

# POLICY BRIEF

October 2021

## Play-based Learning in Ghana The Evidence and Policy Implications

Professor Kwame Akyeampong, Dr Jane Cullen, Dr Eric Addae-Kyeremeh, Dr Helen Hendry,  
Dr Christopher Yaw Kwaah and Dr Esinam Ami Avornyio

### Policy Background

The Government of Ghana, in its Education Strategic Plan 2018–30 has as its main objective for the kindergarten and primary sector (KG1–B6) “Improved equitable access to and participation in quality basic education” (MoE 2018 p,21) as well as “the imperative to focus on improved learning outcomes” (MoE 2018 xiii). As one of its “immediate reforms” (MoE 2018 p,22) is its revision of the KG–B6 curriculum. The stated aim of the new standards-based curriculum is “that learners, as a result of the new knowledge, skills and values they have acquired through the new curriculum, will show a new sense of identity as creative, honest and responsible citizens” (NACCA, MoE 2019, p. iii) as well as becoming “digital literates, critical thinkers and problem solvers”. (NACCA, MoE 2019, p, iii)

The new curriculum aims to provide a “greater focus on the foundational skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, and creativity” (MoE 2018, p.22). The new curriculum defines the core competency of ‘Creativity and Innovation’ as requiring “ingenuity of ideas, arts, technology and enterprise” (NACCA, MoE 2019, p, viii) and though most explicit in the KG curriculum where play-based learning permeates the syllabus, the B1–B6 curriculum has elements of play-based learning activities across all years and subjects – though with a particular focus on roleplay and indoor games such as word and number games and puzzles.

Teaching is now framed within the National Teachers’ Standards for Ghana “designed to codify what a ‘good teacher’ looks like for Ghana, recognising the urgent need to improve the quality of the school experience and learning outcomes for all learners and to raise the status of teachers in their communities and country” (NTC 2017 p,11) with “clear expectations of skills that teachers should be able to demonstrate ... and to support progression ... and provide the motivation to ensure that learning outcomes are maximised” (NTC 2017 p, 16)

## The Partners in Play (P3) project

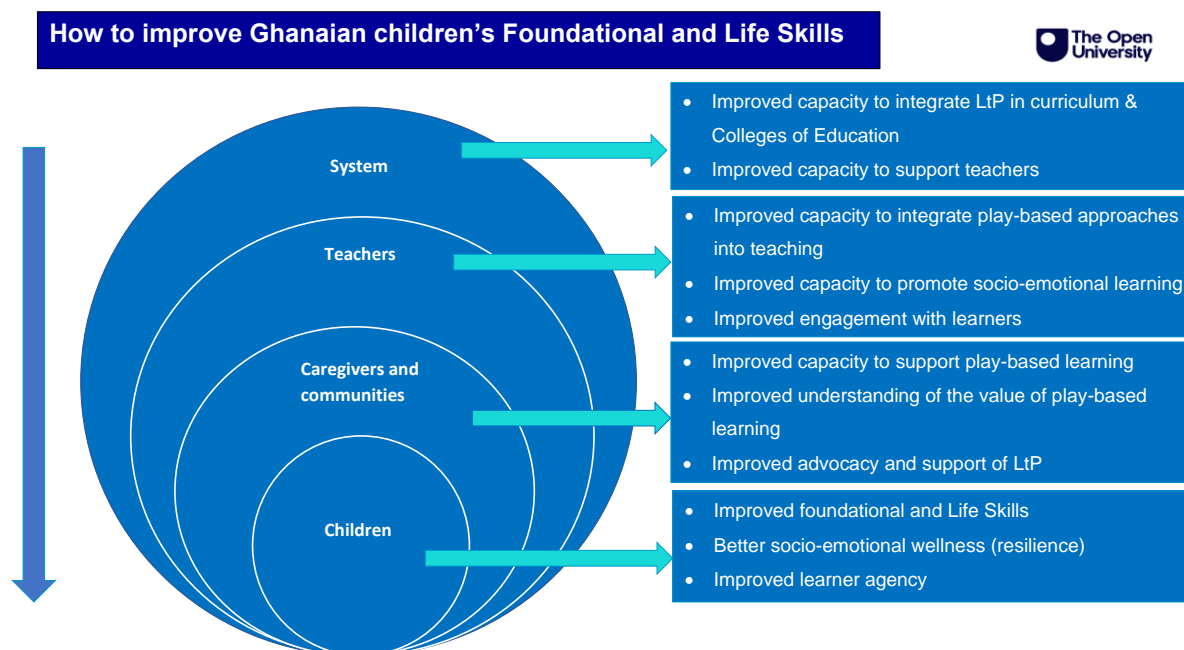
The Partners in Play Project (P3) is a 4-years 6-month project (2019-2024), implemented by Right To Play (RTP), in partnership with the Ministry of Education and its agencies and community-based organisations. The core play-based learning approach is defined by RTP as “an experiential, participatory and guided approach, which enhances the teaching and learning process and allow girls and boys organise and make sense of the world as they actively engage with their peers and leaders in educational games and activities.” The Theory of Change (ToC) underpinning P3 is that fostering play-based learning approaches enables children to become creative, engaged, and lifelong learners and the goal of P3 is to improve the quality of education for Ghanaian girls and boys in KG-B6 through a scalable and replicable Learning through Play (LtP) model.

The P3 project is intended to reach 689,920 children, representing three levels of intervention in three regions (Accra Region, Northern Region, Volta Region).

- 32,000 children (14,720 female); from 100 schools will receive direct support (includes training of 800 teachers)
- 81,920 children (37,683 female); from 257 schools with RTP project staff training district teams to support an additional 2,048 teachers.
- 576,000 children (264,960 female) from 1800 GALOP schools, where district support teams will train 14,400 GALOP teachers
- An additional 2.55M children in Ghana are projected to benefit from LtP over the next four years as part of the RTP’s involvement in the GALOP initiative.

## The Baseline Study

A baseline study was designed to provide information on the current state of teachers and headteachers knowledge, attitudes and practice, caregivers’ knowledge, and attitudes to play, and the education system level readiness to support the intended goal and objectives of the Learning through Play (LtP) P3 project in Ghana.



## Evaluation Questions

1. What are the current levels of children’s life skills proficiency?
2. What are the current levels of teacher’s awareness, knowledge, and skills to facilitate learn through play in the learning environment of children?
3. What is the level of awareness among parents and caregivers on learning through play approaches and the gender-specific learning needs of girls and boys?

### Data Collection Tools and Analysis

Surveys were administered to teachers, headteachers, caregivers and children

Data were analysed using:

- Descriptive statistics
- Independent t-tests
- ANOVA (one-way, two-way)
- Regression analyses

### Teacher and Head teacher Surveys

The teacher and headteacher surveys included the following:

Demographics; Learning beliefs; Play and learning beliefs; Play at school; Play and learning; Social and emotional learning

The teacher survey also asked about: Disciplinary practices at school; Preparedness to use play in the classroom

### Caregiver Survey

The caregiver survey included the following:

Demographics; Learning beliefs; Play and learning beliefs; Play at home and community

### Child Survey

The child survey included the following:

Demographics; Caregiver engagement; Children’s play preferences; Children’s perception of class climate

Children’s socioemotional skills were assessed using International Social and Emotional Learning Assessment (ISELA)

## Findings and Key Lessons

The key lessons are drawn from the analysis of data across four comparison groups – Direct, Indirect, GALOP and Control sample. Control and GALOP schools used in the study had not been directly targeted by RTP. However, it is important to note that these schools could have benefitted from other interventions.

### Children (Grades 1 and 3)

1. Generally, compared to boys a high proportion of girls take care of others e.g., siblings. It is particularly high in the North (Direct Schools Girls: 84.7% and Control: 87.9%). Even in Accra, about 51% of girls compared to 28.8% of boys take care of others.
2. Household chores is high for all children across regions and groups. Girls in the North do more household chores compared with boys (Control –

Boys:72.3%; Girls: 93.9%; Direct- Boys:64.5% and Girls: 89.6%). While a smaller percentage difference, girls in all regions reported spending more time on chores than boys

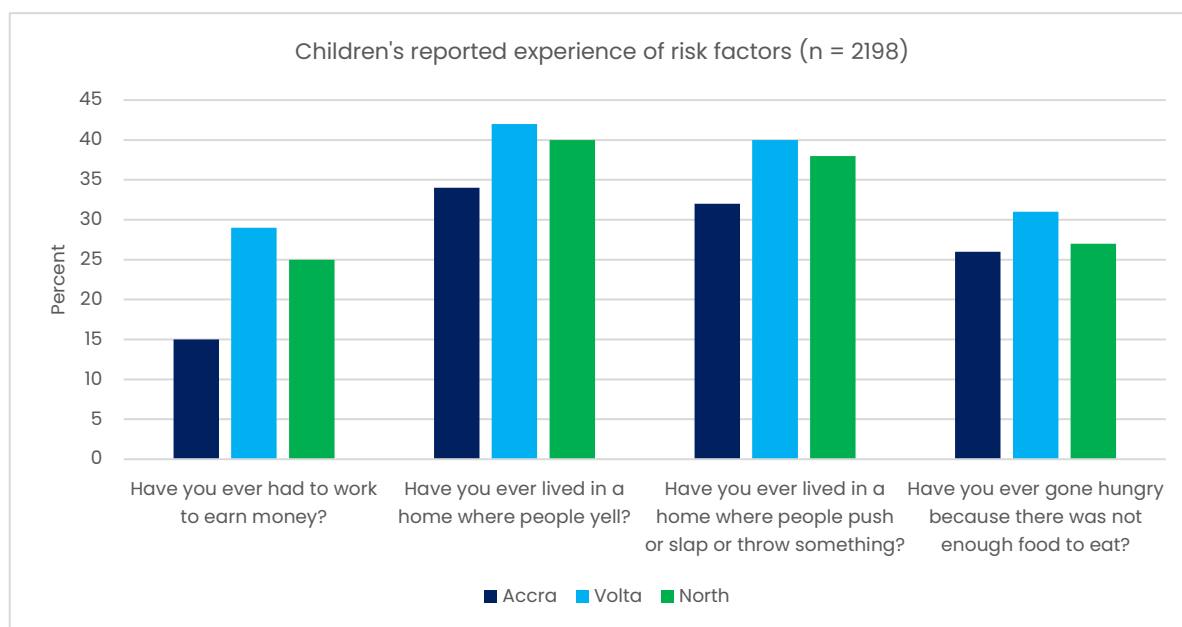
3. Generally, children in the North do more work on farm, engage in cattle keeping/other family business, with boys doing more than girls (Direct – Boys: 74.1%; Girls:66.8%). In the Volta region boys engage more in these activities than girls. In Accra, the reverse is the case.
4. Generally, the main opportunities to learn is at school averaging over 90% in Volta and North and higher than in Accra. Studying outside of school time is lower especially for boys and girls in Control schools in the North (56.1% boys and 58.3% girls) and relatively higher for children in Direct schools (72.2% boys and 73.9% girls).
5. Children appear to be lacking in some specific socioemotional skills e.g., conflict resolution and self-concept. Children’s

stress management score is the lowest at under 30% (still higher in Direct than Control), suggesting that Ghanaian children are likely to struggle with managing stress.

- Children report violent behaviour in their homes/communities, with 'sites of violence' likely to negatively impact children's socioemotional development and agency in learning.
- Children in Lower Primary go without food and engage in significant household labour and work to earn money, with

impact on their capacity to learn at school.

- Children's level of play activity has decreased substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic. But girls have seen their level of play activity decreased much more than boys, particularly for girls in Direct schools in Accra. (North – Boys:57.5%; Girls: 50%) (Volta – Boys:85.7%; Girls:61.7%) and Greater Accra – (Boys: 86.6%; Girls: 67.3%).



### Teachers and Headteachers

- Guided play<sup>1</sup> is consistently rated high compared with direct instruction and games by teachers and headteachers – Games, on the other hand, is consistently rated low in its learning and socioemotional learning value and teachers are less likely to use them purposely to promote deep learning.
- Although, classroom observation evidence suggests that teachers in Direct schools are able to use play to support learning, overall direct instruction is still predominant in their teaching.
- Teachers and headteachers share a strong belief in direct (teacher-led) instruction, but at the same time believe

that play has a role in developing life skills but not strongly to improve academic skills. They also believe that play should be used much more in the lower grades than upper grades.

- The connection between play and learning outcomes is perceived as minimal, possibly due to socio-cultural norms in Ghana where play is viewed as entertainment and not for the development of academic skills.
- Compared to other schools, teachers in GALOP schools rated the use of activity-oriented approaches and play in learning higher.
- Headteachers and teachers all point to the need to improve structures for delivering play-based learning in

<sup>1</sup> Guided Play is interpreted as play that is purposely linked to cognitive or non-cognitive development and has more structure

- Ghanaian schools stressing the importance of improving provision of teaching and learning materials (TLMs) and classroom space.
7. Corporal punishment is still high in schools across the 3 regions where it is often used to punish negative behaviour and poor performance, affecting children's effort and engagement in lessons and with children fearing ridicule and punishment.
  8. Although teachers and headteachers say children's socioemotional skills development is important they give it little priority in the instructional space with most teachers admitting they lack essential skills to develop children's socioemotional skills

### Parents/Caregivers

1. About 50% of caregivers have no education which has implications for

their ability to support their children in doing homework. It is highest in North – Direct: 80.0%; Control:75.3%.

2. About 75% of households earn about \$139 a month equating to about \$4.6 a day.
3. The household wealth index indicates that the poorest caregivers are in the North and relatively richer households are in Accra with Volta in between. Caregivers also spend a little over 7 hours a day working.
4. Caregivers view play as recreational and gendered. There is some expectation that girls are responsible for household chores and boys have more freedom to play.
5. They have the strongest belief that learning is best achieved through direct instruction and on the play-based learning spectrum rate play as having the lowest value in promoting cognitive learning.

### Caregivers' responses on play, its importance and their role in learning

	n	Accra		Volta		North	
		Control	Direct	Control	Direct	Control	Direct
		%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>How will you rate the importance of traditional games? (% Importance)</b>	1329	85.5	81.53	60.21	79.73	72.57	90.73
<b>How do you think play helps your child?</b>							
<b>Have fun</b>	980	54.0	36.6	52.5	62.1	56.3	51.9
<b>Social skills</b>	934	54.0	24.4	45.3	58.4	44.2	61.6
<b>Academic skills</b>	523	16.0	15.5	27.9	39.9	30.8	28.5
<b>Language and communication abilities</b>	535	17.5	23.3	34.3	33.8	46.4	15.7
<b>Better thinking/reasoning abilities</b>	573	32.8	23.8	25.4	42.7	33.4	28.3
<b>Solving problems</b>	372	10.2	17.2	20.3	27.0	26.4	15.6
<b>Do well at school</b>	214	4.3	5.5	12.7	14.9	13.2	12.1
<b>Express emotions or feelings</b>	480	26.2	28.3	17.8	26.6	42.5	15.6
<b>Physical attributes (e.g., coordination)</b>	335	13.1	23.3	12.7	16.5	17.8	20.
<b>Does not help</b>	27	2.1	0.5	4.6	1.2	1.9	-
<b>What role do you have in children's play?</b>							
<b>Buying toys or materials</b>	498	26.2	23.3	27.5	29.4	33.4	22.1
<b>Playing with child</b>	586	21.1	16.6	30.5	47.5	45.8	21.9
<b>Providing time or opportunities for play</b>	943	45.9	41.1	47.4	32.2	49.5	66.0
<b>Providing space for play</b>	484	40.8	26.6	24.5	23.3	22.9	27.1
<b>Supervising child's play</b>	599	54.7	41.6	19.1	56.1	32.3	20.0
<b>None</b>	219	6.5	4.4	22.4	8.8	7.4	15.7

## Policy Recommendations

The learning challenge in Ghanaian basic education schools and how to address them has often focused on a narrow and reductive framing of what learning actually is. It is important to recognise learning as a situated sociocultural process embedded in particular environments with implications for the identity, wellbeing and agency of learners, their families and the wider community. For Ghana, the ambition to make play-based learning an integral part of the learning experience to improve learning outcomes has to reflect deeply on the findings of this study.

The following are key issues and lessons that should inform policy response to the P3 Baseline study:

1. To achieve the ambition of embedding play-based instructional approaches in basic schools in Ghana changing teachers, headteachers' and caregivers' current belief systems on play and learning is essential. There is strong evidence that it lags behind the goals expressed in the new curriculum and national teaching standards.
2. Demonstrating to teachers, headteachers and caregiver's clear links between specific play-based activities and learning outcomes, with teaching examples based on detailed content from the syllabuses of the KG-B6 curriculum is essential.
3. There needs to be dialogue around the importance of safe and supportive learning environment in both home and school, including gender responsive positive parenting and gender responsiveness learning through play activities.
4. Strategies to enhance caregivers' contribution to play-based learning needs to reflect the complex make up of caregivers and extended families supporting the child outside school.
5. Specific alignment with GALOP was built into RTP's P3 programme from the outset

and there are clear benefits in aligning any initiative with other concurrent and previous related initiatives. Moreover, any intervention would benefit from greater wider-than-project understanding of the landscape in which any intervention is to take place, to account for the multiplicity of competing initiatives in progress at any one time.

6. For an intervention to lead to substantial, widespread and embedded changes in practice there need to be bridging mechanisms to enable the shift in ownership to take place to those ordinarily tasked with CPD (e.g., Colleges of Education, circuit supervisors, school-based professional learning communities).



Source: Mmofra Foundation

## The Evaluation Team

Principal Investigator

\*Professor Kwame Akyeampong

Coinvestigators

\* Dr Jane Cullen

\* Dr Eric Addae-Kyeremeh

\* Dr Helen Hendry

\*\*Dr Christopher Yaw Kwaah

\*\*Dr Esinam Ami Avorny

\*[The Open University, UK](https://www.open.ac.uk/)

\*\*[University of Cape Coast, Ghana](https://www.ucc.edu.gh/)

## References

- Ministry of Education (2018) Education Strategic Plan 2018-2030 Accra, Government of Ghana, MoE.
- National Council for Curriculum Assessment (2019) Curriculum for KG and Primary (B1-B6) Accra, MoE, NACCA.
- National Teaching Council (2017) National Teachers' Standards for Ghana Guidelines MoE/NTC.