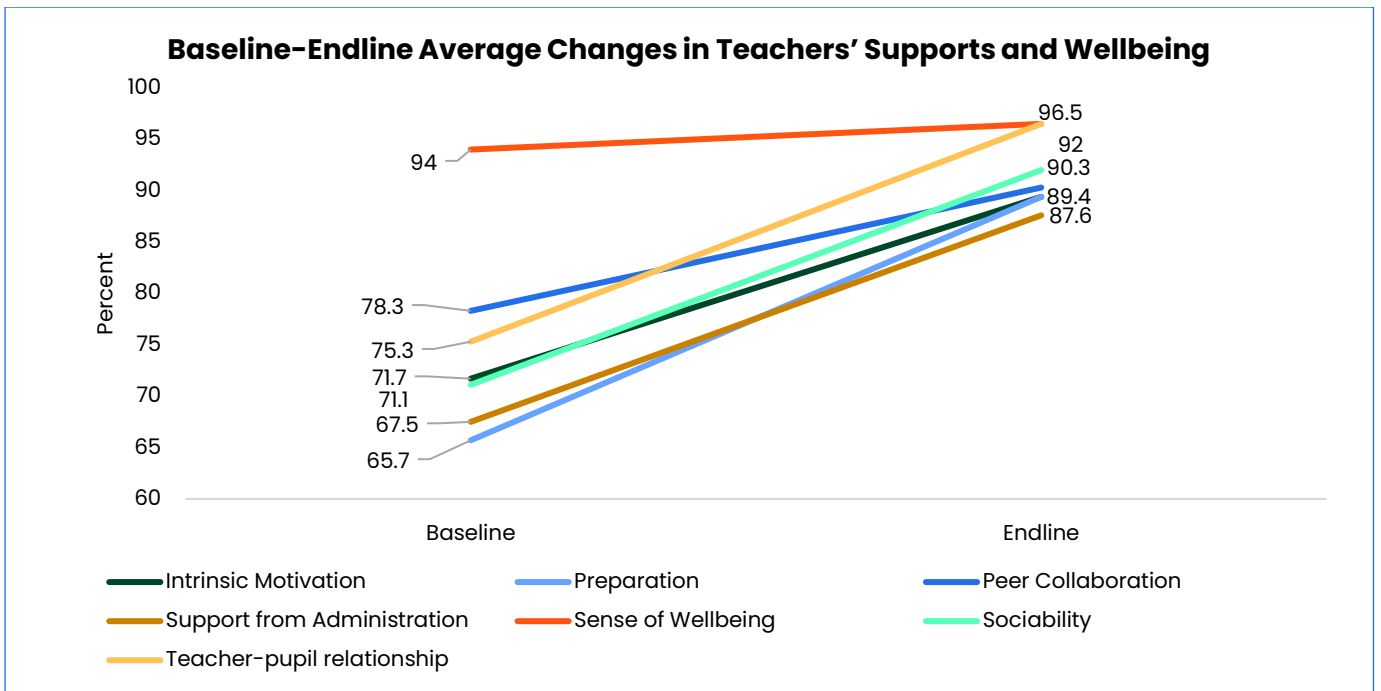
PlayMatters provides training for Head Teachers and other lead teachers on TCPD and provided resources tailored to Learning through Play (LtP) such as planning guides and observation tools to conduct TCPD activities. In a survey with 16 Head Teachers, we observed statistically significant improvements in their self-report of how often they conduct a variety of school-based TCPD activities, including supportive supervision, mentoring and coaching, encouraging teacher peer learning, and conferencing with teachers.

Additionally, we observed a statistically significant increase in Head Teachers' beliefs about the importance of LtP, indicating increased awareness of and support for LtP in education. Moreover, a scale on Head Teachers' perceptions on the importance of inclusive LtP practices showed significant improvements. Given the gendered context of the Somali region, such results show promise of shifting attitudes regarding the inclusion of girls and children with disabilities.



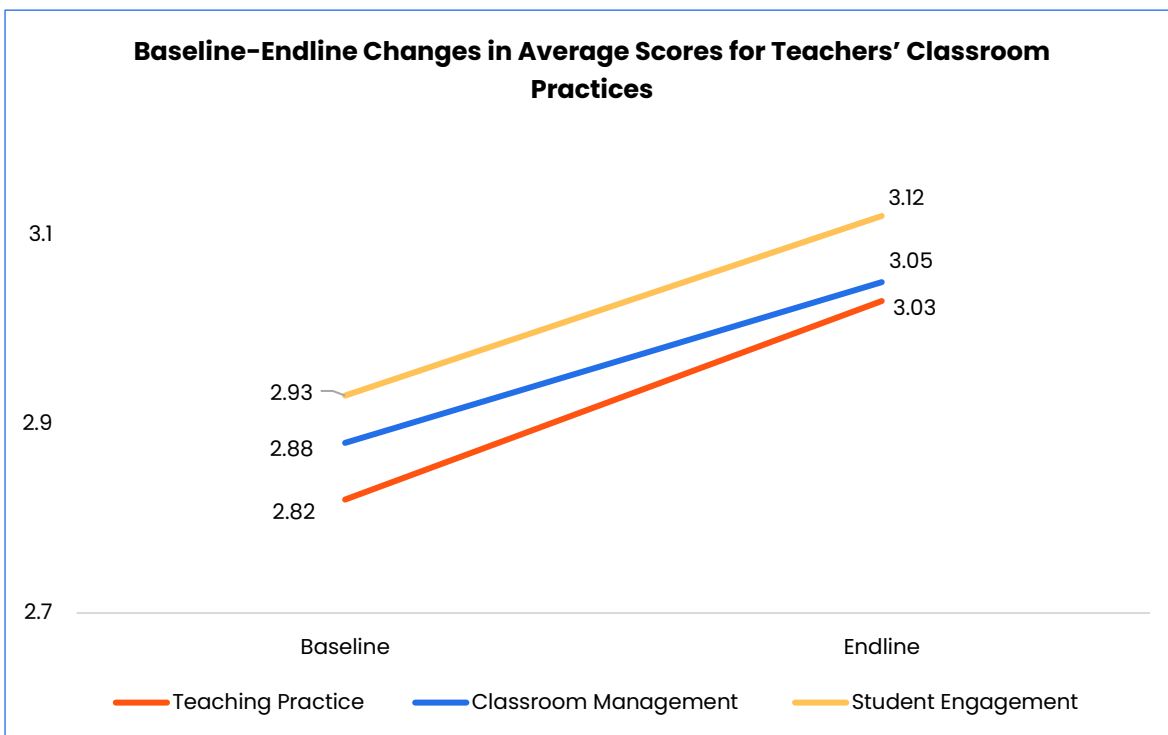
Key Finding 2: Teachers Had Improved Occupational Well-being at Endline

PlayMatters trains teachers on how to manage their own well-being, improves access to professional development opportunities, and emphasizes the importance of a positive classroom environment. Utilizing the ASSETS tool (D'Sa et al., 2022), results showed that teachers significantly improved in key dimensions of occupational well-being (Falk et al., 2019). These domains include intrinsic motivation, support from administration, teacher–pupil relationship, preparation, peer collaboration, and sociability. The only sub-domain without significant improvement was teachers' sense of overall well-being, but there were high levels reported at baseline, limiting opportunity for growth. Improvements from baseline to endline across all sub-domains of the ASSETS tools suggest the possibility of a positive causal relationship between the provision of comprehensive support for teachers and their occupational well-being. Given the challenging contexts that PlayMatters operates in, improvements in teacher well-being indicates that there is value in the delivery of the PlayMatters Core Package and a whole-school systems strengthening approach. Moreover, these findings suggest that PlayMatters' theory of change and global evidence are accurate in positing that when teachers are well, they are better teachers and, in turn, can better support children's holistic learning by influencing not only the classroom and school environment but also their teaching practice.



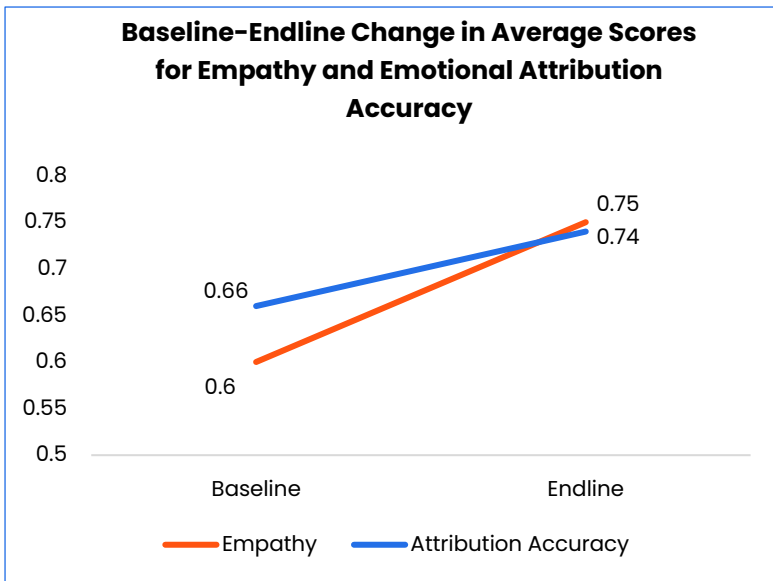
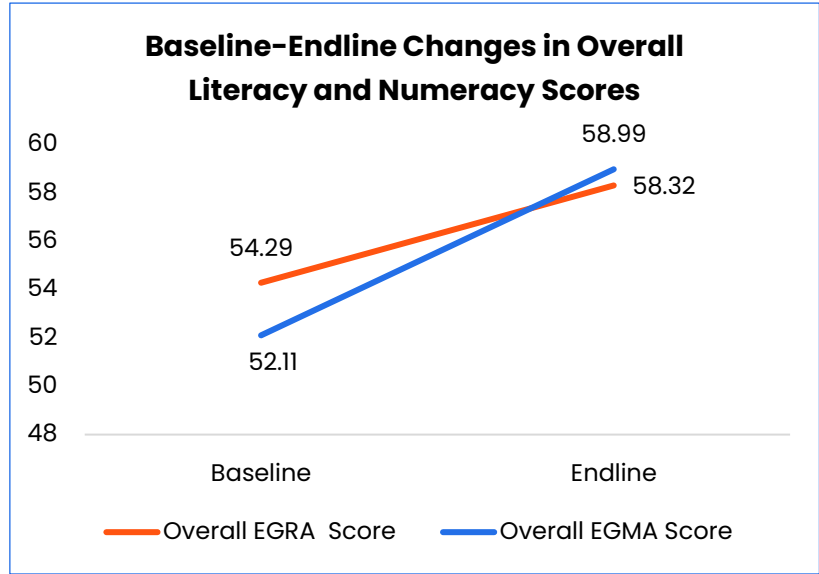
Key Finding 3: Teacher Classroom Practices Significantly Improved

Teacher training and continuous professional development is at the heart of PlayMatters’ delivery model. Teachers’ classroom instructional practices are believed to be a key mechanism for improving children’s holistic learning outcomes. Classroom observations reveal significant positive improvements in teachers’ instructional practices (such as active teaching and learning strategies and LtP practices), classroom management practices emphasizing positive discipline and inclusion, and student engagement. These findings indicate that teachers have significantly increased their use of LtP following a year of PlayMatters engagement.



Key Finding 4: Children’s Holistic Learning Significantly Improved

A key part of PlayMatters’ goal is to improve children’s holistic learning. An assessment of children in grades 2–4 revealed statistically significant improvements in holistic learning outcomes. Sub-tasks on early grade reading and mathematics assessments (EGRA and EGMA) were used as measures of cognitive development, revealing decreases in the proportion of children with zero scores in both EGRA and EGMA, and significant increases in proportions of children achieving standards for both EGRA and EGMA, with particularly large gains in mathematics.



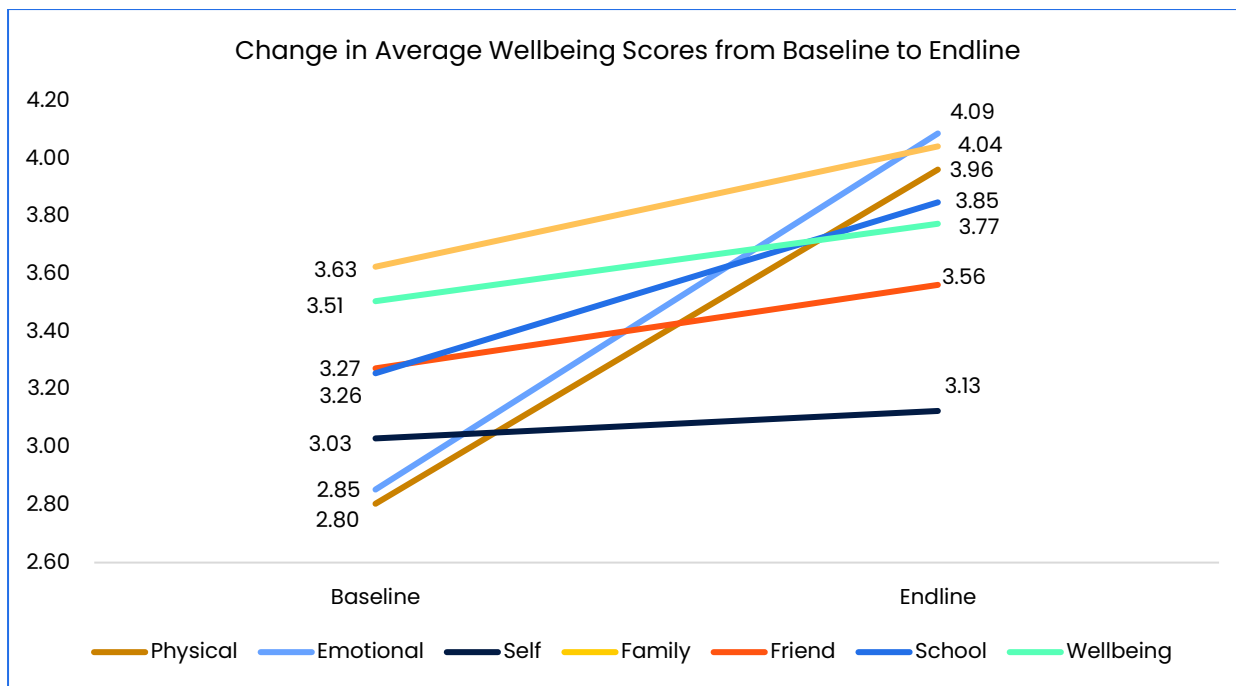
In addition to cognitive development, we found significant positive improvements in children’s social-emotional scores across various domains including emotional attribution, empathy, prosocial behaviors in managing conflict, and a significant decrease in children’s anger dysregulation and use of aggression as a conflict resolution strategy. These results, when considered in light of the positive findings identified from classroom observations and teacher well-being lay a strong foundation for further

exploring the relationship between teacher well-being, teacher’s use of LTP that integrates well-being and inclusion, and overwhelmingly positive improvements in social-emotional outcomes.

Key Finding 5: Children’s Well-being Significantly Improved

Moreover, research findings reveal significant improvements in children’s well-being and a reduction in depression symptoms from 8.7% at baseline to 1.6% at endline – a 7.1% decrease. We observed significant improvements in children’s overall well-being and statistically significant improvements in every sub-domain with particularly large effects in children’s physical and emotional well-being.





CONCLUSIONS

These findings are encouraging for PlayMatters, indicating positive improvements across all of PlayMatters key outcome areas, including improved teacher support systems, instructional practices, child holistic learning, and child well-being. The causality of these relationships will be further evaluated via a planned Randomized Controlled Trial in Somali region, Ethiopia, during the 2024-2025 school year, using the same measures.



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