



Accelerating Learning Outcomes in Ghana Through Play-Based Approaches



PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Partners in Play Project (P3) is working to enhance the quality of education for girls and boys aged four to 12 years old in Ghana from 2019–2024. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and its agencies, NGO partners, and community-based organizations, P3 is incorporating play-based learning approaches into school curriculum and teaching practices. This builds on evidence that shows that play can enrich children’s educational experience and help them develop a lifelong love of learning.

Midway through the project, results showed improvements in foundational literacy, increased student enrollment, and motivation to learn. The project demonstrated positive student–teacher relationships and the creation of safe, inclusive, and nurturing learning environments.

CONTEXT

The Ministry of Education in Ghana is implementing significant education reforms to transform teaching and learning. This is in response to persistent gaps in access and quality education in the country. The government is moving away from traditional rote styles of teaching at all levels and has demonstrated its strong commitment to evidence-based, play-based learning (PBL) and other creative pedagogies.

As a partner in this work, Right To Play brings technical expertise in how to incorporate play-based learning into curriculum and teaching practice, developed through the Gender Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT) project. GREAT trained more than 4,000 teachers from 2018–2023, including online support for teachers during the COVID-19 lockdowns. P3 is collaborating in the same GREAT-supported regions by aligning its strategies with the government’s Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project (GALOP).

REACH

208
schools

Direct: 100
Indirect: 108

1,851
GALOP schools

Ghana Accountability
for Learning
Outcomes Project

614,306
children

Direct: 36,123
Indirect: 28,095
GALOP: 550,088

16,291
teachers

Direct: 805
Indirect: 689
GALOP: 14,797

*208 schools were reached across seven districts in Greater Accra, Northern, and the Volta Region. Teachers and Headteachers across 100 schools received a full training, coaching, and mentoring package directly from Right To Play trainers. Teachers and Headteachers across 108 schools were then indirectly reached through peer-to-peer training (e.g., led by Right To Play-supported “Teacher Champions” and District Officials). 1,851 GALOP schools were reached by Right To Play-trained District Education Officers. This cascade model has enabled Right To Play to reach as many of the 10,000 lowest-performing GALOP schools in Ghana as possible within a short period of time.

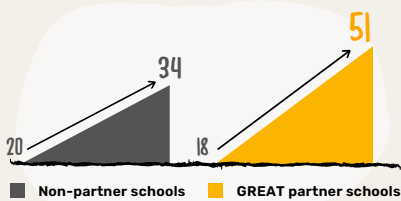
KEY RESULTS

Right To Play supported **more than 16,000 teachers through training and mentoring to develop their skills and confidence in using play-based approaches**. The results showed increased student enrollment and motivation to learn, more positive student-teacher relationships, and improvements in foundational literacy.

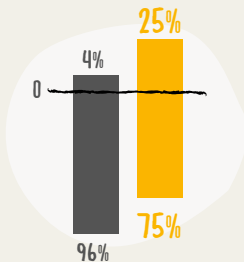
LITERACY

There is strong evidence linking play-based learning approaches with improved learning outcomes, including literacy.¹ **In the GREAT project, students' reading fluency in English increased by 51 words per minute (wpm) from a baseline of 18 wpm by the end of primary school.** This is compared to an increase of only 34 wpm from a baseline of 20 wpm in schools not supported by Right To Play.² After one year of implementation in the P3 project, the percentage of Grade 2 students who could not identify a single word reduced by 20%.³

IMPROVEMENTS IN LITERACY SKILLS



In schools supported by the GREAT project, **students' reading fluency in English increased by 51 wpm from a baseline of 18 wpm** by the end of primary school. This is compared to an increase of only 34 wpm from a baseline of 20 wpm in schools not supported by GREAT.



In P3, **the percentage of Grade 2 students who could not identify a single word reduced by 20%** from a baseline of 96% of students who scored zero to 75.6% after one year of implementation.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

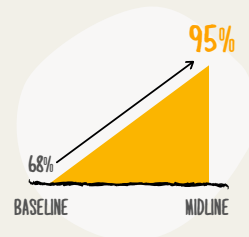
Play-based learning fosters critical social and emotional development, such as pro-social behaviour, resilience, confidence, leadership, and creativity. Right To Play found small but statistically significant improvements in these skills among students in GREAT-supported schools compared to children in schools outside the GREAT project.⁴ Right To Play's evaluation of the P3 project found that **increasing opportunities for students' engagement and participation through play boost their creativity, problem-solving, and other social and emotional skills.**⁵

POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

By using games and other play activities in classrooms and outdoor spaces, teachers were **better able to create positive learning environments and implement non-punitive discipline techniques**, building trust with their students and enabling quality and active lesson delivery.⁶

95% of learners in GREAT-supported schools perceived their learning environment to be positive and stimulating from a baseline of 68%. Similarly, 20% more students reported feeling positive about their learning environments in GREAT-supported school as compared to in a control school, especially for girls.⁷

This is also reflected in students' attendance, with children in schools that use play-based approaches more likely to attend and stay in school when compared to learners from schools that rely on rote learning. **Students in the schools supported by the GREAT project were ten times more likely to stay enrolled in school compared to those in the control schools.**



95% of learners in GREAT-supported schools perceived their learning environment to be positive and stimulating from a baseline of 68%.



KEY LEARNINGS

- 1 Play-based approaches need to be used regularly:** The quality and consistency of the use of play-based approaches by teachers is a significant factor in a school's improved learning outcomes. All literacy and numeracy classes with positively and significantly correlated improvements in learning outcomes included play-based activities aligned with the topic or learning goal.
- 2 Buy-in from school leadership leads to positive change:** Headteachers' support for play-based learning is positively and significantly correlated with improved learning outcomes, showing that engagement of school leadership is crucial.
- 3 Teacher professional development and agency is key:** Teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities are more confident to bring play-based approaches into the classroom. Schools that promote teachers' agency and encourage reflective practice correlate with teachers' abilities to innovate and adopt strategies that promote better learning outcomes for students. Schools with teachers who showed confidence in using and adapting play-based approaches for low-resource settings see students achieve higher learning outcomes. These teachers are also better able to make use of available materials, and are better equipped to manage their classrooms using non-punitive approaches, thereby creating a more positive and enriching learning environment.
- 4 Play-based learning creates friendly and engaging environments for children:** Play is an important tool for fostering collaborative and positive learning environments. Teachers using play in the classroom were better able to design activities for their learners in groups or pairs and were observed to have more enthusiastic and energetic learners. Teachers were also better able to connect individually with every learner, thereby making the learning environment more friendly and inclusive.
- 5 Play provides opportunities for learners to practice targeted skills with others:** Play-based approaches give students opportunities to practice targeted skills - such as literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional development - with others, resulting in better learning outcomes. This is compared to schools with lower learning outcomes that relied on non-play-based or individual learning activities, such as a workbook exercise.

[Play] has greatly improved their reading skills and mathematical skills. With the help of word cards and games, students are now able to pronounce words correctly and also find innovative ways of solving mathematical problems.

- Headteacher, Volta

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from P3 demonstrated that schools with the most significant improvements in learning outcomes were most strongly correlated with high levels of Headteacher and teacher engagement. This includes training, willingness, and confidence to apply play-based approaches in classrooms and curriculum delivery. This highlights the positive role of teachers in fostering safe and nurturing learning environments leading to improved learning outcomes.

In order for the Ministry of Education in Ghana to further catalyze its Education Reform Agenda, Right To Play puts forward the following recommendations for consideration:

- 1 Embed play-based learning into national pre-service and in-service teacher training and teacher professional development** and continue to support projects and programs that increase awareness of the positive connection between play-based approaches and holistic learning outcomes (e.g. literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional skills development). Teachers and Headteachers who understand the benefits of play will use play-based approaches more effectively, further accelerating learning outcomes.
- 2 Collaborate with experts in play-based approaches to develop play-based learning materials for teachers** (e.g. teacher handbook) that align with pre-primary and primary lesson plans, curriculum, National Standardized Tests and other assessments in reading and math, to further strengthen the link between play and learning outcomes.
- 3 Invest in professional development to provide educators with practical, play-based strategies to utilize existing materials in low-resource settings**, as well as adapting activities to the local context. This will also support teachers to implement effective classroom management techniques tailored to the unique challenges of large class sizes in Ghanaian primary schools.
- 4 Invest in and strengthen opportunities for teacher coaching and mentoring.** Work with District Education Officers, School Improvement Support Officers (SISO), Headteachers, and implementing partners to more routinely conduct classroom observations and assessments of play-based approaches. Ensure that teachers are offered constructive feedback and professional development opportunities to improve their confidence in using play-based approaches.
- 5 Ensure that projects and programs promote and measure improvements in social and emotional learning and acquisition of life skills, in addition to literacy and numeracy.** Social connectedness and problem-solving are lifelong skills that contribute to better learning outcomes. Play-based approaches support children to acquire these skills alongside academic gains.

The use of play-based learning in Ghana has come to stay. All stakeholders are happy about it because it is achieving results. [Children] normally play a lot. Any teaching and learning that is structured using play helps students to understand concepts very well.

- Joachim Seyram Kwame Honu,
Program Officer, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA)



1 Cynsure Evaluation Limited, 2024. "Meta-analysis and synthesis of evidence about play-based learning and foundational learning outcomes in Ghana"

2 One South, 2023. "Endline evaluation of the Gender Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT) Project"

3 RTI, 2023. "LEGO Play Accelerator Ghana Midline Report"

4 One South, 2023. "Endline evaluation of the Gender Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT) project"

5 RTI, 2023. "LEGO Play Accelerator Ghana Midline Report"; and Cynsure Evaluation Limited, 2024. "Meta-analysis and synthesis of evidence about play-based learning and foundational learning outcomes in Ghana"

6 Akyeampong, K., Avornyo E. A., Kwaah, C. Y., & Serbeh, R. (2023). Partners in Play Project in Ghana: Learning Study Report. Open University, UK

7 One South, 2023. "Endline evaluation of the Gender Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT) project"

