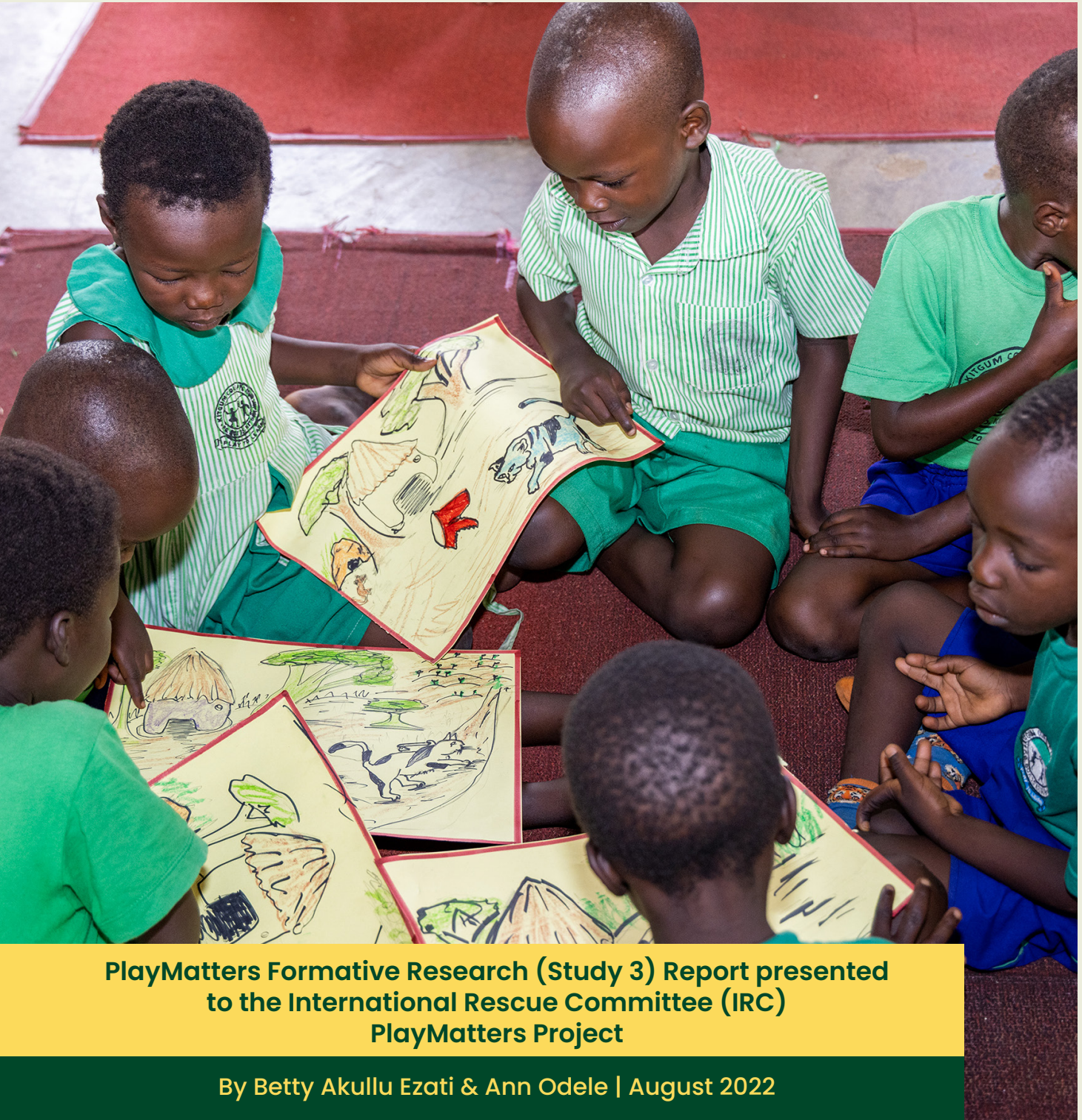


Formative Study of Learning Through Play (LtP) in Primary Schools in Adjumani and Yumbe Districts (Uganda)



PlayMatters Formative Research (Study 3) Report presented
to the International Rescue Committee (IRC)
PlayMatters Project

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In partnership with



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Executive Summary

Research shows that play can provide an excellent learning environment, instill love for school and promote holistic development of children. Indeed, some schools are using Learning through Play (LtP), yet there is dearth of information on how primary schools in Uganda are applying LtP. This study was situated in Yumbe and Adjumani, rural districts hosting refugees. Adjumani and Yumbe districts host settlements located in areas with inadequate social services, high teacher-pupil ratio and inadequate instructional materials which compromises the quality of education.

Purpose: The study was designed to explore LtP integration in schools in Adjumani and Yumbe districts in order to support PlayMatters to develop and implement successful Learning through Play (LtP) methodologies in primary schools.

Methodology: The study took a qualitative ethnographic design with children, parents, educators and school leaders in two purposely selected primary schools in Adjumani and Yumbe districts to understand how LtP is understood, perceived and used as well as to identify the barriers encountered as they use LtP. The selection of the two districts were based on contexts similar to the ones that PlayMatters operates in. The case study schools were selected based on a Positive Deviance Framework because they were already incorporating LtP in their classrooms. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observations.

Findings: In both schools, play was perceived by all the children and parents as any activity that exuded excitement, enjoyment and promoted physical fitness and relaxation and refreshment. A majority of the parents viewed play as disruptive to learning but few (12 out of 32) associated play with learning. Like children and parents, school leaders and educators perceived play as co-curricular games including volleyball, tennis, handball, netball and football. Both however agreed that learning took place through play. LtP was viewed as a learner-centered, engaging and enjoyable activity that promoted active participation and made learning interesting.

With respect to gender, findings showed mixed trends with similar games such as word games being played by boys and girls together while others played separately. Other types of play activities boys and girls played together included volleyball, athletics and ludo. However, boys still preferred playing football while girls opted for netball, an indication that the gender norms continue to influence the choices of play the children made. Unlike school, at home girls had less opportunity to play because they were expected to be involved in domestic work.

The benefits of play and LtP identified by parents and children were more social and physical with few identifying cognitive related benefits. For example, the benefits of play and LtP to children included improved physical wellbeing and pride to their parents as well as creating enjoyment and understanding of curriculum content. Parents on the other hand, valued play because of

the positive relationship it created between the educators and children, its improvement of interest and concentration of the children in class. The school leaders and educators appreciated play and LtP for its role in socialization, development of children's leadership skills, physical and mental development, improvement in retention of knowledge, skills and values learned, increased curiosity in the content being learned, enhanced creativity of both the children and the educators.

LtP in case study schools was integrated into the relevant curriculum content of the different subjects through songs, games and role plays. For example, in the English language, educators used role play to teach and enable children to practice language structures while in Social studies, children used role play to show how plain hilly areas are prone to soil erosion. In a classroom setting, LtP was applied when introducing lessons, during the lesson as an energizer/interlude, to ease the explanation of difficult concepts as well as to conclude lessons. In terms of the five characteristics of play, free time plays were engaging, joyful, meaningful and socially interactive while classroom plays were more iterative.

Factors that facilitated the engagement of children, educators, school leaders and parents with LtP were easily available local play materials, willingness of parents to provide play materials and willingness of the educators to try out new innovations. However, observations showed that educators were not utilizing these local materials. Consequently, although they acknowledge the availability of locally available materials as a facilitating factor for implementation of LtP, they also identified inadequate play materials as a hindrance. Other factors that inhibited the engagement of children, educators, school leaders and parents with LtP were large class sizes, heavy work load of the educators, inadequate time and crowded timetable and inadequate capacity of the educators to use LtP.

Conclusions and recommendations: Generally, educators and school leaders understanding of LtP in the case study, especially separation of play and learning schools showed gaps which could explain why despite recognition of availability of local play materials, the case study schools were not adequately utilizing them. Consequently the use of LtP in curriculum content though evident remains weak. Willingness of the educators and their valuation of LtP can be harnessed to strengthen LtP in the case study schools.

Overall, reducing these barriers requires a multipronged strategy involving training educators to appreciate and integrate LtP in pedagogy, ensuring availability of play materials, training educators to make local play materials and on how to use them in class. The evidence on the current state of LtP in schools should be used to inform orientation of educators, first through continuous professional development and subsequently integrated into the pre-service curriculum in order to improve the use of LtP. Abundance of local materials should be harnessed to ensure availability of adequate play materials.

Section 1: Introduction

Research has enduringly demonstrated that play can provide children with an excellent learning and teaching environment (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Karaoğlu, 2020; Ssentanda & Andema, 2019; Wood, 2010). By exploring, imitating and discovering, play can promote language, cognition, and social competence (Karaoğlu, 2020). Children use both their brains and body in their play and in this way play promotes holistic development of a child (Karaoğlu, 2020). Scholars also agree that children will not develop the love of learning if they do not receive enjoyment in what they are doing (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Play, therefore, must be purposely enabled by skilled teachers who are well trained in pedagogy (Karaoğlu, 2020; Mendenhall et al., 2021).

In Africa, the use of play-based approaches to learning is gaining ground (Croft, 2012; ; Salami and Oyaremi, 2012; Ssentanda & Andema, 2019; Ssentanda, Southwood, & Huddlestone, 2019). However, while teachers have a strong understanding of the role of play in children's development, their actual transfer of play to the classroom is still low (Salami and Oyaremi, 2012; Croft, 2012). Croft, for instance found that play in Malawi was used as a management practice rather than a learning strategy. This could partly explain why in Uganda, despite the importance of play in learning, its adoption in primary schools in Uganda appears still to be at its infancy (Ssentanda & Andema, 2019) with some schools taking it up and others resisting (Altinyeniken, 2010). This report presents findings on the use of play-based approach to learning in primary schools in Adjumani and Yumbe Districts of Uganda.



Uganda's Education System

Uganda's education system is comprised of an early childhood level that caters for children aged 3-5 years (pre-primary education), followed by seven (7) years of primary education, then four (4) years of lower secondary education, two (2) years of Advanced Level secondary education and the final tier is three (3) to five (5) years of tertiary education. The curriculum of primary level is organised in two formats with lower primary (primary 1-3) arranged around themes while up primary (primary 4 – 7) is subject based. Primary education, is still considered the first official level of formal education since there is no government founded pre-primary schools for children (NAPE, 2018).

Children in primary and secondary levels are nationally examined. The national examinations are summative and is used for selection to the next level of education, making them very competitive. Consequently, teaching is aimed at maximising the chances of learners passing the national examinations. So tailored is the teaching to passing examinations that even when teachers are technically knowledgeable about usefulness of learn-centred methods towards improving learning outcomes, they still perceive such methods as a waste of time (Mitana, Muwagga & Ssempala, 2018).

The use of play-based approaches to learning in primary schools in Uganda

The National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) in the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), a body responsible for developing curriculum in Uganda, recommends learning through play as the best approach for lower primary schools. Specifically, the use of pictures, wall charts, songs, rhymes, games, and role-play are highlighted (NCDC, 2007). In training colleges, teachers are trained to use play-based approaches for child-centered and participatory learning (Ssentanda & Andema, 2019). In addition, there have been initiatives to strengthen play-based learning in primary schools outside as well as in the Settlements by UNICEF, Plan International, the Right to Play, among others.

Uganda is also a host to a large number of refugees, a majority of whom live in Settlements created by the Government. Currently, 15 such settlements exist – most of them located along the border with South Sudan and the DRC where the majority of the refugees originate. Of the 1.4 million refugees in Uganda, approximately 68% live in the West Nile region (GoU and UNHCR, 2017). The West Nile region is composed of the districts of Arua, Maracha, Koboko, Yumbe, Moyo and Adjumani. Statistics show the refugee population in Adjumani and Yumbe as 58% and 52%, respectively (Adjumani, 2019).

By policy, refugees have the same rights to access public services including education like their Ugandan counterparts (Schulte & Kasiyre, 2019). However, since the refugee hosting districts are among the least developed districts in Uganda, both refugees and Ugandans experience challenges not only of access to education but low quality of education. For example, educational indicators such as teacher pupil ratios, drop out and completion rates are below the national average (GoU & UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2018). Therefore, the rising numbers of refugees constitute a challenge to the already poorly equipped schools in these districts. For instance, 59% of children, aged 6 – 17 are out of school and in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, located in Yumbe and up to 66,201 (32%) are not in school (GoU & UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2018). Furthermore, the quality of education is compromised by a shortage of classrooms, teachers and materials. The class sizes exceed 150 children, with some squeezing in 250 children or more, and inadequate infrastructure (Schulte & Kasiyre, 2019) hinder the use of LtP.

In addition, given the learners' varying levels of knowledge, maturity, and abilities in the same class, teachers in Uganda struggle with the application of play-based learning (Altinyelken, 2010). Low transfer of new learning by teachers as well as superficial understanding of the principles underpinning LtP also create gaps in the effectiveness of play-based learning (Mendenhall et al., 2021). Moreover, teachers view storytelling as a waste of time (Mitana, Muwagga & Ssempala, 2018), time that could be spent on 'real' lesson content. Hence, the use of play-based approaches to learning is not uniformly spread across primary schools in Uganda, with some schools using it while others resisting its use (Ssentanda & Andema, 2019). Drawing from schools that are using LtP, this study sought to explore what "successful" LtP integration looked like in Uganda. The selected schools had strong local engagement and by the time of research were not dependent on donor funding.

The PlayMatters Initiative

PlayMatters (2020–2026) is an education initiative that promotes Learning through Play (LtP) methodologies for improved holistic learning and well-being for children ages **3–12+** in refugee and host-communities across Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. The initiative focuses on children whose education and social development have been affected by displacement and trauma. 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).

With its five characteristics of active engagement, meaningfulness, enjoyment, iteration and social interactiveness (Zosh et al., 2017; Parker & Thomsen 2019), LtP enables children to communicate their thoughts, share ideas, understand others and enjoy being with them and build stronger relationships. In this sense, LtP entails active learning, collaborative and cooperative learning, experiential learning, guided discovery learning, inquiry based learning, problem-based learning (Parker & Thomsen, 2019).

Based on Vygotsky’s theory, LtP is based on the premise that play is not purposeless, but a process that improves brain structure, function and facilitates the process of learning by helping children to pursue goals, ignore distractions and build resilience. LtP has several benefits including improving holistic outcomes for children more effectively than either traditional instruction or free play (Yogman et al., 2018), enhancing autonomy, interaction, creativity, reflection and problem-solving skills of the children (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). The implication is that educators can enhance holistic learning by scaffolding play with the learners both in and outside their classrooms. Yet, there is little evidence from low-resource and humanitarian contexts on how to assist educators in overcoming the challenges they face to implement Learning through Play. The challenges facing educators in refugee settings such as overcrowding, scarce materials, curricula, and cultural/traditional understandings of teaching and learning may also serve as barriers to the use Learning through Play approaches (Kasirye-Büllesbach, 2019; Ogwang, 2022).

Problem Statement

Despite the challenges many primary schools in the refugee settlements face such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning materials, overloaded curricula, inadequate capacity of the educators to use LtP (Kasirye-Büllesbach, 2019; Ogwang, 2022), some primary schools have adopted the use of LtP. Several questions arise like, for instance, what does LtP look like in these schools? What motivates these schools to use LtP? What challenges do these schools experience as they implement LtP? So far, schools using LtP have not been independently audited nor has there been serious efforts to track implementation of LtP in order to derive evidence-based findings of existing practices. These knowledge deficits deny the stakeholders including MoES, district local governments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Development Partners promoting LtP as well as PlayMatters, the perspectives required for prudent planning. The findings of this study are therefore meant to close such knowledge shortfalls and provide a way forward for improve and more widespread use of LtP in schools.

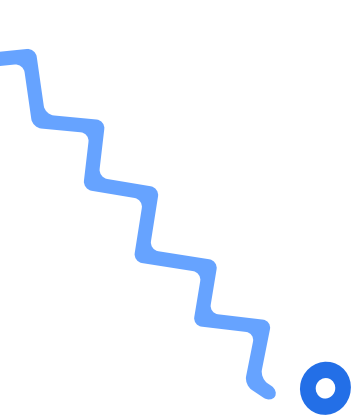
Purpose

The study was designed to explore LtP integration in schools in Adjumani and Yumbe districts in order to support PlayMatters to develop and implement successful Learning through Play (LtP) interventions in early childhood development centers and primary schools.

Research Questions

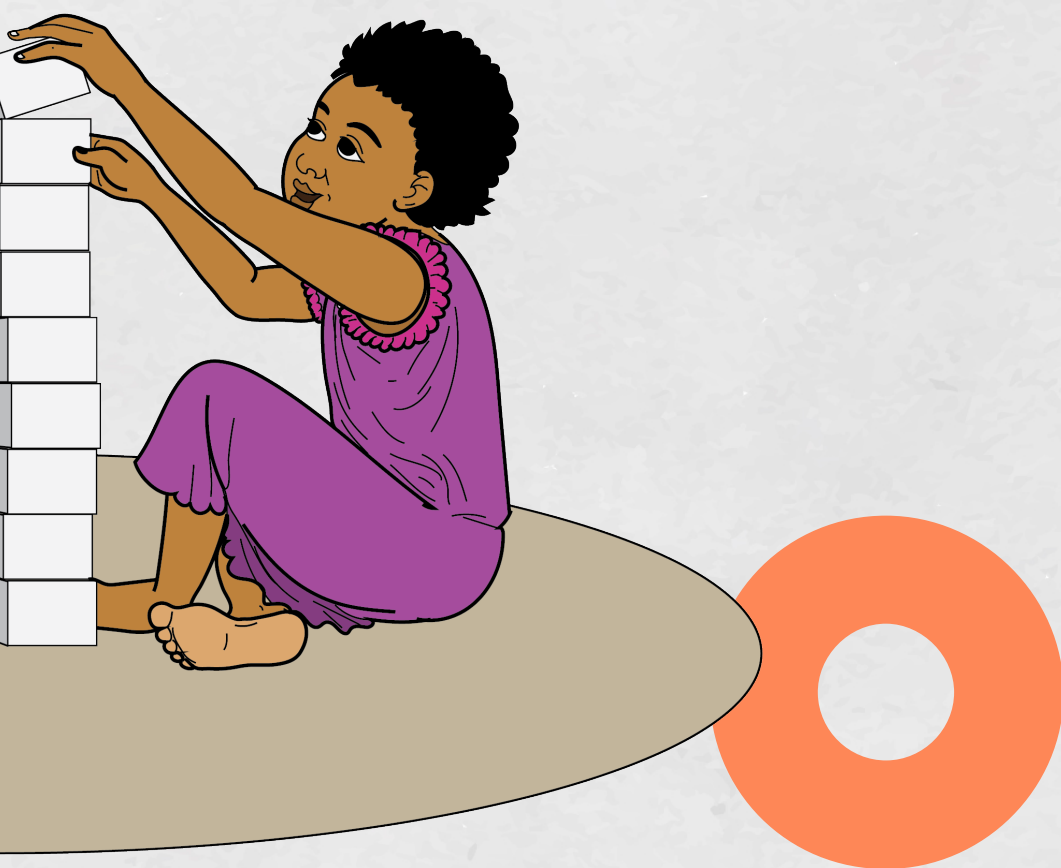
Specifically, the study answered the question: “**What can PlayMatters learn from existing learning through Play (LtP) practices in ECD centers and primary schools in low-resource and humanitarian contexts in Uganda?**” with the following sub-questions:

- What does Learning through Play mean to children, educators, school leaders and parents in case study schools?
- What does LtP look like in the case study school?
- What barriers and opportunities challenge or facilitate the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at school?



Section 2: Methodology

In this section we describe the methodology that was adopted for the study.



Research Design

We used ethnographic methods to understand how case study schools perceive and use LtP as well as the barriers and opportunities encountered as they use LtP.

Population and Sample

The study population comprised educators, school leaders, parents and pupils in primary schools in Yumbe and Adjumani districts. The selection of the two districts were based on Positive Deviance Framework. The case study schools were selected because they were already incorporating better than average participatory pedagogies (Learning through Play practices) in their classrooms. In addition, both districts are not only hosting refugees but also among the poorest in the country. Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021) place the multidimensional poverty index of these districts at 0.412, only ahead of Karamoja. From each district, with the support and clearance by the District Inspector of Schools (DIS), two primary schools were selected. Selection was based on primary schools that displayed:

- Implementation of LtP approaches regularly.
- Sustained implementation of LtP approaches for over 5 years.
- Having a developed a vision that includes references to LtP (or similar practices).
- Adoption of inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.
- Focusing on the development of holistic learning outcomes, including social emotional skills and creativity.
- Provision of education to refugee children and/or host community members.

From each school, one (01) school leader, four (04) educators and 15–17 children and parents participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the educators; with the help of the school leaders who identified teachers who were using LtP. Thereafter, the educators helped to select the children. The parents of the selected children were then enrolled into the study. A summary of participants is in Table 1 below.

Access to Participants

In order to access the respondents, the school leader who was met first helped to identify the educators who were successfully implementing LtP. The educators identified the children who took messages to their parents inviting them to a meeting. The parents were informed about the study, consented to participate in the study and assented to their children's participation in the study.

Methods of Data Collection

In-depth interviews with a total of 8 educators and 2 school leaders were conducted. Additionally, the research team conducted observations of interviewed educators in and outside their classrooms to gain insights into the types of play associated with LtP and free play." Furthermore, drawing-, photo- and video-stimulated focused group discussion were conducted with children while focused group discussion with parents concentrated on photos and videos in order to understand the values they attached to play as well as LtP. The videos and photos that the parents and children used were generated from our observations of the educators in class and during children's free play. Notwithstanding the critique around researcher generated photos and videos (Richard & Lahman, 2015), parents and children easily expressed their feelings about play and LtP because the photos and videos were from their context. Table 1 summarises the sample and the data collection methods.

Table 1: Summary of sample size and methods of data collections

District	Name of School	Enrolment			Number of Teachers	Participants from each School	Method
		Boys	Girls	Total			
Yumbe	School in Yumbe	430	383	813	17	School Leader (1) Educators (4)	Interviews
						Children (17) Parents (17)	Photo, Video and Drawing elicited FGDs
Adjumani	School in Adjumani	377	434	811	11	School Leader (1) Educators (4)	Interviews
						Children (17) Parents (17)	Photo, Video and Drawing elicited FGDs

Data Management

Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (2011) emphasize the value of effectively organizing data in research. Consequently, the audio and written transcripts from interviews, FGD and observation notes were saved into different storage devices. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. The audio, video and written transcripts and notes will be destroyed 5 years after the study as recommended by Uganda National Council of Science and Technology guidelines.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed following one case at a time (case schools). This enabled a deep understanding of each case at a time, as a complex social entity located in its own socio-historical situation. Data analysis started with transcription. The transcribed data was then coded into Dedoose. Analysis was thematic to produce themes aligned to the study objectives. Thereafter, a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006), where the findings across the two cases were discussed in relation to existing research in the field, eliciting broader insights into the understandings, use, and barriers of LtP in the two primary schools.

Validity and Reliability

Qualitative trustworthiness and credibility was established through triangulation using multiple methods (observation, FGD, in-depth interviews), which corroborated findings across the cases. Secondly, daily peer debriefing provided an external check of the research process. Finally, in the presentation, rich and thick descriptions are employed to permit readers to make decisions regarding trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was first sought from Makerere University Social Science Ethics Committee (protocol number MUSS-2022-100) before proceeding with the study. The IRC Institutional Review Board also provided ethical clearance for this study at a regional level (Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda) under protocol number EDU 1.00.021. Voluntary participation and informed consent were established through explaining the study to each participant who then signed a consent form, and in the case of pupils who signed assent forms. The consent and assent forms guaranteed confidentiality of participant identities, and pseudonyms were used as a measure in this regard. We also observed COVID-19 standard operating procedures including wearing of masks, sanitization and social distancing during physical research interactions.



Section 3: Findings of the Study

This section comprises findings from the case study schools, providing insights into their understanding of Learning through Play (LtP), examples of LtP as well as opportunities and barriers to the use of LtP in these schools.



Children playing rope skipping game during an organised Play Session, Palabek Refugee Settlement, Uganda, October, 2021

Understanding of Play and LtP

We present understanding of play and LtP first from children, then parents, head teachers and lastly teachers. We also provide insights into how LtP is used in and out of the classroom settings, the importance of LtP and the disaggregation of gender and play.

Children's Understanding of Play and LtP

In both schools, play was perceived by all the children as any activity that exuded excitement, enjoyment and promoted physical fitness and relaxation and refreshment. For example, one of the children explained, "We want our bodies to be fresh [re-energized]. We feel okay and our brains open very well. If the teacher teaches and I feel tired, I play this game (high jump)[then] I feel okay and others [playmates] feel very happy. I feel okay, feel good". These were mainly play activities played during free time either at mid- morning recess, lunch recess or after school. In fact, mention of the word play often yielded responses about outside free activities. These included football, netball, long jump, high jump, skipping, and seven stones which were reported to promote physical fitness as reported by another child,

With respect to skills and knowledge learned from play, 14 out of 15 children at the school in Yumbe restricted learning to the specific knowledge and skills of the game being played as reported by one of the children after watching a video, "Yes, that is still dodging, how do you dodge? Stand on the other side, one on the other side, one is the middle, That is a skill of dodging being learned. Yes, they are learning how a particular game is played". This was in reference to a game where two pupils stand about 5 – 8 meters apart and another in the middle; a ball is then thrown at the person in the center who is expected to dodge.

None of the children at the school in Yumbe viewed play as directly contributing to learning, especially curricular content. Their only link of play to learning were the re-energizing and relaxing aspects enabling them to learn better as one of them revealed, "We like it [play]. If we play like that, we feel very well and active in class." In fact, one of the children perceived LtP as interfering with learning as he explained, "I like playing because it makes me physically fit but I don't like plays because sometimes it makes me forget things in class".

Play was so engrained in the minds of the children as an activity for relaxation that when asked to draw their favorite play activity during class time, 7, 5 and 2 children from the school in Yumbe drew children playing football, skipping rope, and board game, respectively. Only one child drew balloons depicting properties of air. This was from one of the lessons we observed in which the educator used balloons. This child explained, "**I enjoyed the lesson and understood it better**", an indication that LtP promoted retention and enjoyment of learning. At a school in Adjumani, 10 of the children reported that in class, role plays improved their sentence construction and values such as love and forgiveness. It is clear that in both schools, though the children's predominant perception of play was not related to learning, some children saw and appreciated the benefits of play-based approaches to learning.

// When we play we feel okay, our brains open very well. I enjoy it, I feel good, I am happy, I am really happy...I play football for my joints to be okay. It makes you strong, it gives energy. If something is painning you somewhere and you play, you will be free. Sometimes when you play and you sweat seriously, the sickness runs away. Sometimes you will be free. We sweat, we become strong and healthy"

Parent's Understanding of Play and LtP

Similar to the children, parents generally perceived play as for leisure, enjoyment, and relaxation and good for children. Participatory activities parents preferred in class included singing, dancing, storytelling, riddles, poems, debate because they were viewed as safe, enjoyable, educative and not prone to accidents as reported by a mother, "...as they are clapping and singing, they are learning... The good play is one which keeps their minds on a particular subject." Another parent, a father reiterated, "When I see children play, I feel my child is refreshing her mind and relaxing. I feel the child is healthy when they play". A mother also reported that "Play is happiness; when you play you are happy". Another father explained play as an activity that promoted peace. He said, "When children play they will forget about their problems and they will feel good".

As regards to LtP, parents viewed it as distractive to learning. A father explained, "According to me, I have known that it is good for a child to play depending on the lesson. If it is mathematics, maybe that does not require the child to play". In this way, play was relegated to learning things outside curricular content. Parents were also cognizant that too much play could distract a child's learning.

Nonetheless, up to 7 out of 10 parents in Adjumani and only 5 out of 17 parents in Yumbe associated play with learning as reported by a father from Yumbe that, "**When children play it means there is something they want to learn. I know learning can take place through those plays**". Similarly, another parent from the school in Yumbe identified the role of games in critical thinking even though the focus was not on curricular content. He explained, "**If they are guided then they are able to learn. The thing is that when children play these games they widen their thinking capacity. Games like puzzles improve their thinking capacity. And also through those games, they learn from the socializations they do during the play**". These responses showed deeper understanding of play-based approaches to learning by the few parents of the school in Yumbe and these could support other parents to appreciate LtP.

School Leaders' Understanding of Play and LtP

Like children and parents, head teachers perceived play as co-curricular games including volleyball, tennis, handball, netball and football. It is viewed as activities that relax the children and prepare them to learn curricular content. One of the school leaders explained, "When they go out to play, they go back to class when they are relaxed and that can facilitate learning". This resonates with both the parents and children's perception. Permitting children to play was feared because of difficulties controlling children. One of the head teachers explained, "**So it takes time for... the children settle down in class if the play was very interesting. When children over play they switch their mind to play and they will always want to play. So that may disturb learning and when they have too much play, they may not concentrate on studies**".

However, the two school leaders agreed that learning takes place through play as explained by one of them, "**let me take mathematics, integrating with play.... when you are counting you can make the children jump or clap while they count. You can also use the cards**". They explained that LtP made curricular content **vivid, child-centered and interesting**. Despite recognition that play leads to learning, it was generally viewed as separate from learning curricular content.

Educators' Understanding of Play and LtP

Play was viewed by all the educators as co-curricular activities, Physical Education or any activity outside class such as football, netball, dodging game, athletics as pointed out by one of the teachers, "To my own understanding, play is any activity or a game intended to give enjoyment". Four educators also regarded play as an interactive activity for socialization, sharing ideas and dancing together. Through play children learned to make friends and communicate with each other which subsequently reduces fights among children. Educators reported that cordial relationship among learners and also between learners and educators was important in fostering a conducive learning environment.

With respect to LtP, educators generally viewed it as a learner-centered, engaging and enjoyable activity.

It is “what encourages active participation and makes learning interesting” (LTR1). It motivates children to learn because it “...breaks boredom,...fatigue and makes learners attentive, thus facilitating learning because ...what a child sees with their eyes, they cannot forget” explained one of the educators (LTR4). Through role-play [for instance], they can recall and “...it makes the learners understand very well”. Another educator pointed out, “The reason why I am making that thing [play activity] is for them to easily remember” (ATR3). Similar to the children, parents and school leaders, educators considered too much play disruptive to learning.

Overall, with respect to research question one, school leaders and educators perceived LtP as a pedagogical approach that made learning enjoyable, interesting, interactive, promoted retention and application of learning. Even though few children and parents linked play to learning, these few exhibited strong understandings of LtP associating it with development of critical thinking.

Gender and Play

The case study schools gave equal opportunity for boys and girls to play unlike the homes which permitted more time for boys than girls to play. Boys played volleyball, athletics and ludo together with girls. Observations of free play activities showed a mixed picture with some girls playing factory made word game together with boys while others played in single sex grouping as seen from Figure 1 and 2.

This mixed findings on gender would indicate that at school girls and boys can play any game of their preference, yet boys still prefer playing football while girls opt for netball, evidence that the gender norm continues to influence play. For example, while girls played football when given opportunity, boys shied away from netball as explained, “Boys and girls, usually they are given equal chances to play... But netball, the boys don’t want to involve themselves and yet the football girls can also get involved” (LTR4).

Even in class, especially in middle classes (Class 4 and 5) it was reported by one of the educators that “girls want to sit as girls and boys as boys. When they are out practicing, sometimes they fall. Girls laugh at boys. Even if it happens to girls, the boys laugh” (ATR4). However, in lower primary boys and girls freely played together outside class and also sat together in class.

In middle primary, girls were seen discriminating against boys in some play activities. This may imply that there was a gendered understanding of which games the boy and girl each played and which games were played together. It is clear from this findings that factory made games designed for learning encouraged boys and girls to play together while traditional games such as football and netball discouraged joint play.

At home several factors hindered participation of girls in play including domestic work and cultural norms that prohibits girls from playing certain games as stated;

“ What I have seen in this community, girls are more engaged in domestic activities than boys and don’t have the chance to play. Actually, in our culture, boys are given more privileges than the girls at home. Boys, if they are given work; they go and dig and come back home then start to play. Girls since morning are busy, sweeping the house, fetching water, washing utensils and sweeping the compound, preparing breakfast, and so on. So the girls have no time to play, unless those small ones who cannot work. But if they reach a certain age where they are able to work they are given domestic work. (LTR1)”



Figure 1: Girls and boys play together.



Figure 2: A boy playing with a ring.

The inability for girls to enjoy play is a combination of religion and culture as some Muslim participants reported disallowing girls to play with boys. Up to 10 parents confirmed this but pointed out that the society was changing and so is their attitudes towards assigning domestic work to girls to allow for more equal opportunity and time for free play at home.

Importance of Play and LtP

The benefits of LtP were appreciated by the different categories of people who participated in this study. We start by presenting findings from children, parents, school leaders and lastly educators.

Children's perceptions of the importance of play and LtP

Play improves the physical wellbeing of the children and creates pride and joy among parents as explained by one of the children from Yumbe, "it pleases my parent because if they see me playing they are pleased that my daughter also plays with other children". For competitive games, children reported getting money after a win, which they used to buy pens and books. One of the girls explained, "**when we win, we are happy. We win money and use it to buy things like pens and books.**"

Only one child reported LtP as important for improving enjoyment of learning and understanding of content. This could mean that the educators may not be using LtP regularly to enable children identify its importance and associate play with learning.

Parents' perceptions of the importance of play and LtP

Play creates friendship, draws children closer to the teacher, improves interest and concentration in the lesson and enhances enjoyment of learning. After watching a video of LtP, a parent explained,

// ...what they are listening from that teacher they cannot forget because they have built friendship with the teacher through those other practical things...Play builds relationship with the teacher and they'll keep respecting their teacher... Play creates interest in learning, you don't forget the lesson, learning is real because practically children have seen it" (referring to the video they discussed earlier of a participatory approach used by one of the teachers (AP))

This response shows even though parents had weak understandings of LtP, they appreciate the benefits of play and LtP.

School leaders' perceptions of the importance of play and LtP

As regards to the importance of play and LtP, school leaders cited socialization, development of leadership skills, physical and mental development, improvement in retention of knowledge, skills and values learned. One of the school leaders explained, "it is for socialization and it helps them to build relations...develop leadership...learn responsibility... It also helps them to strengthen their bones. So it makes them active" One of the school leader also pointed out that LtP "helps children to understand and keep {content} in their memory". This means school leaders value play and LtP for its holistic approach to development of a child.



LtP enhances learning and improves performance

Play enhances learning and aids retention of knowledge and skills as explained by one of the educators, "As I teach mathematics, I get kids who have never been to school but because of play, they learn fast as they sing. They learn new words. A child will remember quickly and they don't get tired" (ATR3). This was confirmed by another educator,

// When you use a play method to deliver a lesson the child may not forget that content. They will acquire and even retain that knowledge for the rest of their lives; that is one of the values. So, play is really very necessary in the teaching and learning process (LTR1)."

LtP was also reported to aid understanding and performance because of its utilization of multiple senses such hearing, observing, touching, smelling and feeling. Play made learning real and not abstract. All the educators reported observing reduction in numbers of children failing in classwork when LtP was applied. Moreover, LtP improved the relationship between the teachers and children, and made class control easier. Observation showed free interaction between children and their teachers but also with each other when LtP is used. In addition, play improved the attention span of the children and kept them alert throughout the lessons. Consequently, educators did not have to bother about constantly calling the children to pay attention.

LtP, according to all the educators, also triggered creativity among children when they designed play materials for different games such as football, ropes for jumping and skipping, dolls, abacus for learning mathematics, among others.

LtP enhances inclusivity in learning

To all the educators, LtP was seen as an inclusive approach to learning because it elicited a high rate of participation from slow, moderate and fast learners and from different age groups. This ultimately improved their participation, and in turn their performance as one educator explained, "...it encourages dormant pupils to work hard"(ATR1). In regards to age, another educator explained,

// Some of these boys may think that now they are big, they are now at the age of being fathers, but if you bring them out...they also become like other pupils who are doing work in the same class. They are now equal...these big boys they sit thinking...me am big, am not supposed to be in P4 ... even if you will be explaining, the person will not be cooperative,... [But] when you bring them outside and involve them in play, they will be equal. (ATR 2)"

In this way, LtP diffused age differentials and boosted children's self-esteem and confidence, enhanced their participation in learning and acclimatized children to the school environment. It is also an incentive and attraction to attend schools especially where the home setting may not be so favorable to support play. Play therefore reduced absenteeism as another educator explained, "Retention of kids in schools is ensured. The more interactive the lesson is, it makes children come to school every day. You retain them as they were enrolled."

Furthermore, although, the school and community around was multi-cultural, there appeared to be non-discrimination during play in respect to ability, ethnicity and displacement status.

LtP refreshes and relaxes learners' mind from stress and trauma

All the educators considered that play refreshed children's minds, aroused their interest in learning, and removed boredom and fatigue, especially during afternoon and evening lessons. One teacher explained, "when a child becomes bored, you bring in play so that it refreshes the mind of the child, then after that you can continue teaching so that the child learns very well" (LTR 2). Through active participation, LtP also improved children's health and development.

When a school uses play, it becomes a haven for children who face challenges at home because as they are immersed in the playful activities, they forget about their troubling situations. Another educator reported;

// Sometimes these girls are intimidated at homes...but when they begin to play [at school], such things will be removed. Besides, some of these learners might be coming from areas of insurgency, so when you are practicing all those things [play activities], whatever has been sticking on their minds gets removed day by day. Whenever you are practicing you will find that those children will be very happy and they will forget about all those things," (ATR4)."

Furthermore, six educators reported that play pre-occupied and safeguarded children from bad practices such as early sex. One of the educator shared: "...there is an enormous problem...those who are above 15, when they play together (boys and girls), they can create other friendship, sexual immorality...". This is why 4 of the educators caution on play for the children above 15 years of age, and pointed out that play between boys and girls sometimes could result in illicit sexual relationships, which calls for proper guidance on sexuality from both the home and school. Despite this concern, another educator argued that when the adolescents engaged in play, "The ideas for sex will be reduced and they will also get used to their peers." In general, play brought joy and happiness, promoted cooperation, unity and protected children. And above all, it was reported that since play occurred in groups, it made children know each other and in turn reduced cultural barriers especially in a community that has mixed cultures like the where case study schools are located.

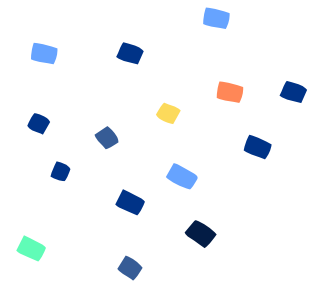
LtP improves educators' creativity

Besides having benefits for children, LtP was also reported to be advantageous to educators. Through LtP educators learn to use "different approaches to handle a problem; develop the skill of handling different issues that may come your way. So as a teacher you also enjoy as you guide the children. Your creativity also improves". (LTR1). 'Talk time' was also reduced as a result of LtP as explained;

// ...it helps the teacher to minimize too much talking, the teacher cannot over-talk because he gives instructions and the learners are the ones to do the talking. So, it minimizes the rate at which the teacher talks in class (LTR1)."

Educators also confessed to learning new things each time they used LtP. They recognized that children sometimes had more knowledge than

them in certain things which they willingly shared when LtP was used. Moreover LtP also created enjoyment for educators as explained "So as a teacher you also enjoy as you guide the children and you can even enjoy it more. So it makes you enjoy the game" (LTR3).



LtP in the Case Study Schools

LtP in the case schools was integrated into the relevant curriculum content of the different subjects. For instance, songs on sanitation and environment conservation were built into the teaching and learning of mathematics. Children sang and demonstrated numbers. In science, LtP included children inflating balloons, comparing weights of balloons on a weighing scale, pairs carrying each other, and demonstrating that matter occupies space by sitting closer to each other at their desks.

In the English language, educators used role playing to teach and enable children to practice language structures. While in social studies, children with the help of the educators role played soil erosion in hilly areas by grouping children in one place with hands raised up, then one by one the children in the outer layer would fall off the rest, depicting soil dropping from the hills. In another class, children role played the legend of Gipir and Labongo, {Briefly, the legend is that Gipir and Labongo were brothers who separated following a disagreement. Gipir speared an elephant using Labongo's precious spear. The elephant did not die but ran off with the spear. Labongo insisted on getting his spear back which forced Gipir to go to the forest in search of the elephant. Luckily, Gipir with the help of an old woman found the spear which he safely delivered to Labongo. While in the forest, Gipir received beautiful beads from the old woman. The beads were so beautiful that the children often loved to play with it. One day, Labongo's favorite daughter swallowed one of the beads and just like Labongo had insisted on having his spear returned, Gipir asked for his bead. Labongo had to kill his daughter in order to retrieve the bead. This resulted into separation of the two brothers}.

Integration of LtP in the different subject areas is an indication of the awareness of the the educators in the case study schools that LtP was not subject specific. Moreover, observations showed LtP used at specific moments in a lesson, for instance, to recap, introduce, develop or conclude a lesson. Clapping of hands in creative ways, which thrilled the children, was repeatedly done as a compliment in all the classes that were observed.

Children's Understanding of Play and LtP

In a classroom setting, LtP was applied when introducing lessons, during the lesson as an energizer/interlude, to ease explanation of difficult concepts as well as to conclude lessons. Educators used poems, drama, stories, news, songs, dance, jumping, role plays, riddles, demonstration, group work, and debate in class. One of the educators explained, "when I am singing for them, I don't just sing anyhow... When I am introducing, say, sanitation, I just compose a song concerning sanitation. When I sing for them, they get information about sanitation from the song" (ATR3). Another educator also reported how he uses LtP in class **"For example, on a number line when demonstrating integers, you jump the number of steps...And we may also have sorting items; you may have mixed items so you may ask them to sort and maybe divide according to different colours, shapes or sizes"** (LTR3).

During class observation, children were physically active as they role-played, sang, danced, debated, and created the popular varied choral compliments accompanied by particular motions such as clapping according to different rhythms (Kabalanga and Chinese), raising hands while shaking them (flowers), pretending to open and take a drink (soda), etc. Participating in such activities built confidence in the children.

Another class where the educator taught English, children sang and danced as they read and phrased words from each letter of the alphabet. Similarly, in a mathematics class, the educator introduced a song that enabled the children to count 1- 10 while jumping and dancing. Another educator (ATR4) shared how he uses LtP in sciences;

// In science when you are handling science, maybe the topic is "Our body", if you want to integrate play there, you get one person or you get two people to demonstrate. You begin with my body-- your body, what is on your body?, then the other one asks what is in your body? My body has eyes, a tongue, ears while demonstrating and sometimes you demonstrate and jump while holding the ears and the learners see these are ears. Then you ask them: Are you hearing? They say "yes". Then you ask: what are you using for hearing? Response: "We use ears, we use ears." Then you hold the ears and jump up then they see it. That will make them not to forget because you make the learning real and they relax as they stand to demonstrate parts of their bodies. You take them outside in a circle to do this."

In addition, children also participated in field work as explained;

// Whenever I am handling science, we are doing fieldwork. I would bring these learners outside, we move around the school, then I demonstrate and they also see for themselves. I did this once when I was teaching about soil erosion, the types of soil erosion. I took them round looking at different types of soil (ATR4)."

In addition to using LtP to teach curriculum content, it was also used as an interlude to relax the minds of the children. Such LtP activities included singing, dancing, jumping, among others.

Typical characteristics of LtP in the case study schools were mainly actively engaging and socially interactive as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Characteristics of LtP in the case study schools

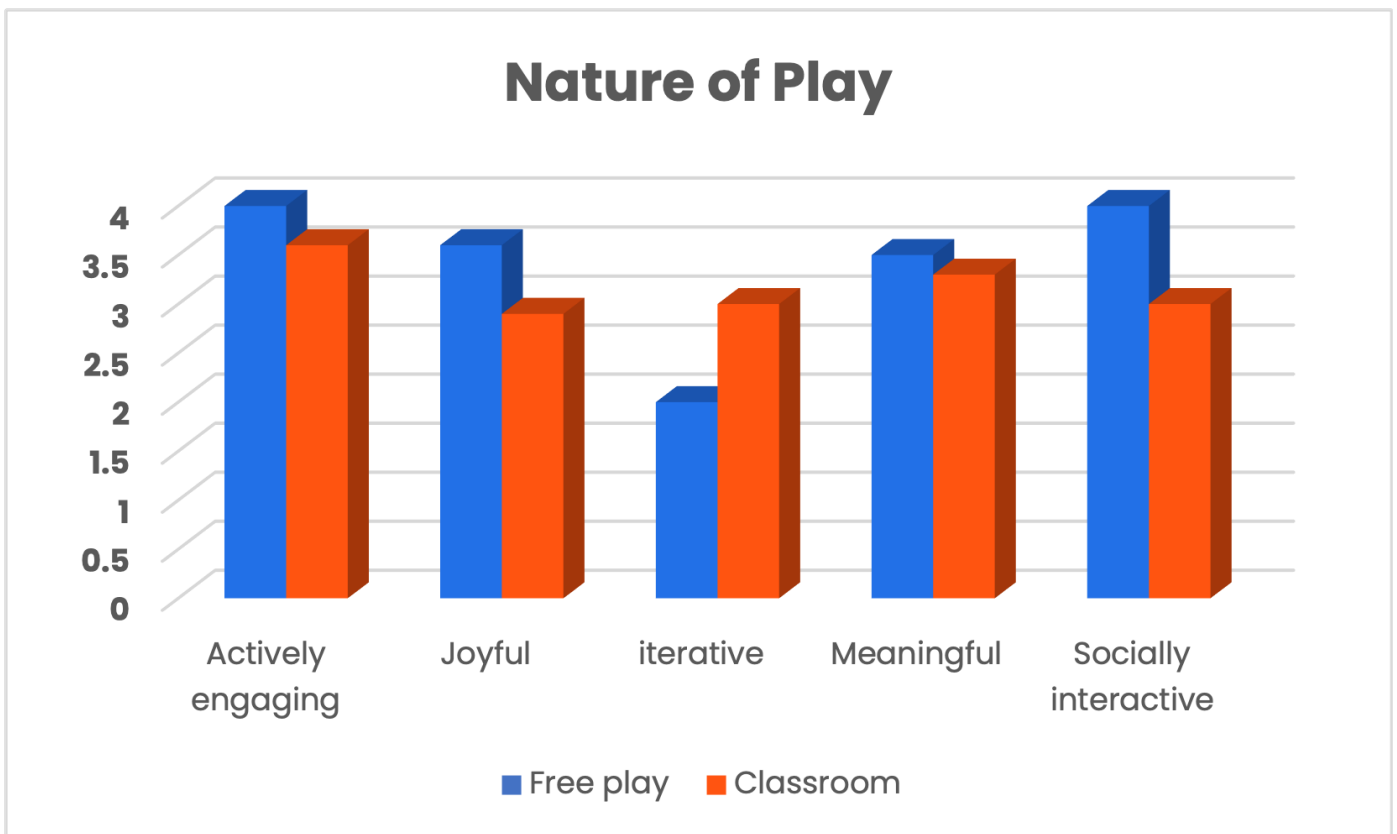


Figure 3 compares play during free time and in the classroom. Play during free time was more engaging, joyful, meaningful and socially interactive while classroom plays were more iterative. These differences could be due to the need to ensure learning of content unlike outside play, where the need for iterative may be low. It is also probable that low iterative is due to the educators' focus on time to cover content which pushes them to limit play time.

LtP outside class

The common free play activities outside class were skipping using a rope, football, and seven stones. These were all children-led play activities. However, due to crowded classes, some of the play activities that could have been conducted in class were done outside. These were all teacher-guided. One of the educators explained,

// We acted in a small play by making a line... then we were dancing, we held the polythene, saying "Polythene bags, polythene bags, how dangerous you are! You spoil our soil; you make our living organisms die! Polythene bag, polythene bag, I don't want to see you!" and we throw them into the pit (ATR3)."

Figure 4 shows teacher guided play. Through these play activities, children learned to participate, appreciate each other, cooperate, enact and analyze scenes, collaborate, share ideas, and compete.

Through role play children learned sentence construction, vocabulary and science among other.



Figure 4: Children role playing.

Generally LtP in case study schools were applied appropriately in all the subjects and throughout the lesson from introduction to conclusions. While free play outside class were all children-led play activities, class activities were mainly all teacher-guided.

Factors that facilitate or inhibit the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at school

This section provides insights into factors that facilitated or inhibited LtP in the primary schools in Yumbe district. We start by presenting factors that facilitate, then those that inhibit LtP.

Factors that facilitate the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at school

Availability of local materials for making play items and supportive parents were some of the factors reported to facilitate LtP.

Availability of local materials

LtP in the case study primary schools is made possible by the availability of local materials that all the educators and children used to make play items. As one of the school leaders stated “when you are teaching about a plant, for us we can just bring it. Even when they are moving on the way they will see it and they just know this plant is called so and so because they saw it in class”. Likewise, LTR 3 also reiterated;

// Like these skipping ropes, we make with banana fibers, these balls from banana fibers or this polythene, then some rings that are made out of local materials, even there are some bottle tops, they could play this other game on the ground, even I could use the bare ground where they mark some lines and they play that kind of game.”

Besides, other educators shared, “I can buy skipping ropes from the shop or make them by myself locally from banana fibres, waste disposed like Osofia bags {bags made from waste plastic materials}, lids from containers of Rwenzori Mineral water bottles,”ATR2, while a headteacher explained, “using banana fibre you can make dolls, local balls, you can do some modelling...like may be a mortar, mould the mortar, you go with it [to class]. Further, as ATR4 revealed that in his science lessons, he used the local environment to study different soils, and used polythene bags to demonstrate that air has weight and occupies space; he collects clay from the distant swamp for modelling. ATR1 in the

role play used a cup, a pen, an orange, and a flower while LTR2 used balloons, used water bottles to teach science.

In addition, teachers also used manila papers to make play materials, draw pictures and write letters and numbers and charts. Further, one of the primary schools had dolls, scrabbles, and word games that were provided by a donor. These materials, though few, supported the use of LtP.

Readiness and motivation of the educators to adapt to new things

Receptiveness of all the educators in trying out new methodology eased the use of LtP as stated by LTR3,

// One, the attitude of the teachers, the readiness of the teachers is one of the factors that will help the integration of play in the lessons. Secondly, another factor is the flexibility of the learners in using the playing materials or using play as a method of learning. Another factor is; in our school here, children are academically motivated. So whenever any innovation is brought like that everyone is willing to take on whatever is brought to them.”

Motivation is probably one of the reasons why the case study schools were implementing LtP unlike other schools (Ssentanda & Andema, 2019; Altinyeniken, 2010). This is one of the factors that PlayMatters can ride on to strengthen LtP in the case study schools. Moreover, children's interest in playing also eased teachers' use of LtP.

Perceived benefits of LtP

In addition to educators motivation to try new things, the perceived benefits of LtP by educators and school leaders facilitated its use in the case study schools. The benefits identified included easing children's acquisition of concepts, captures children's attention, reduces boredom, improves innovativeness of the educators, reduces the educators workload and makes learning learner centered. LTR3 summarized these factors,

“...as a teacher first of all using this play as a method of learning makes me to be innovative. It increases my level of innovation, creativity of course, before you go for a lesson, I think of that play activity that can make them to get that particular concept. Secondly, it reduces my level of talking so, I talk less, give simple instructions, demonstrate and allow the pupils to participate. Then another good part ... it gets the attention of the learners ... easily. Another good part is that it helps to avoid boredom during the learning process. Most of these learners have got short attention. So, if you dwell on one thing continuously changing explanation about the same subject matter, the children get bored and their mind is taken away LTR3”

Since children love playing, its use in the teaching and learning environment attracted them to school and enhances love for education. This in turn promoted retention and completion of school.

Supportive parents

Parents provided support in several ways including giving children play materials, permitting them to participate in games as well as morale boosting them when children are playing competitive games. With regards to materials for LtP, one of the teachers reported, that “you can ask the children to come with the balls, may be made out of banana fibers; then you can ask them to make ropes so that they can do skipping” (LTR1). One of the head teachers confirmed this, “For the sticks we ask them to carry from home. Sometimes we ask them to carry stones, and even leaves sometimes”. In addition, children brought pieces of wood and bottle tops with which the class made the abacus with ATR3's guidance.

Provision of materials by the parents is boosted by the location of the schools. The case study schools are located in peri-urban and rural settings where local materials are not only easily available but children already have knowledge and skills in making play items from the local materials. LTR3 explained.

“The next factor could be the setup of our school here, our school is not an urban school, it is (a place) where learners have got a variety of experiences right from their homes and they are used to some of the materials of playing right from their homes. So the set up in the community here is one of the factors that can facilitate play in conducting our lessons.”

The wealth of traditional knowledge and skills the children have of making balls, dolls, skipping ropes out of banana fibers were transferred to schools and the children were able to make their play materials.

In relation to findings on factors that facilitate engagement of children, parents, educators and schools leaders parents with LtP, these findings has shown that the case study schools are endowed with local materials that can be used to make play materials, educators who appreciate the benefits of LtP and are willing to implement it as well as supportive parents. This could explain the presence of LtP in these schools.

Factors that inhibit the engagement of children, educators, school leaders, and parents with LtP at school

Several factors impeded LtP in the case study schools. These included large class size, inadequate capacity of the educators to use LtP, inadequate play materials, inadequate funding,

Large classes and heavy workload

In both case study schools, enrollment was very high with numbers ranging from 80 to over 100 in each class. The large class size created more problems such as inadequate space, difficulties moving in class and controlling children, and where the educators used available play materials, they were not enough. Observation of the classes confirmed congestion with hardly any space for movement. The following excerpts shows some of the challenges.

// You know when you bring a play material, children like playing so much and ... class room control become very hard. And the space sometimes may be a factor because if we have, for example, one hundred children, the space will not be enough in the classroom and secondly may be the issue of giving equal opportunities, like if you are to give equal opportunity to each child to participate ... time may not be enough and each child may not have a chance may be to participate because the class is large (LTR2)."

// There is a lot of congestion in class (P5). Some of the methods when you employ, you may not get fruits... In class we cannot do play. Space in the classroom is meagre [small]." ... "While conducting play outside, many learners from different classes disturb (ATR4)."

In both schools, there were too few educators. For instance, while the school in Yumbe was supposed to have a total of 24 teachers, the school was running with only 10 teachers during the time of data collection as stated by one of the educators.

// The workload in our school is too much because we are supposed to be ...24 members of the teaching staff. Even the 24 if they were all there considering the number of our children here; the teacher-pupil ratio will still be too high. So, ...our number of staff is still 17 and 7 of us are not there. So, ...you will find that

we take more than three subjects in three different classes. So, going from one class to another when you are mainly using the play method of teaching in the lessons, I think the time will not be sufficient enough for all the periods in a day. LTR3 ."

Inadequate numbers of teachers posed a challenge in monitoring learning and supporting learners. During free play, children were taken out in shifts because the size of the field is not adequate as pointed out by one of the educators,

// The football field and compound are neither flat nor spacious,...the ground is not good for the pupils, it's not enough to play. It makes them squeeze or even not to participate in that kind of play....It should be a large flat area (ATR1)."

It is also clear the large class size pushes educators to worry about time to complete the lessons instead of ensuring that children enjoyed the lessons.

Inadequate time and overloaded timetable

Play is perceived as consuming time that could have been used to cover curricular content by all the educators. LTR1 explained, "Using play can also take a lot of time as I said earlier on but if it's a short play, ... it can fit within that time allocated on the time table. (LTR1). Similar sentiments were expressed by LTR3, "if the number is large, using these play materials need a lot of time, ...giving instructions, making some demonstrations, and perhaps allowing the children to carry on the activity require ample time but our time table here is only for 40 mins. So, it becomes very hard to finish up your work with in that small time there when you use play matter as a method of conducting a lesson".

Furthermore, any activity that reduced focus on examinable component of the curriculum was shunned by both educators and school leaders. For instance, Physical Education was reported as time consuming and yet not examined/ assessed like other academic subjects. This view highlights

the pervading examination-oriented attitude to education among administrators, teachers and students as explained;

// ...it is for refreshment, whatever they [teachers] do in the playground will not appear in PLE (Primary Leaving Examinations)...some see it as a wastage of time. Even when you move from school to school, you get less involved in (Music, Arts, Crafts, Physical Education)."

Inadequate capacity of the educators to use LtP approach

All the educators in the case study schools lacked adequate knowledge and skills to effectively use LtP as pointed out,

// Yeah, this is something new or a new innovation...when you came here, I did not have any idea. When my head teacher told me to come and participate in this kind of play matter kind of lesson. I really didn't know anything... and this morning I tried my best...I think there is need for some kind of training if possible. For the first time we are having it today (LTR2)."

All the educators and school leaders in the case schools had either received inadequate training or none and this affected their ability to effectively use LtP as seen in the response of LTR3 "some lessons it is very hard to involve the learners in much of the play activities. Some topics in the curriculum are very hard to be implemented with play ...activities" (LTR3). Likewise, LTR1 explained, "One of the things I have found discouraging, me personally first of all, is that I don't have knowledge on how to include some of the play activities to some particular content". This was reechoed by one of the school leaders thus "No, in this school teachers have not been trained. We are actually waiting for you to do that".

Furthermore, educators were also reported to have negative mindset as was explained by LTR1,

// There may be a factor of mindset,... that these plays are for children even themselves demonstrating they don't have that time or zeal or interest ... sometimes I may not be knowledgeable in certain play so I may not have interest just because I don't have that knowledge. So it cuts across; mindset is there, little or low knowledge is there, even sometimes the interest ,... so those factors that hinder or affect use of play in delivering (LTR1)."

This negative mindset could be caused by unwillingness to prepare lessons with play, and the need to complete the syllabus that is emphasized by case study schools. Effective LtP requires that schools focus on children learning with joy rather than completing the syllabus. The head teachers thus called for training of the educators.

Inadequate play materials

Although the case schools boasted of abundant local materials, one of the challenges they all reported was inadequate play materials and the related distance one had to move to obtain the materials. It was clear that the educators in these schools mainly focused on using manufactured play materials as stated by LTR1, "we don't have enough materials to play with, learners usually scramble over them [factory manufactured play materials]...the big ones will have the opportunity but the small one...as a result they sometimes hurt themselves struggling for the materials". LTR3 also reported, "You have to cover a long distance to go and get them. For clay, you move to swamps and get it. For others, you need an intervention from schools".

Focusing on manufactured play materials is a mindset that needs changing. Luckily, the educators were beginning to improvise as explained;

// I don't see the school buying them [factory made materials] but for us here ... you cut your letters or you use things like these [bottle tops] which are durable and nondurable, the school does not provide them, the local materials we use actually, sometimes we ask the learners to come with them."

Such improvisation is especially important for resource constrained schools such as the case study schools. In fact, the educators were skeptical about the school's ability to purchase more materials.

Lack of provision for play time in the timetable/compact timetable

Occasioned by COVID-19, both case study schools did not include play time in the timetable unlike before. This was to deter close interaction among children as demanded by the Uganda Ministry of Health guidelines. Moreover, according to the educators, the abridged curriculum that was supplied by the National Curriculum Development Center did not provide for play activities. Consequently, the educators focused on covering curriculum content with minimum involvement of children. Teaching became teacher-centered rather than learner-centered.

It was also clear that playtime that was previously in the timetable was for co-curricular activities. Hence the claim that the timetable lacked playtime again showed that LtP to the educators in the case study schools was for outside activities. One of the educators explained,

// This time table was drawn during COVID-19 where they didn't allow children to be involved in plays because plays may make children come closer... otherwise the timetable will cater for play activities or play periods like we would have periods of co-curriculum may be the last period."

This also means that there is a clear distinction between learning and play; with play being relegated to outside activity and learning to class.

Other barriers

In addition to the above, other barriers that were reported included resistance from children and parents, poor weather, illness, hunger, limited time of parents due to multiple responsibilities to shoulder.

Resistance from learners

Two educators from Yumbe and four from Adjumani reported that children in upper primary did not welcome play according to the educators. One of them explained "P4 to P3 they appreciate play more; they even like it but for the upper primary sometimes they feel that they are big and would not like it so much" (LTR4). Such self-consciousness of their growth and maturation was perceived as discouraging children from play, and making them, especially girls reluctant to engage in LtP. Other educators reported,

// Some girls feel they are too big to play..." "Bringing the interest of the learners takes time. Bringing the child to get used to play activities takes time... These learners, the issue of motivation... how you motivate them matters. It can be challenging when they think that the teacher is disturbing, "(ATR1, ATR 2 and ATR3)."

Other educators viewed such resistance as a result of dislike for education as a whole as stated by an educator of P.5 class, "...some learners are lazy. Their attitude towards learning is not good and you just try to bring them back to get the interest of learning. However, some of them may not like play especially during the adolescent stage, you give them instructions and they will ignore them".

Resistance from parents

Two parents also reported that some parents may resist play mainly due the risks of accidents and children's poor health. One of the parents explained that he had no money in case the child got an accident, so he preferred the child to avoid certain plays. Sicknesses of both the educators and children were also reported by the educators as a hindrance to the use of LtP.

Unfavorable weather

Mainly affected play outside class. One of the educators pointed out "When there is too much flooding, they cannot play well. If it is rainy or shining, they don't participate well." Another educator confirmed, "And sometimes weather also hinders. For example, one may want to play outside in an open space and yet the weather is not friendly and that may also be a hindrance. Like the other time the weather was changing and I was worried because if it rained that time it would interfere in our program".

Inadequate finances

Since some of the play materials require money, the case study schools which are categorized as universal primary education were unable to provide resources for them. Universal Primary schools rely solely on government grants which were reported as inadequate and not promptly disbursed. The school leaders confirmed the inadequacy of funds when one of them reported that, "when you take the distribution of UPE ... money coming to the school is little and there are other things that you also need to facilitate like teachers going for training". This discouraged the educators from using LtP.

Large class size, concerned about completion of curriculum content in preparation for examinations, inability to make play materials from the easily available local materials were some of the factors impeding the use of LtP in the case study schools.



Conclusion and way forward

Understanding of play and LtP

This study has shown that parents and children did not view play as a learning approach but as activities for relaxation and enjoyment. However, the majority of the educators and all the school leaders perceived play and LtP as relaxing the minds and for explaining difficult concepts. In essence, this understanding show that play is viewed as a learning approach.

LtP in case study schools

The case study schools are using LtP in all subjects and with easily available local materials, supportive parents, willing educators, LtP can easily be strengthened.

Barriers and opportunities

Though the use of LtP in the case study schools is still low, many of the educators appreciated its value in the teaching and learning processes, sought further grounding in the approach and were willing to use it. There is a need to (re-) orient parents, learners, educators and administrators to LtP methodology to enhance its potential for holistic learning in primary schools in refugee and host community settings.

Overall, reducing these barriers requires a multipronged strategy involving training educators to appreciate and integrate LtP in pedagogy, ensuring availability of play materials, training educators to make local play materials and how to use them in class. By the time of data collection, the schools kept the school environment safe, cleared the compound/playground, enforced policies/school rules regarding discipline, controlled entry of non-school staff, offered lunch to children, acted as exemplar in gender non-discrimination by permitting both boys and girls to play and kept a first-aid kit for emergency health care. These are indications that the case schools are ready for LtP.



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Uganda

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



Tanzania

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