



Putting SDG4 into practice

*Learning through play*

**Inclusive and equitable education provides all learners with the capabilities to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful societies and enhance individual wellbeing. This technical brief describes how learning through play pedagogies contribute to the holistic development of young children, laying the foundations for lifelong learning. The experiences of VVOB demonstrate how innovative play-based pedagogies can be introduced successfully at the classroom level by creating favourable policy environments and building capacity of pre-service and in-service teacher professional development institutions.**

### Why learning through play matters

Learning through play has gained momentum in early childhood education and beyond. Learning through play is proven to enhance wellbeing and involvement in learning. It fosters a breadth of skills and cultivates creativity and imagination, thus preparing learners for success in the 21st century. Researchers have documented multiple positive effects from learning through play:

#### *Play facilitates holistic development.*

Too often, learning is understood as a mainly cognitive and academic process of building knowledge and acquiring skills. But research has shown that learning is much more diverse. Besides a cognitive process, learning is also physical, social, linguistic, emotional and creative. Learning in these different domains is interconnected. Play allows children to engage with multiple domains of learning simultaneously. A child playing hide-and-seek, for instance, is physically active, exercising executive functions like patience and self-control, developing spatial awareness and interacting socially.

#### *Play is a natural way of learning.*

Play and learning cannot be separated. Play is fundamental to how we learn. From a very young age, children naturally engage in playful learning experiences. Most learning happens incidentally. It is not until later, when children enter formal schooling, that learning becomes more intentional. Through play, children are constantly learning about and connecting with their environments. They

also acquire crucial 'learning-to-learn' skills, which will help them continue to learn throughout life.

#### *Play provides opportunities for children to actively explore and interact with other children, adults and the environment.*

This is in line with constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning, which state children construct knowledge and meaning from their active experiences and that learning is a collaborative process.

#### *Play increases wellbeing and involvement.*

In play, children have many choices. Children choose (with) what and how they play. Giving learners choice stimulates their motivation and involvement and increases their wellbeing. Wellbeing is also increased because play is an inherently joyful activity. Play provides children with safe spaces to exercise skills they will later need in more challenging contexts. For instance, in roleplay children can learn how to deal with conflicts.

### Learning through play and SDG4

SDG4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Learning through play, as an effective pedagogical approach to fostering deeper level learning and vital learning-to-learn skills, is essential in realising this goal.

Because of its lifelong learning benefits and the importance of early experiences for later development, learning through play is an indispensable element of quality early childhood education. By 2030, all boys and girls should have access to such an education (SDG

target 4.2). This will significantly increase the number of children who are developmentally on track in learning and their psychosocial wellbeing, ready for primary education and for acquiring the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development in the 21st century.

As a partner for putting SDG4 into practice, VVOB is committed to including learning through play in all its early childhood education programmes.



## What is learning through play

### Characteristics

VVOB's understanding of learning through play is inspired by the research of Jennifer M. Zosh and the group of researchers she collaborated with to publish important conceptual work in 2017 and 2018\*.

They emphasise that true play, and learning through play, requires children to experience **agency**. Play implies that children can take charge and make choices. For children to be able to learn through play, they need to have control, initiative and leadership over their actions. This does not mean that adults can or should not have a role in children's play, but that adults see the child as capable to (jointly) plan and control the flow of activities during play.

Zosh and her colleagues identify five characteristics that define playful learning activities:

1. Learning through play is **joyful**. When learning through play, children experience pleasure, motivation, surprise, thrill, etc. Joy is important because it leads to motivation but also because positive emotions are an important facilitator for learning. Research shows that negative emotions and experiences obstruct our ability to learn.

2. Learning through play is **meaningful**. For children to learn through play they need to be able to connect their experiences to things they already understand, to something that makes sense to them and they feel connected to, or to something that is concrete.

3. Learning through play is **actively engaging**. It implies children are involved with and absorbed by what they are doing and that they can persist despite distractions. In the research by Zosh this is also referred to as being 'minds-on'. Being actively engaged also requires some level of self-direction.

4. Learning through play is **iterative**. Iteration refers to children repeatedly trying out new possibilities, revising hypotheses and exploring other ways to do things. This way, new brain networks are created and deeper level learning is generated.

5. Learning through play is **socially interactive**. Although play can happen individually, learning through play is more powerful in social interactions. By sharing ideas, interacting, collaborating and communicating, children build a deeper understanding and powerful connections with others. Social interaction is important for motivation, but also for developing critical thinking skills and other more complex learning-to-learn skills.



\* Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2017). *Learning through play: a review of the evidence (white paper)*. The LEGO Foundation, DK. //

Zosh JM, Hirsh-Pasek K, Hopkins EJ, Jensen H, Liu C, Neale D, Solis SL and Whitebread D (2018). *Accessing the Inaccessible: Redefining Play as a Spectrum*. *Front. Psychol.* 9:1124. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01124



Types of playful learning

Play, and learning through play, unfolds on a spectrum depending on the intensity and type of guidance and support from adults, as well as on how explicitly learning goals are set.

At one end of the spectrum, Zosh and her colleagues identify ‘free play’. Children experience the freedom to play and explore without limitations or interference. They are free to initiate the play context and direct the play. There is no explicit learning goal, although learning does happen. Further along the spectrum, play also occurs, but in increasingly structured environments. Materials, physical spaces, and teachers or parents can all structure play. Guided play is where the adult (teacher, parent) chooses or arranges a context, and sets a learning goal, but the child directs the play in that setting. Games are a particular form of guided play where play is directed by predefined rules. Even further there is co-opted play, where play is initiated by the child and adults step in to direct the play towards a certain learning goal. Lastly under the umbrella of learning through play, is playful instruction. This is straightforward instruction by adults who initiate and direct learning while using playful elements.

Learning can take place at all levels of the continuum. Different types of play will lead to different learning outcomes and have different results in different settings. While free play might be beneficial for developing socio-emotional skills, guided play could be better to support STEM learning. Generally, Zosh and her co-authors do argue that guided play maximises learning more than other types of play.

In VVOB’s interventions, any dimension of play can be the focus. The different countries and contexts where we work require tailored approaches. In many formal early childhood education systems, introducing guided play to classrooms is an ambitious but feasible goal. In other settings, introducing playful elements in higher levels of education can be an inspiring first step towards the learning through play spectrum. In settings where children have less and less ‘free time’ to explore and discover the world without constraints, raising teachers’ and parents’ awareness of the benefits of free play is also very relevant.

Play as a spectrum						
	Free play	Guided play	Games	Co-opted play	Playful instruction	Direct instruction
Initiated by:	Child	Adult	Adult	Child	Adult	Adult
Directed by:	Child	Child	Child	Adult	Adult	Adult
Explicit learning goal:	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Spectrum of Play. Zosh et. al., 2018



## VVOB's systemic approach to introducing learning through play

Introducing learning through play in the formal education system often requires a paradigm shift. From a very young age already, many children find themselves in under-resourced, overcrowded classrooms, where teachers rely heavily on instructional practices that fail to actively engage learners and that reduce social interaction between them. Parents and educators alike may associate education with academic achievement and favour methods for teaching and learning that emphasise content-based rote learning. Changing these circumstances requires a systemic approach.

**VVOB strengthens education systems' capacity to support teachers and school leaders** in creating the best conditions for learning through play. VVOB supports Ministries of Education and local education authorities to strengthen teacher and school leader professional development systems.

**Teachers** are the most important factor when it comes to structuring the classroom environment for children to learn through play. But they may not be aware of the importance of play for learning and/or not know what learning through play could look like in their classroom. At the same time, teachers may not find much support to introduce such an innovation. Early childhood education curricula do not necessarily provide them with much guidance and teachers may lack the authority to adapt and enrich the existing programme; initial teacher training probably did not help them develop the beliefs, knowledge and skills needed to promote learning through play in their classrooms; and school leaders may not be providing indispensable moral and practical support.

**School leaders** have considerable influence on the conditions that allow (or impede) teachers to adopt learning through play approaches. They play an important role in providing the necessary materials and spaces for learning through play to happen. They can promote learning through play by creating specific school-based professional development opportunities for their teaching staff, but unfortunately, they often discourage teachers from innovating, because they themselves are not familiar with the concept. Like teachers, school leaders need support to become true advocates of learning through play.

### VVOB focuses on:

- **Supporting the creation of a conducive policy environment for learning through play, providing input in policy development and supporting the operationalisation of existing policies.**
- **Introducing learning through play in:**
  - **the pre-service teacher training system, for instance through curriculum reform at the level of teacher training institutions or by preparing teacher educators to include learning through play in their courses;**
  - **induction and continuous professional development for (new) teachers, for instance by preparing those responsible for coaching and mentoring in-service teachers (district officials, school leaders, teacher mentors,...) so that they can encourage teachers to experiment with learning through play and offer meaningful feedback;**
  - **school leadership development, for instance by supporting dialogue on meaningful child development and exchange of good practices through professional learning communities for school leaders.**



### The case of Vietnam

#### Challenge: bringing learning and play together

Vietnam's 2005 Education Law takes a particularly favourable perspective on learning through play. As the objective and main method for early childhood education, it explicitly states that preschools should “help children develop holistically by organising play activities.” The 2009 early childhood education curriculum likewise insists on holistic development, deep learning and child-initiated activities to ensure that all children can develop to their full potential. But the gap between policy and practice remains wide. In Vietnam's early childhood education facilities, teaching and learning is still very often teacher-led with very little opportunities for guided play or free play.

Education and learning have been highly valued for centuries in Vietnam, yet this was more in the interest of learners' academic achievements rather than their holistic development. The strong emphasis on “studying hard” that contributes to Vietnam's stellar PISA results is not easily counter-balanced, and it is unlikely that

related values and beliefs will spontaneously disappear. Even though the importance of so-called ‘play activities’ for holistic development is recognised within the Vietnamese education system, these activities are still seen as separate from so-called ‘learning activities’ designed to deliver content, achieve (highly valued) high academic standards and satisfy parents' preference for ‘real education’. Given the academic content-driven understanding of learning, the concept of ‘learning through play’ appears somewhat contradictory to many Vietnamese early childhood educators. In the classroom, ‘learning’ as an essentially cognitive process is separated from and valued over ‘play’. Even during ‘play activities’, there is often little room for children's initiative as teachers insist on children following instructions from a very early age.

Despite a promising policy environment on paper, shifting actual classroom practice towards joyful, meaningful and actively engaging learning through play is a complex and long-term process.



## A two-phased approach: rooted in reflection

To tackle this challenge, VVOB works hand-in-hand with the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training to provide in-service teachers with professional development opportunities that impact teachers' deep-seated beliefs about learning as well as their pedagogical practice. Together with the provincial Departments of Education and Training in Quang Nam, Kon Tum and Quang Ngai, VVOB opts for a two-phased approach.

### First phase

In the first phase, teacher professional development is approached through a combination of training, action and reflection. In line with the objectives of Vietnam's child-centered early education curriculum, the focus of the intervention is on children's wellbeing and involvement.

Rooted in the educational model of Experiential Education\*, these two concepts should be understood as follows. 'Well-being' indicates that the basic needs of the child are satisfied and refers to the degree to which children feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self-confidence. 'Involvement', on the other hand, is evident when children are concentrated and focused, interested and fascinated and when they are operating at the very limits of their capabilities. High levels of wellbeing and involvement lead, in the end, to better learning outcomes.

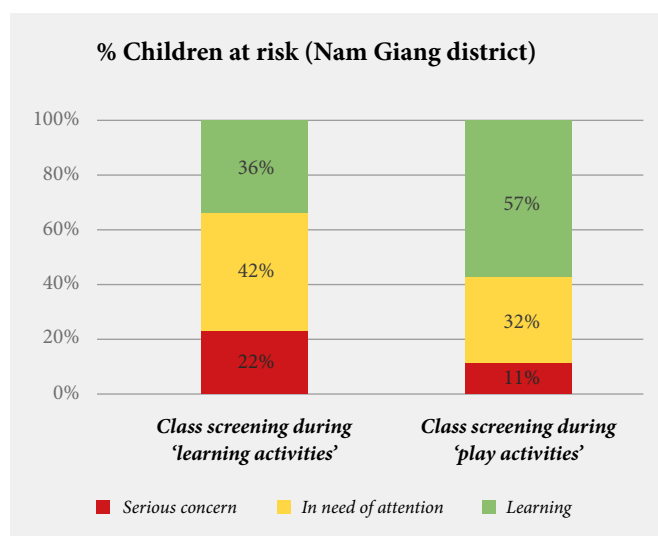
In order to support children's wellbeing and involvement, VVOB and the ministry of education developed a two-module training for preschool teachers. In the first module, teachers are supported by a group of core trainers from the ministry of education to observe children's levels of well-being and involvement using a specifically developed five-point monitoring scale. In the second module, teachers learn to identify which children are doing well and which are at risk of not learning. The teachers are guided to reflect on barriers to learning experienced by those children at risk. These reflections form the basis for the next phase: prioritising action points and experimenting with changes in the learning environment, activities, materials and interactions in the class.

In Nam Giang, one of the participating districts in Quang Nam province, teachers specifically chose to compare children's observed involvement and wellbeing during the so-called 'learning activities' versus so-called 'play activities'. 'Learning activities' included academic activities such as counting, reading letters from the blackboard, teachers telling a story, .... 'Play activities' included free play, corner play (a method that allows learners to choose between different group activities located in different areas in the classroom) and guided outdoor activities. Through these observations, they found that more children were doing well during 'play activities', while levels of wellbeing and involvement were lowest during the more teacher-led academic activities. The insights from Nam Giang quickly inspired preschool teachers in other participating districts to start experimenting with 'play activities'.

### Second phase

In the second phase, the teacher professional development shifts to school-based modalities, such as experimentation and self-reflection, co-teaching, and collaborative learning among teachers. From this point onward, it is crucial that teachers can count on support from school leaders and other supervisors, such as district education officers, who can visit classrooms to observe and give feedback on playful teaching and learning practices. In anticipation of this phase, VVOB makes sure to involve these stakeholders in the previous phase of the intervention.

Because Vietnamese teachers have never experienced play in formal learning themselves, the ministry of education – with VVOB's support – organises inspiration sessions on playful learning activities. Teachers learn how to consult children on their interests and organise meaningful activities around these. They learn about using choice boards to allow children to engage in corner play activities. Teachers are inspired to use more open-ended locally available materials that support children's holistic development. During these sessions, teachers are provided with opportunities to engage in playful learning activities themselves. Facilitators guide participants' reflection to transform these experiences into ideas for their own teaching context.



\* Laevers, F 2005, *Deep Level Learning and the Experiential Approach in Early Childhood and Primary Education*, Research Centre for Early Childhood and Primary Education Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.



### The case of Zambia

#### Challenge: translating policy to practice

In Zambia, VVOB promotes the integration of learning through play in early childhood and early grade primary education (grade 1).

Learning through play is integrated in the Zambian policy environment for early childhood education. The curriculum promotes learning through play as an important teaching methodology in early childhood. Learning through play is at the foundation of the recently adopted Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS) for children from 0 to 6.

However, translating the policy into more operational guidelines and instruments for teacher training institutes and provincial and district education authorities remains a challenge. Subsequently, early childhood education teachers (preschool and grade 1 teachers) currently do not have sufficient capacity to organise and support playful learning activities in their classrooms. Education is still very much teacher-centred and content-based.

#### Approach: interventions at different levels

To promote the practical application of learning through play pedagogies in early childhood and grade 1 teaching, VVOB supports a number of partners: the Ministry of General Education at the national level as well as provincial services for in-service teacher training in Central Province; the pre-service teacher training

colleges in Kitwe and Serenje; and Chalimbana University, where a degree programme for early childhood teachers is organised.

VVOB's approach is two-pronged:

On the one hand, VVOB supports the Zambian education system in operationalising the existing early childhood education policy. For instance, VVOB assists with the roll-out of the ELDS at provincial and district level in Central Province and helps the ministry in aligning existing assessment tools with the standards. To promote playful learning, VVOB has also advocated the integration of group work into the national early childhood syllabus.

At the same time, VVOB makes sure current and future preschool and early childhood teachers are able to apply learning through play in their classrooms. To do so, VVOB builds capacity of pre-service and in-service teacher training institutions in four thematic areas:

- groupwork;
- classroom management;
- teaching at the level of the learners;
- and development and use of locally available teaching and learning resources.

Through explicit modelling, teacher trainers are exposed to playful learning activities and then stimulated to reflect on how they can link back this experience to the classroom and the teacher training setting. Teacher trainers are strengthened in coaching and mentoring competencies to support teachers and school leaders in the implementation of playful learning pedagogies in their classrooms and schools.







### **Groupwork through corner play**

Groupwork creates opportunities for learners to interact and has strong benefits for language and socio-emotional development. For the practical organisation of groupwork, VVOB promotes corner play, where teachers allow learners to choose between different group activities located in different areas in the classroom. The activities are linked to the syllabus objectives and vary between table top activities, pretend-play, etc.

Children are free to change activities as long as there is a free spot in the activity of their choice. This allows them to engage in those activities that are most meaningful to them. Choice increases motivation, creates a higher sense of agency and stronger engagement to what is being learned. Children will then tend to challenge themselves and work at the limits of their abilities.

### **Classroom management**

Learning through play in large class groups with freedom and choice for learners, can easily turn into chaos and impede the safety needed for learning. Therefore, classroom management is crucial. VVOB

supports teachers in classroom management by helping them set clear expectations. 'What can learners expect? What does the teacher expect from the learners?' Expectations need to be made explicit, for example through a visual daily programme, a choice board or the use of pictures with classroom rules.

A visual daily programme informs learners on what they will be doing that day and when they will have moments of freedom, when they will go home, etc. It increases wellbeing and develops the abstract concept of time in young learners.

A choice board facilitates and visualises the process of choosing guided play activities by giving learners a certain degree of control over what play activities they want to engage in and giving them the opportunity to work on activities at their own pace.

Teachers are supported to think about class rules and their wording. They brainstorm positive reinforcement systems and are informed about logical consequences as a way to diminish misbehaviour and increase learners' wellbeing and self-regulation.

### *At the level of the learners*

'Chalk and talk' is a popular teaching practice in Zambia's classrooms and often results in rote learning. Children could be counting, for instance, without really understanding what the numbers represent. To change the teaching and learning process, VVOB provides advice on how numeracy and literacy skills progress and which different steps learners need to go through. This allows teachers to teach at the level of the learners. Teachers are made aware of the steps and, to expand their range of teaching methods, the steps are linked to examples of both teacher-led and more independent guided play activities. For example, through a variety of games children can establish meaningful relationships between counting and a number of objects in the classroom.

When learners are engaged in more independent guided play activities in groups, the teacher has time to observe the learners. Awareness of learning progressions and the steps involved in the development of specific skills can guide teachers' observations and help them to see at what stage a learner is and what the next suitable step for this learner is, making activities challenging. Where necessary, teachers can take certain learners aside during groupwork for remedial teaching.

### *Teaching and learning using locally available resources (TALULAR)*

In order to allow learners to establish meaningful relationships with what is being learnt, teachers are taught and encouraged to make playful TALULAR learning materials which can be used in guided play activities during groupwork. Teachers are asked to reflect on which learning opportunities the materials offer, whether they promote playful problem solving, interaction, multisensory exploration, manipulation and discovery. In addition, teachers are asked to think about how the materials can be adapted to the needs of different learners. VVOB gave technical support to the ministry of education in the development of a 'low cost resource' manual which was funded by UNICEF.



### *Gender responsive learning through play*

VVOB and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), together with the Ministries of Education of Rwanda, South Africa and Zambia, developed a toolkit on gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) to support early childhood teachers and school leaders. The toolkit places a strong emphasis on gender responsive learning through play and wants to see educators encourage learners to engage in all kinds of play, without being hindered by gender stereotypes.

While all play allows for mixed-age and mixed-gender groups, boys and girls are socialised to play in different ways. This can cause children to think that boys and girls are very different and unable to do the same things. Such notions of gender differences affect learners' aspirations and achievements. Challenging these differences and questioning stereotypes is very important from an early age onwards, because young learners are still in the process of defining what it means to be a girl or a boy.

The toolkit contains a wealth of tips and inspiration for gender-responsive lesson planning and delivery, creating gender-responsive learning environments and play areas, developing gender-responsive play materials and getting the community on board.



## About VVOB

VVOB is a Belgian non-profit organisation with more than 35 years' experience in sustainably improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of education. VVOB's annual budget is approximately €11 million.

### VVOB focus

In pursuit of quality education, VVOB works in two niches, the professional development of school teachers and the professional development of school leaders, in:

- early education to improve the quality of formal pre-primary education and assist the transition to primary school.
- primary education to improve literacy, numeracy and life skills.
- secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.
- secondary technical and vocational education and training to improve quality, align knowledge and skills imparted with the labour market, and integrate entrepreneurship.

As a fundamental principle, VVOB firmly believes that quality education can only be achieved if equity, and particularly gender equity, is achieved in the education system.

## VVOB expertise

VVOB teams of experts specialise in meeting the most important education needs identified by international research and in the education strategies and priorities of VVOB partner countries. We do this through capacity development and technical assistance.

### Developing the capacity of local education authorities

For VVOB, developing the capacity of local education authorities means:

- professionalising teachers through strengthening teacher training institutions and professional development organisations, and mentoring and coaching systems.
- professional development of school leaders through professional development organisations, and mentoring and coaching systems.
- enabling a strong policy environment for the professionalisation of teachers and school leaders, by enhancing dialogue, communication and collaboration among stakeholders.

### Providing technical assistance

For VVOB, providing technical assistance means:

- offering structural and sustainable solutions to support and reinforce the capacities of governments and local education authorities responsible for the professional development of teachers and school leaders.
- offering practical and technical education expertise and support for processes through a wide range of methodologies, from classical training and workshops to mentoring, coaching and peer learning.
- ensuring that partners increasingly take the lead throughout programmes to guarantee sustainability.

## How VVOB works

### Addresses local needs and contexts

VVOB aligns its work with national education strategies to inspire policies adapted to local needs and contexts.

### Collaborates with a network of educational partners

VVOB develops educational expertise based on its know-how and exchanges within its worldwide and Flemish network of educational partners – teacher training institutions, universities, ministries of education, educational service providers and international organisations.

#### *Operational partners*

VVOB partners with ministries of education, teacher training institutions and organisations focusing on professional development. Partners range from national and regional governments to institutions, individual schools, school leaders, teachers and students.

#### *Financial partners*

Local governments finance programmes from their own budgets and with support from national and international donors, including the Belgian and Flemish governments, the European Union, USAID, Mastercard Foundation, Dubai Cares, other foundations and international non-governmental organisations.

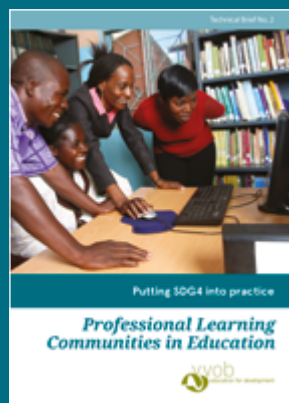
### Stimulates cooperation

VVOB stimulates cooperation between educational institutions across continents.

## Where VVOB works

VVOB works in 10 countries – Belgium, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Rwanda, South Africa, Suriname, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia – and on assignments in other countries.

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