

Putting SDG4 into practice



Play-based Learning

Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer

Technical Brief 10: Play-based Learning is an update of our Technical Brief 3: Learning Through Play. While Brief 3 focuses on learning through play in early childhood education, Brief 10 explores how play-based learning approaches can be used not only in early childhood education but throughout a learner's educational journey, playing an instrumental role in developing the complex skills and competencies. This publication contains references to other publications and websites. VVOB cannot be held responsible for current or future content of these publications and websites, nor for the content of external publications and websites that refer to this publication of VVOB.

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Glossary of Acronyms

Throughout this technical brief we use the following acronyms:

CCE: Climate change education

DBE: Department of Basic Education in South Africa

DSD: Department of Social Development

ECD: Early childhood development

ECE: Early childhood education

GTP: Gender-transformative pedagogy

iPLAY: Integrating Play-based Learning Activities for Young learners (VVOB project in Vietnam)

IT'S PLAY: Improving Teaching Skills on Playful Learning for Africa's Youngest (VVOB project in Zambia, Uganda and Rwanda)

LCoP: Leadership communities of practice

LRLE: Language-rich learning environments

PLC: Professional learning community

POM: Process-oriented child monitoring

SDG4: Sustainable Development Goal 4 of Quality Education

SEL: Social and emotional learning

TALK: Preschool Teachers Apply Language-rich Teaching Skills and Knowledge (VVOB project in Vietnam)

TaRL: Teaching at the Right Level

TPD: Teacher professional development

TVET: Technical and vocational education and training

INTRO



Quality, inclusive and equitable education provides all learners with the capabilities to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful societies and enhance individual well-being. This technical brief describes the benefits and characteristics of play-based learning and how

VVOB adopts a systems approach to support play-based learning in the education sector. Cases and examples from VVOB programmes illustrate how play-based learning equips learners with a breadth of skills and promotes inclusive and equitable education.

Why Play-based Learning Matters

Play-based learning has several important potential benefits, which are related to its capacity to foster holistic development, boost active learning and engagement as well as improve well-being and motivation. It creates opportunities for tailoring education to individual needs and prepares learners for the world of the future.



Facilitating Holistic Development

Play-based learning supports the holistic development of learners (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022). allowing them to acquire a breadth of skills. These include transferable skills such as cognitive, social, emotional, physical and creative skills as well as foundational, technical and entrepreneurial skills.

Play-based learning promotes cognitive development by providing opportunities for learners to think critically, make decisions and solve problems. Through play, learners engage in activities that require planning, strategising and logical thinking. Social skills are developed when play-based learning prompts learners to negotiate, cooperate, take turns and resolve conflicts. Emotional skills are strengthened through play-based learning when students learn to read their peers' emotions when playing together. Additionally, they learn to persevere when things get tricky or how to deal with frustrations when faced with unexpected situations. Physical skills can include balance and coordination or gross-motor skills acquired through running, climbing or dancing as well as fine motor skills generated by activities such as manipulative play, arts and crafts or threading and lacing. Play-based learning feeds creative skills by sparking learners' curiosity and imagination by encouraging them to explore new ideas, relationships, spaces and problems. Likewise, imaginative play enables students to cultivate storytelling skills, create new ideas and express their unique perspectives.

Play-based learning also nurtures foundational skills (Krieg, 2019) such as literacy and numeracy since play exposes learners to a range of words and concepts expanding their vocabulary. Play-based learning also helps children to bridge the gap between objects and abstract concepts like words and numbers. It supports the development of phonemic awareness as well as letter and number recognition. This is achieved through play-based activities such as alphabet games, building letters with blocks and rhyming games. Play-based learning can also be instrumental in acquiring technical skills by encouraging experimentation and exploration. Whether it is building with blocks, using tools or engaging in hands-on activities, learners develop a fundamental understanding of cause and effect, problem-solving and technical concepts. Similarly, play-based learning also allows students to establish entrepreneurial skills enabling them to collaboratively engage in projects, solve real-world problems and practice creativity, innovation and risk-taking.

Fostering Active Learning and Engagement

Play-based learning encourages learners to actively engage with their environment, materials and activities (Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022). It involves manipulating objects, experimenting, exploring and taking an active role in the learning process. Through interactions with the world and their peers, students learn from their experiences, fostering communication, collaboration and negotiation skills. This aligns with constructivist and social constructivist theories which emphasise that learning is a collaborative process where learners construct knowledge from active experiences.

Fostering Well-being

Play-based learning nurtures well-being in many ways. First, play-based learning is inherently enjoyable and brings a sense of fun. It stimulates positive emotions (including those related to being challenged or feelings of accomplishment) contributing to learners' overall well-being. Additionally, it allows learners to express and regulate emotions, engage in positive relationships, nurture creativity, boost self-confidence and self-esteem, stay physically active, stimulate cognitive growth and serves as a natural outlet for stress reduction. Collectively, all these aspects contribute to learners' sense of well-being.



Increasing Motivation for Learning

Play-based learning increases motivation for learning in several ways. First, it taps into learners' curiosity, involving them based on their own interests and talents (UNICEF, 2018). As learning becomes more relevant to their lives, it also increases intrinsic motivation for learning. Rather than being passive recipients of information, play-based learning allows learners to become active participants, taking decisions and setting goals, making their own choices, promoting motivation through a heightened sense of agency, autonomy and control over learning experiences. Play-based learning provides immediate feedback and rewards, allowing learners to see the direct results of their actions. This immediate feedback loop reinforces their desire to learn and encourages them to continue exploring and learning through play. Tailored challenges in play-based learning align with learners' abilities and interests, offering chances to set goals, overcome obstacles and achieve a sense of accomplishment. This further fuels their motivation and desire to push boundaries.

Creating Opportunities for Inclusion and Differentiation

Play-based learning is intrinsically inclusive since it puts individual needs, interests and abilities at the forefront. It challenges learners, regardless of their level, to progress in their development (Schools Vic, n.d.). Learners with different interests, backgrounds or challenges can actively participate in play, ensuring that learning is accessible to all.

Preparing Learners for the Future

Play-based learning develops skills and competencies that are essential for the future. It nurtures creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, adaptability, resilience, taking initiative and entrepreneurship, which are all highly valued skills in the 21st-century workforce (UNICEF, 2018).

Play-based Learning and SDG4

SDG4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and champion lifelong learning opportunities for all. Play-based learning, as a pedagogical approach fostering deeper level learning and the development of a breadth of skills, is essential in realising this goal.

Though often associated with early childhood education (ECE), play-based learning approaches are highly pertinent to all levels and types of education including primary and general secondary education as well as technical and vocational education and training (TVET). In TVET for example, it enables learners to develop technical skills in a practical way, problem-solving abilities and a deeper understanding of technical concepts, to take initiatives and make their own choices, enhancing their readiness for the world of work. In that sense, play-based learning approaches contribute to achieving many SDG4 targets including 4.1 (quality primary and secondary education), 4.2 (quality pre-primary education), 4.3 and 4.4 (quality technical and vocational education and skills).

As a pedagogical approach that facilitates inclusion and differentiation based on learners' interests, abilities, needs, learning styles, backgrounds and challenges, play-based learning can also play a critical role in the realisation of SDG4.5 which aims to eliminate all discrimination in education.

Many of the benefits of play-based learning also play a crucial role in the attainment of SDG target 4.7 on education for sustainable development and global citizenship (VVOB, 2023). The holistic approach inherent to playful learning lets learners gain a comprehensive understanding of sustainability, inequity and human rights issues. It can empower learners to actively address global challenges and stimulate the development of values and attitudes that are aligned with sustainable development and global citizenship. It also promotes consideration of multiple perspectives and encourages the formation of creative solutions to real-world problems. Additionally, play-based learning can make complex global issues such as climate change, poverty or inequity more tangible.



Play-based Learning Unpacked Characteristics

VVOB's understanding of play-based learning 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 (Zosh et al., 2017; Zosh et al., 2018).

This model emphasises that agency is an essential feature of play-based learning approaches (Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022). Play-based learning implies that learners can take charge and make choices. For learners to be able to learn through play, they need to possess control, initiative and leadership over their actions.

This leads to greater engagement, motivation and positive attitudes towards learning as well as to more empowered learners and the development of executive function, problem solving and planning skills. This does not mean that adults cannot or should not be involved in learners' play but emphasises the fact that they should see learners as capable of (jointly) planning and controlling the flow of activities during play. The model, furthermore, identifies five characteristics that define playful learning activities (Zosh et al., 2018).

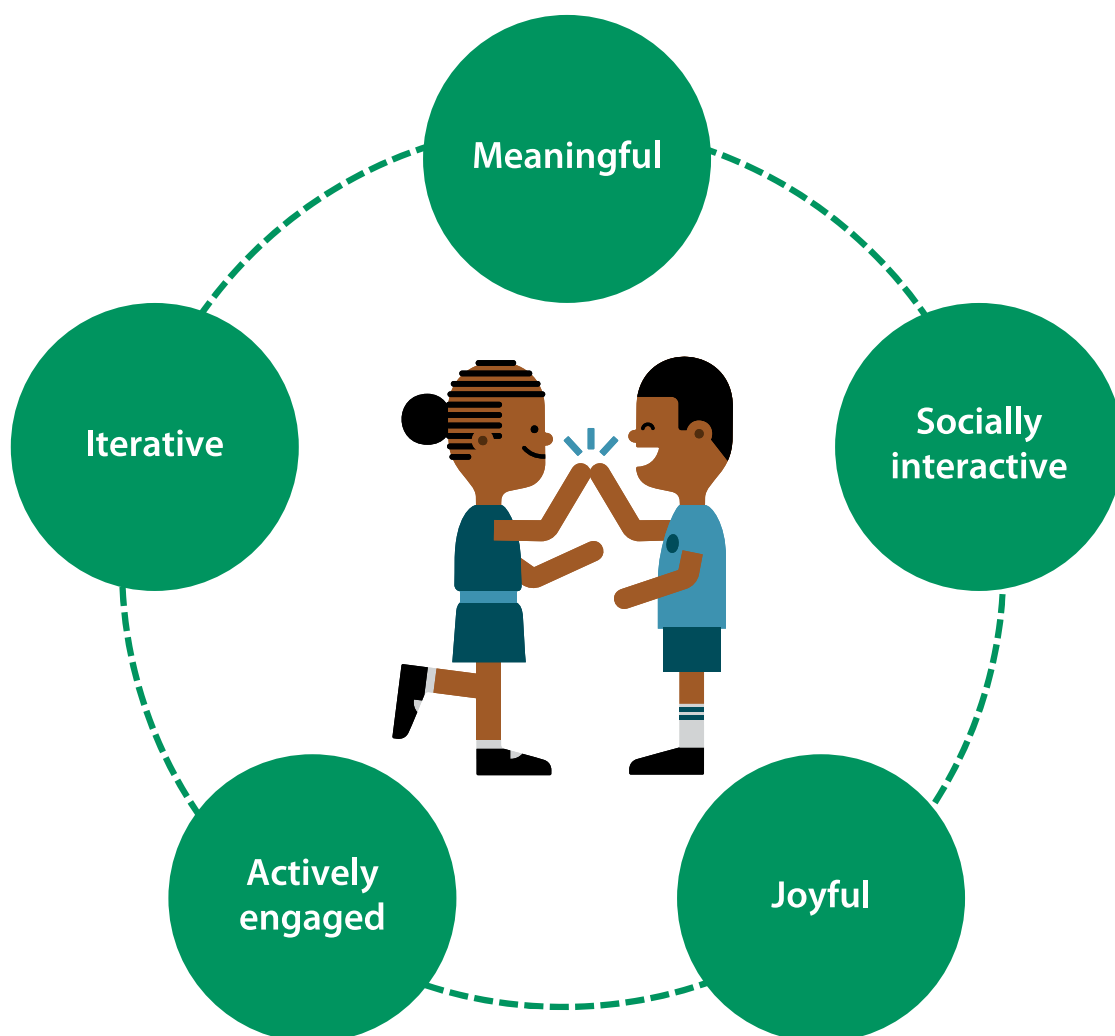


Figure 1: The five characteristics of play. Zosh et al., 2018. Based on an illustration from the LEGO Foundation

1. **Play-based learning is fun and enjoyable.** Through play-based learning, learners experience pleasure, enthusiasm, surprise, thrill, etc. Fun and joy, however, can mean more than 'smiles and sparkles'. Fun and joy can also relate to the challenging or competitive elements in play-based learning approaches – referred to as 'hard fun'. While the activity might not be joyful in and of itself, the joy comes from the process of overcoming the challenges set and the sense of achievement as a result. Fun and enjoyment are important because they lead to motivation and perseverance, serving as essential facilitators for learning. Examples of enjoyable play-based learning activities include role-play activities, educational competitions or gamified learning experiences. Intense joy can also be found in quiet and solitary activities such as reading a book or listening to a story.
2. **Play-based learning is meaningful and purposeful.** Play-based learning is driven by intrinsic motivation and personal, cultural and societal relevance. It is highly significant to the learner, connecting to their personal interests, existing knowledge, experiences and goals, allowing them to make sense of the world around them. It also allows learning to be linked to the learner's broader culture, society and community. Examples of meaningful play-based learning activities are pretend play scenarios, problem-based learning or student entrepreneurial projects.
3. **Play-based learning is actively engaging.** It implies learners are involved with and absorbed by what they are doing and that they can persist despite distractions. This is also referred to as being 'hands-on and minds-on'. Being actively engaged requires exploration, manipulation of materials and interaction with the environment to foster learning as well as some level of self-direction. Examples of actively engaging play-based learning activities include sensory play where learners actively explore different textures and shapes, hands-on science experiments or student debates to analyse complex social issues.
4. **Play-based learning is iterative.** Iteration refers to learners repeatedly trying out new possibilities, revising hypotheses and exploring other ways to do things. In this way, new brain networks are created and deeper level learning is generated. Examples of iterative play-based learning activities are building and rebuilding structures using blocks, creative writing exercises that include repetitive feedback and revision loops, finding different ways of solving mathematical problems ('more than one way'), prototyping and design thinking that involves developing, testing and continuously improving a project.
5. **Play-based learning is socially interactive.** Although play can happen individually, play-based learning is more powerful in social interactions. By sharing ideas, interacting, collaborating and communicating, learners build a deeper understanding and powerful connections with others. Social interaction is not only important for motivation but also plays an indispensable role in the development of critical thinking skills and other more complex learning-to-learn skills. Examples of socially interactive play-based learning activities are represented by cooperative play, taking turns and sharing materials, group work and collaborative projects.



Integrated Play-based Teaching and Learning

Play-based learning 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 (Zosh et al., 2018). At one end of the spectrum, the model identifies ‘free play’. Learners experience the freedom to explore without limitations and/or interference. They are free to initiate the context and direct the activities in which play-based learning can take place. There is no explicit didactic goal although learning does occur. Further along the spectrum, play-based learning also happens but in increasingly structured environments. Materials, physical spaces and teachers or parents can all structure play-based learning. Guided play and learning are where the adult (teacher, parent) chooses or arranges a context and sets a learning goal but the learner directs the play in that setting.

For instance, providing learners with different colour paints to teach basic colour-mixing concepts. Game-based learning is a particular form of guided play and learning where play-based learning is directed by predefined rules, for instance using ‘Math Bingo’ to reinforce math skills and concepts. Additionally, there is co-opted play where learners instigate play and adults step in to direct the play towards a certain learning goal. For instance, adults may ask learners playing with blocks to name or build specific geometric shapes. Lastly, under the umbrella of play-based learning, there is playful instruction. This involves direct instruction from adults who initiate and guide learning while using playful elements. For instance, teachers may provide learners with blocks to practice elementary maths concepts.



Figure 2: Spectrum of Play. Zosh et al., 2018. Source: "serious games" as outlined in Hassinger-Das et al., 2017 in which the game has a learning goal



Learning can take place at all levels of the continuum. Different types of play will lead to different learning outcomes and will produce different results in different settings ((Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2010). However, research indicates that the best learning results will be obtained by guided play and games (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredge, & Klahr, 2016; Toub, Rajan, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016).

Integrated teaching and learning approaches combine guided play and learning, adult-led learning, and learner-directed play and learning (Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2012). Adult-led learning occurs when adults introduce an experience or an idea, concept or topic for exploration and direct the learning by taking charge, giving instructions, setting rules, asking questions and providing structure. Learner-directed play and learning transpires when learners show more agency and execute their learning through exploring, experimenting, investigating and being creative in ways that they initiate and control. The adult's role in learner-directed play and learning may be to observe what the learner knows and understands based on what they make, write, draw, say and do. Guided play and learning occur when adults are involved in learners' play and learning, following their interests and responding to spontaneous learning opportunities as they arise. Integrated teaching and learning approaches recognise the value of both learner-directed and adult-guided learning, allowing for a balanced and comprehensive learning experience. By combining different approaches, educators can create a learning environment that maximises engagement, supports individualised learning and fosters the development of essential knowledge, skills and conceptual understanding in learners.



Figure 3: Integrated teaching and learning approaches. Kennedy et al., 2012. Reproduced from the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, Department of Education and Training, 2016, p. 15)

VVOB's Systems Approach to Supporting Play-based Learning

Introducing play-based learning into the formal education system often requires a paradigm shift. From a very young age, many learners find themselves in under-resourced, overcrowded classrooms where teachers rely heavily on instructional practices that fail to actively engage learners and reduce social interaction between them. Initial teacher training may not have adequately equipped teachers with the beliefs, knowledge and skills required to promote play-based learning in their classrooms. Curricula often do not offer teachers much guidance. Teachers may face challenges in adapting and enriching the existing programmes as school leaders may not give essential moral and practical support for implementing such pedagogical innovations.

Parents and educators alike may tend to associate education with academic achievement, preferring teaching and learning methods that emphasise teacher-led and content-based rote learning.

Changing these circumstances requires a systemic approach that focuses on strengthening existing policy frameworks, teacher professional development systems as well as creating school leadership and parental support for play-based learning. It also requires tools and systems to monitor the quality of play-based learning to inform policy, school and classroom practice.

Strengthening Frameworks, Policies and Guidelines on Play-based Learning

At the policy level, VVOB partners with Ministries of Education, local education authorities, providers of initial teacher training and teacher professional development and other relevant education system stakeholders to bolster and co-create contextualised frameworks, policies and guidelines which integrate and enable play-based learning in education systems. This policy-level work builds on the results, experiences and lessons learned from implementing play-based learning programmes at the level of professional development providers, schools and classrooms.

Early Childhood Education in South Africa

In **South Africa's F.U.N. project**, for instance, VVOB supports the South African government which is in the process of transitioning the mandate for Early Childhood Development (ECD) from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

This 'function shift' creates great challenges as well as opportunities for provincial and national government education stakeholders where they assume additional responsibility for thousands of non-government ECD centres. As they seek to adapt to their new roles and mandate in the wider ECD sector, there is a strong need to review and improve their systems, policies and guidelines for the professional development and monitoring of ECD practitioners and centre leaders. Part of this process involves VVOB supporting national government stakeholders in the development of Professional Teaching Standards; a vision on Professional Pathways for ECD Practitioners and Guidelines for Professional Development Providers on ECD training programmes to ensure they integrate and reflect the principles and practices of play-based learning.



Professional Development of Teachers and School Leaders on Play-based Learning

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the classroom environment for play-based learning. However, they might not be aware of the importance of play in the learning process and/or may lack clarity on how play-based learning can be introduced in their classroom. Teachers also need to acquire the skills to design and implement well-planned and structured play-based activities that build on learners' experiences, knowledge and needs. This involves combining different play-based facilitation methods.

Therefore, VVOB supports the integration of play-based learning in both pre-service teacher training systems and the induction and continuous professional development of (new) teachers. At the pre-service level, this includes backing curriculum reforms at the level of teacher training institutions or preparing teacher educators to include play-based learning in their courses. In terms of induction and continuous professional development of new/existing teachers, this incorporates supporting those responsible for coaching and mentoring in-service teachers (district officials, school leaders, teacher mentors, etc.) so that they can encourage teachers to experiment with play-based learning and offer meaningful feedback.

VVOB's approach to teacher professional development on play-based learning starts from the premise that to teach play-based learning effectively, educators must experience it themselves. This immersive approach fosters a deep understanding of how play can be leveraged to promote the development of a breadth of skills in all learners, including that of teachers themselves. In other words, teacher professional development must adhere to the principles of learning through play itself. It should be a motivating and joyful experience that is meaningful to the teacher's day-to-day practices and requires the active engagement of teachers, offering opportunities for collaboration, reflection and continuous improvement.



Blended Learning in Rwanda

In Rwanda, blended professional development for teachers and school leaders, implemented by the University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE) in partnership with the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) and VVOB, combines online and in-person teacher professional development components to create participatory and interactive learning experiences.

The programme starts with in-person sessions, enabling participants to get to know each other and understand the purpose and delivery approach. Participants then connect with the interactive online course content, gaining knowledge and understanding through engaging activities. Bridging activities between sessions, like quizzes and assignments, enable participants to reflect on and apply the course content to their work practice.

Additional in-person sessions allow for practising the course content collaboratively with peers, contributing to a deeper level of learning. To conclude, participants submit an assignment and e-portfolio analysing the content and applying it to their work practice, showcasing their learning. Support visits provide participants with real-time feedback, helping them to implement their newfound knowledge into their daily activities.

Trainers play a crucial role in this blended continuous professional development model as they shift from being knowledge providers to becoming facilitators of learning, very similar to the transformation required of teachers moving from traditional teaching to more play-based teaching strategies. They monitor participants' progress, moderate online discussions, provide coaching and feedback and support participants in planning self-directed learning.

School leaders have considerable influence on the conditions that allow (or impede) teachers to adopt play-based learning approaches (VVOB, 2024). As gatekeepers, they play an important role in providing the necessary time and scheduling, spaces, resources and materials for play-based learning to take place. They can promote play-based learning by creating specific school-based professional development opportunities for their teaching staff. Unfortunately, they often discourage teachers from being innovative because they themselves are not familiar with the concept. Like teachers, school leaders need support to become true advocates of learning through play. This support may involve facilitating dialogues on meaningful child development and encouraging the exchange of best practices through professional learning communities for school leaders.



Professional Development for Preschool Leaders in Vietnam

VVOB strengthens the capacity of the Ministry of Education in **Vietnam** at the national, provincial and district level to put in place professional development trajectories for preschool leaders to establish enabling conditions for play-based language-rich learning environments. These play-based learning environments support the development of emergent literacy in preschool children. The programme places special emphasis on equipping school leaders with skills such as effective coaching and observation while also promoting teacher autonomy through the facilitation of peer learning communities within schools.



Leadership Communities in Ghana

In **Ghana**, similarly, VVOB supports school leadership for play-based learning to mitigate some of the challenges experienced around the introduction of a new play-based pre-primary curriculum, including fragmented coordination and a lack of teacher professional development. To address these issues effectively, leadership communities of practice (LCoP) were set up, involving district educational, school and community leaders. In this context, VVOB provides leadership training to preschool leaders and complementary support to LCoP facilitators on how to initiate, facilitate and sustain effective LCoPs. This multifaceted approach is instrumental in creating a supportive environment for the successful implementation of play-based learning in Ghana's early childhood education system.

Parental and Community Engagement

Misunderstandings around the value of play-based learning among parents and communities can create resistance. Conversely, parents and communities that are actively engaged in what goes on at school and that hold beliefs and values aligned with playful approaches, can have a positive impact on the successful implementation of play-based learning. VVOB supports school leaders and teachers to engage with and include parents/caregivers and local communities by strengthening their understanding of play-based learning, involving them in developing contextualised models of play-based learning and building their support for such approaches. In some cases, VVOB partners with other institutions and (civil society) organisations to actively reach out to parents directly about play-based learning.



IT'S PLAY in Zambia

For VVOB's **IT'S PLAY programme in Zambia**, the Ministry of Education and VVOB use a dual track approach to connect with parents and communities. A first track champions school leaders and teachers to invite parents to open school days and other school events. On these occasions, school leaders and teachers use communication materials like posters to engage parents and community members in discussions around the use and values of play-based learning and to build parental and community understanding for the approach. During these discussions, teachers and school leaders illustrate what and how children learn through play, how teachers deliberately create learning through play-based activities and involve parents in play-based activities in school. The communication materials include additional guidance for teachers and head teachers to engage in these discussions.

A second track is the support VVOB offers education officials to target parents and communities via media. While various choices such as radio, SMS or phone-based audio messages were considered, the Public Address System proved to be the preferred option. In collaboration with the Zambia News and Information Services, District Resource Centre Coordinators from the Ministry broadcast messages to local communities using mobile public address systems. The messages focused both on the need to enrol children into early childhood education as well as on the importance of play-based learning for children's holistic development.

iPLAY in Vietnam

In VVOB's **iPLAY project in Vietnam**, 'Play Days' provide parents with interactive opportunities to learn about the benefits of play-based learning. Play Days are a school-based parental engagement activity where parents are invited to school to participate in a range of exciting and relevant play-based learning activities, together with their children. Through these activities, schools aim to build parental understanding (of the value) of play-based learning, their role in supporting play-based learning at school as well as how they can provide such opportunities for their children at home.

Play Days also help to connect parents with schools in other ways, creating opportunities for parents to interact with teachers and to understand how their children are progressing at school. Usually, parents only come to school to pick up their children. Play Days are a rare occasion where parents really engage in school activities. As community stakeholders like the commune Youth Union, Women's Union, police and communal heads also attend Play Days, they also help to strengthen the bonds between schools and the local communities and authorities.

Monitoring Play-based Learning Process Quality

Monitoring play-based teaching and learning processes is essential to ensure the quality of play-based learning. It provides teachers, school leaders and education officials with information on the quality of play-based teaching practice and can help to adapt and improve play-based teaching and learning in classes, schools and systems. However, this requires specific monitoring approaches and instruments.



Process-Oriented Child Monitoring (POM) in Vietnam

In **Vietnam**, VVOB supports government partners and schools to use process-oriented child monitoring (POM) (Laevens, Moons, & Declercq, 2012). This initiative enables early childhood education (ECE) teachers to oversee the quality of their play-based teaching practice and reflect on and adapt their teaching methods to improve learning outcomes.

POM is a formative assessment system, enabling teachers to systematically observe and evaluate learners' levels of Well-being and Involvement which serve as process indicators for children's learning. This simple yet highly effective tool allows teachers to gain invaluable insights into the presence of play-based characteristics in their classrooms.

The well-being indicator assesses the emotional and physical well-being of the children in the ECE classroom. It looks at factors such as whether children feel safe, secure and happy within the learning environment and whether they experience strong and supportive relationships with their teacher and peers. The Involvement indicator measures the extent to which children are actively engaged and participating in the learning activities. It evaluates whether children are concentrated and actively exploring, experimenting and interacting with their environment and whether the learning taking place is meaningful and intrinsically motivating. Together both indicators cover the main characteristics of play-based learning.

Based on this assessment of children's learning and the quality of play-based learning processes, teachers are encouraged to engage in reflective practices, both individually and as a team. These reflections aim to identify the changes that can be made to teaching practices to enhance learning and meaningful participation.

Learning Through Play Checklist (LTP Checklist) in Vietnam

Another approach to assess the quality of learning through play used in Vietnam is the learning through play Checklist (LTP Checklist) developed in the framework of the iPLAY project, which supports play-based learning within the context of recent curriculum reforms in primary education.

The LTP Checklist is a versatile tool that can be effectively used by teachers, school leaders and education administrators for various purposes including lesson planning, providing guidance to teachers, classroom observations, explicit modelling or demonstration sessions, self-evaluation or external assessments of play-based process quality or as part of reflection, coaching and feedback in teacher professional development trajectories.

The LTP Checklist offers a systematic approach for educators, administrators and observers to evaluate lessons based on their alignment with key characteristics of play. For each of the five characteristics, the tool identifies several specific elements to explore. In terms of active engagement, for instance, the tool prompts observers to look out for elements like experiments or projects, offering learners options that promote student ownership and the use of prompts and questions instead of instructions. In terms of iteration, the tool guides observations towards opportunities for learners to try, fail and try again. It also considers teachers asking questions that encourage learners to actively think, without providing correct answers. To assess social interaction, the tool focuses on cooperative learning strategies such as small group work or opportunities for learners to share their learning products with their peers.

Play-based Learning: A Multi-purposeful Strategy in VVOB Programmes

Through its programmes, VVOB unlocks the potential of play-based learning for the benefit of learners, educators and society at large. VVOB's play-based learning initiatives not only equip learners with a range of essential skills but also drive social transformation and promote inclusive education.

Play-based Learning for a Breadth of Skills

VVOB programmes leverage play-based learning to develop a breadth of skills and competencies in learners, across the different levels and subsectors of the education system.



Playful Learning In the Early Years in Zambia, Rwanda and Uganda

Through VVOB's **multi-country IT'S PLAY programme**, Ministries of Education in **Zambia, Rwanda and Uganda** support the development of emergent literacy and numeracy skills in early childhood education (ECE) to improve learning outcomes at primary school level.

Emergent literacy and numeracy skills refer to the foundational skills and knowledge that young children develop as they prepare to become literate (able to read and write) and numerate (able to understand and work with numbers) such as general listening and speaking skills, building up vocabulary, gross and fine motor skills, recognising quantities, completing patterns, etc. These skills form the basis for later, more formal literacy and numeracy learning. Through a unique teacher professional development (TPD) model, VVOB enables ECE teachers to become proficient in play facilitation skills that specifically target emergent literacy and numeracy development in young learners. The model provides teachers with clear, content-specific play-based learning activities that they can easily implement in their classrooms. These play-based activities, which include storytelling activities, sound and letter exploration activities, shape, pattern and number recognition activities, role-play activities, games and quizzes, construction activities, etc., actively support the cultivation of emergent literacy and numeracy skills. Additionally, due to their play-based nature, they also enhance other areas of holistic development such as physical skills, social and emotional skills as well as creative skills.



Did you know ...

That play-based learning is not just for small children? This kind of learning sparks curiosity, fosters creativity, and encourages you to think outside the box – skills that are valuable no matter where you are in life. and play taps into that for people of all ages. Play-based learning approaches can therefore be instrumental in developing the complex skills and competencies that adolescents will need to build their future lives and careers in an ever-complex world. The following two case studies from Zambia and Ecuador illustrate that older children and adolescents also find resonance in play.



Catch up in Zambia

In **Zambia**, the **Catch Up programme**, implemented by the Ministry of Education with support from VVOB, addresses the learning deficits of learners in primary school grades 3-5 through the 'Teaching at the Right Level' approach. This strategy is an accelerated foundational literacy and numeracy intervention that provides support based on children's learning level rather than their grade level. The Catch Up pedagogy integrates play-based learning elements in its teaching and learning activities based on the play-based learning framework. Key to the Catch Up approach is grouping children based on their learning level and providing them with resources and instruction tailored to their proficiency level while building on their prior knowledge. Group work allows learners to collaborate on and engage in various activities such as games, storytelling and riddles, enhancing their learning experience. This approach not only challenges learners but also offers a safe, joyful and supportive environment for learners to actively engage with peers and teachers. Learning at their level allows all children to experience the joy of success and overcoming challenges.

While the focus of the Catch Up programme is to address poor learning outcomes in foundational numeracy and literacy, recent research confirms that its play-based nature also positively influences various dimensions of socioemotional learning (SEL). It helps build children's confidence by encouraging participation in various activities, fosters leadership skills and social development, promotes group work and engagement with peers and contributes to building supportive relationships and developing empathy.

Project-based Learning in Ecuador

In **Ecuador**, VVOB's **¡VAMOS! project** uses project-based learning to formulate agriculture entrepreneurial skills in secondary technical school students. While play-based learning is not commonly associated with secondary technical education, the project-based learning approach mirrors many of the characteristics of play-based learning, immersing students in meaningful real-world scenarios and encouraging them to collaboratively apply knowledge and practise entrepreneurial skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving.

In the ¡VAMOS! project, these endeavours mostly relate to sustainable agricultural production, management of marine biological resources and food conservation and processing techniques. The project-based learning approach steers students through a structured practical learning path that starts with a project launching event. During this event, students choose their real-world project and decide on the

driving/guiding questions which also generates the curiosity, joy and excitement that will inspire students to implement and learn through their project work.

Once they have chosen a project and composed driving/guiding questions, students are encouraged to actively seek answers. This involves evaluating different sources, interviewing experts or collecting data from their communities. Students actively engage with and explore the content of their project through these research and inquiry processes. In the next stage, students will actively and collaboratively develop products, such as a business model, a budget or a marketing plan for their business. Throughout this process, they will build and apply various entrepreneurial skills in a real-world setting and iteratively generate new knowledge, coming up with new questions and challenges as they go. During the last phase, students present their products, practise presentation skills and reflect on the learning process they have experienced.

Play-based Learning for Inclusive Education

Play-based learning is also vital to foster inclusiveness within education systems. Its interactive and engaging nature provides learners from diverse backgrounds with equal opportunities to learn and thrive, promoting social cohesion and reducing disparities in educational outcomes. By accommodating various learning styles and needs, play-based learning helps create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Language-rich Learning Environments in Vietnam

In Vietnam, VVOB's **TALK project** supports pre-school teachers, school leaders and education officials to establish language-rich learning environments (LRLE) within preschools in ethnically diverse and disadvantaged districts. LRLE allow children from ethnical minorities and disadvantaged backgrounds to enter primary school with language skills that will make them more ready for learning, increasing their chances of academic success and inclusion in the mainstream education system. Play-based pedagogies are a key strategy to develop these LRLE since they cultivate the necessary conditions for language-rich learning.

The first condition for language-rich learning is a positive, safe and rich learning environment where learners feel comfortable and confident enough to take risks, express their emotions and engage deeply in the learning process. Inherently enjoyable and engaging, play-based learning provides a perfect platform for creating these secure, positive and rich spaces. It encourages children to explore, experiment and be creative. Through its socially interactive nature, play-based learning advances the development of positive and supportive relationships.

The second condition needed to create language-rich learning is enabling learners to engage with meaningful tasks. Play-based learning provides children with the autonomy to choose activities, materials and roles that appeal to them. It boosts imaginative and creative play, motivating children to create stories, solve problems and engage in pretend-play. Play often mimics real-world situations such as playing house, running a pretend store or engaging in doctor-patient role play, providing a meaningful context for language development. In play-based learning, tasks can be personalised to suit the individual needs and interests of each child.

A third condition required by language-rich learning environments is targeted support via interaction. Three ways to scaffold and support children are through rich language supply, real conversation and feedback and support. During play, teachers supply rich language by introducing new words, concepts and phrases that are relevant to the play scenarios children are engaging in. Play-based learning also encourages real conversations among learners as they participate in discussions, ask questions and share ideas related to their play scenarios. By asking clarifying questions, giving hints or implicitly correcting language while children are playing, teachers can provide feedback and support to children.

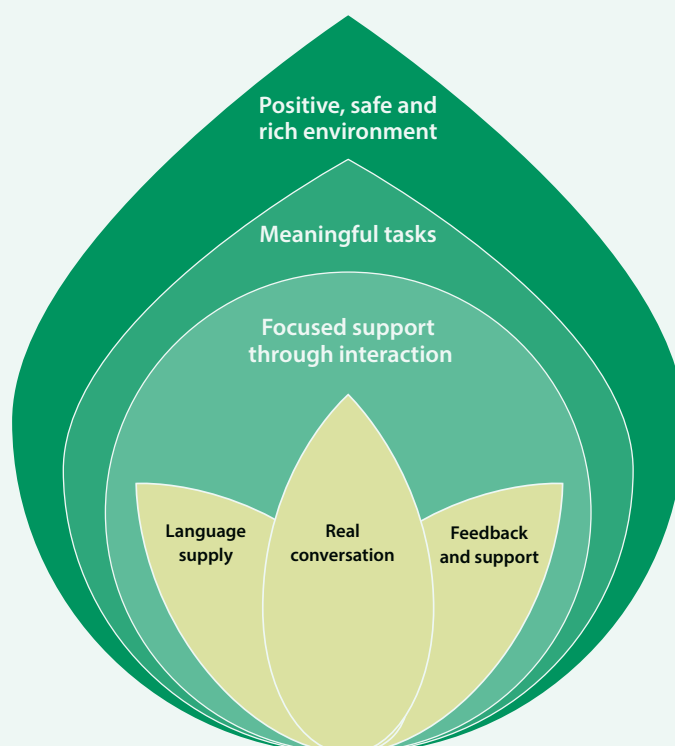


Figure 4: The conditions to create language-rich learning environments. Adapted by VVOB from the project 'Taalsterk' by VIVES University of Applied Sciences

Social Emotional Learning in Uganda

In **Uganda**, play-based learning also supports inclusive education by using SEL Boosters in a **Teaching at the Right Level project** for primary school learners in Adjumani, Uganda's largest refugee hosting district.

SEL Boosters are based on 'SEL Kernels', a concept developed by Harvard EASEL Labs to endorse the growth and advancement of learners' social and emotional skills. SEL Boosters are created by sourcing stories, games and songs from teachers and district education officials. These materials are then modified to include social and emotional challenges based on SEL Kernels principles.

Progressive education policies provide refugee learners with free access to the education system of the host community. While this creates many opportunities for inclusive education, it also poses important challenges for schools and educators. Many learners, both in refugee and host communities, struggle both academically and in terms of their mental health and well-being.

To address this challenge, the Ministry of Education and Sports, supported by VVOB and Harvard EASEL Labs, offers remedial classes to over-age-for-grade learners from both refugee and host communities. These classes combine Teaching at the Right Level literacy and numeracy activities with 'SEL Boosters'. These are play-based, age-appropriate, bite-sized activities that cultivate socio-emotional learning such as games, stories and role-play.

The activity 'Badu Badu', for instance, supports learners to reflect on their self-regulation and attention control skills by following verbal instructions from teachers rather than their movements. In 'Feeling Charades', a learner acts out an emotion using their face, hands or other parts of their body while the others need to guess which emotion it is. This activity enhances learners' emotional knowledge and expression skills.

Play-based Learning and Education for Social Transformation

Play-based learning plays a crucial role in education for social transformation. It champions an inclusive and engaging learning environment that encourages learners to collaborate, communicate and think critically. Through play, learners establish essential social and emotional skills such as empathy, teamwork and conflict resolution which are vital for building harmonious and equitable societies. Play-based learning can boost creativity and problem-solving, empowering students to address complex social issues and contribute to making positive change in their communities.

Gender-Transformative Pedagogy

One example of how play-based learning can contribute to education for social transformation is embodied by VVOB's Flagship Programme on gender-transformative pedagogy (GTP). GTP encompasses a range of teaching and learning approaches, methods and tools encouraging critical reflection and examination of gender stereotypes, norms and roles, with the aim of changing existing gendered power dynamics. This approach places a strong emphasis on play-based learning since it links up well with several key principles of GTP. Play-based learning builds learners' agency and provides opportunities for exploration, problem-solving and critical thinking, allowing them to develop their own ideas and beliefs around gender and the role it plays in society. Play-based learning nourishes collaborative learning, enabling multiple perspectives and valuing experiences and contributions of individuals from different genders, identities, cultures and backgrounds. Play and social interaction help children to develop empathy, respect and inclusivity. Play-based learning offers opportunities for children to express themselves and find their voices.





Climate Change Education in South Africa

Another example of how play-based learning can foster social transformation through education is represented by VVOB's **Keep it Cool (KIC) project** (2019-2022) which supported secondary schools across three provinces in **South Africa**, integrating climate change education (CCE) into school and classroom practice. The intervention consisted of a professional development trajectory for 200 in-service secondary school teachers with teacher training followed by sharing of knowledge and experiences in professional learning communities (PLCs). As a final assignment in this trajectory, teachers were tasked to design climate change education projects. These projects prompted students and communities to recognise locally relevant climate change challenges and to trial possible mitigation and adaptation strategies, reducing the impact and vulnerability of the community to climate change or increasing their resilience to future impacts. The projects were documented in attractive formats (e.g. showcase videos) and these materials are now used to also promote climate change education and environmental awareness amongst other educators, learners and communities outside the project.

Many of the projects were outdoor action-based, demonstrating characteristics of play-based learning. They included setting up vegetable gardens to generate produce as well as waste management initiatives focusing on sorting, recycling litter and composting organic waste. For the students, these projects were a fun and meaningful way to link climate science to their contexts and real-life experiences. They encouraged students to (literally) get their hands dirty, actively involving them in hands-on learning and pushing learners to continuously revise and explore new ideas. Collaboration and communication were at the heart of the KIC climate change projects, with students working together and sharing ideas both with their peers and members of their communities. Besides furthering students' awareness and building their climate change knowledge, the engaging and meaningful nature of these projects motivated and made them feel more capable of tackling urgent climate issues, enhancing their long-term commitment to environmental stewardship.



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About VVOB

VVOB – *education for development* is an international organisation with over 40 years' experience in strengthening the quality of education systems in Africa, Asia and South America in close partnership with ministries of education and their institutions. Research shows that, of all school-based factors, the quality of teaching and school leadership has the biggest impact on learning outcomes of learners. As such, the professional development of teachers and school leaders is VVOB's primary priority in ensuring quality education for all. By working closely with governments, research institutions, committed donors and national, regional and international networks and expertise partners, VVOB strives to maximise the sustainability and potential for upscaling of its initiatives.

VVOB Focus

Children and Youth

In pursuit of quality education, VVOB focuses on strengthening the professional development of teachers and the professional development of school leaders in the following subsectors:

- **Early childhood 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.

Flagships

Flagships are evidence-informed and scalable initiatives with a distinct regional and international ambition. VVOB's flagships structurally address persistent educational challenges through key efforts for equitable learning outcomes. These key efforts are:

- **Gender-transformative pedagogy**, to create learning environments where harmful gender stereotypes are challenged and addressed.
- **Effective school leadership**, to create the conditions for effective teaching and learning.
- **Skilling for sustainable futures**, to ensure young people leave school with high chances at securing decent work.

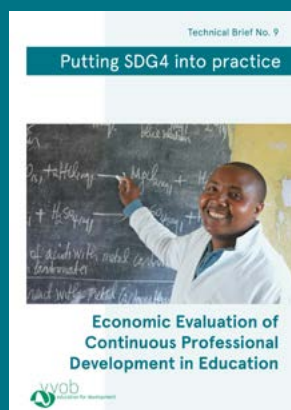
VVOB Expertise

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's partner countries. Formalised, longstanding partnerships with governments are the steadiest pathway towards scale and sustainability. For VVOB, working in partnership with ministries of education means:

- Offering structural and sustainable solutions to support and reinforce governments and national education authorities responsible for the initial education, induction and continuous professional development of teachers and school leaders.
- Offering practical and technical education expertise and support for processes through a wide range of in-person, remote or blended methodologies, from classical training and workshops to mentoring, coaching and peer learning.
- Ensuring that partners increasingly take the lead throughout projects to guarantee sustainability.

To facilitate learning and scaling of successful projects, VVOB invests in research and knowledge generation. Based on the evidence generated, VVOB engages governmental partners and stakeholders to influence policy and practice, and to mobilise governments towards ownership and sustainability for systems change.

'Putting SDG4 into practice' Technical Briefs



VVOB – *education for development*

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