CASE STUDY

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RIGHT TO PLAY

Play-Based Learning in Tanzania: From Policy to Practice

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Overview

This study showed that Right To Play's (RTP) play-based learning methodology had significant influence in the Tanzanian education system. Across all stakeholder groups and in documentary analysis, play-based learning was repeatedly praised as an effective approach to teaching and learning, for reasons including: student engagement, easing classroom management, improving academic performance and life skills. Despite the identification of challenges to full scale integration, these results are promising for the continued integration of RTP's play-based learning approaches in Tanzania and similar partner countries.

What Was the Purpose of this Study?

Very few studies consider the role of play-based learning at the centre of education policies. This study sought to better understand the influence of RTP's methodology on the integration of play-based learning into policy standards and curriculum in Tanzania, and the translation of policy into classroom practice. Many Ministries of Education (MOEs) mandate active, child centered learning in their education sector plans, curriculum etc., but face challenges in operationalizing these policies. In response, RTP currently supports the MoEs in nine countries[i] to further embed play-based learning into education systems and policies in order to apply the policy in the classroom. In Tanzania, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) switched to a competency-based curriculum in 2016 and determined that play-based learning was highly suited for this. RTP Tanzania supported the training of 16,129 pre-primary teachers in play-based learning in preparation for the roll-out of the new curriculum. Currently, RTP Tanzania supports the capacity building of teachers in 143 partner schools using a train-the trainer (ToT) model that engages MoEST staff. Teachers are also trained to provide support and advice to colleagues in their schools, as well as interested teachers in non-partner schools.

To better understand RTP's impact in the Tanzanian context, the following research questions were asked:

- What elements of the RTP philosophy and methods have been integrated into Tanzanian MoEST policy and curriculum?
- How is play-based policy integration between RTP and the Tanzanian MoEST related to play-based learning implementation?

What Does the Literature Say?

Much of what is known about play-based policy has come from studies of challenges by educators to improve play-based learning implementation. Lynch (2015), in her work on American educators' perspectives of play in the classroom, found that instead of increasing play-based learning to meet policy, educators actually decreased play times to meet academic curricular expectations.[ii] This tendency for decreased

play time in kindergarten has also been noted by Wood (2014), who argued that decreasing play to accommodate more direct-instruction time is not developmentally appropriate.[iii] Aubrey and Durmaz (2012) concluded that uncertainty about policy are likely due to tensions arising from educators' need to maintain play-based pedagogies and, at the same time, meet curriculum expectations and overall outcomes.[iv] A lack of clear definitions and strategies to support implementation has also been highlighted as contributing to the disconnect between policy and classroom practice (Hu, Fuentes, Wang, & Ye, 2014).[v]

There is also evidence that suggests that developed nations face substantial challenges in bridging the gap between play-based policy intentions and classroom practice (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000; Leggett & Ford, 2013; Lynch, 2015; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).[vi] Evidence also suggests that Tanzania faces difficulties synchronizing educational policy, planning and implementation outcomes among urban and rural pre-primary classrooms (Mtahabwa & Rao, 2010).[vii] So, it is reasonable to expect difficulties with bridging the gap between policy intention and implementation in Tanzania.

What Methods Were Used in the Study?

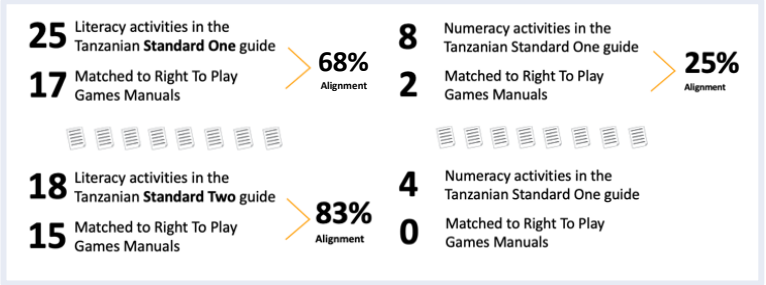
Phase one of the study focused on assessing the alignment between RTP and MoEST documents. In the classroom, the RTP play-based learning training manuals were compared to MoEST teacher manuals for pre-primary and primary standards (or grades). At the national level, RTP's play-based learning approach was compared to national MoEST policy. Analysis of play-based learning policy documents relied on a comparison of main sections, objectives and pedagogical messages.

Phase two focused on the relationship of policy integration to classroom practice. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted in May 2019 with teachers from partner schools and MoEST officials (including Head Teachers, Ward Education Officers, District Quality Assurers), in three regions of Tanzania: Dar Es Salaam, Morogoro and Mara.

What Were the Findings?

Results from the phase one document analysis revealed alignment of philosophy in three areas: (1) teacher training, autonomy, and empowerment, (2) supporting development, well-being, and inclusion through game play, and (3) structure of the games used in instruction.

A review of RTP and Tanzanian teacher guides also demonstrated alignment between the two parties' games for literacy instruction, with 68% of the games featured in Tanzania's Standard One teacher guide, and 83% of literacy games in their Standard Two guide drawing from RTP games. Numeracy games presented less considerable alignment, though still 25% of Standard One guides drew from RTP manuals. Furthermore, Reflect-Connect-Apply (RCA), RTP's own teaching and learning strategy, was adopted in the pre-primary and primary teacher manuals.



Phase two considered the perspectives of teachers and MoEST officials. Both groups reported that play-based learning improved learners' interest and retention. They also stated that play-based learning positively influenced learners' ability to remember class content. Teachers additionally cited mathematics learning as a component of play-based learning, which supported learners to remember number names and cardinality. Furthermore, both groups believed that play-based learning contributed to the development of life skills, especially relationship skills.

MoEST officials also noted the benefits of play-based learning to children's physical development, as well as benefits for teachers. They observed that play-based learning eased the classroom management burden from teachers, was easier than traditional instructional approaches. By using play-based learning teachers could more easily direct learning and when used in conjunction with RTP's RCA methodology, play-based learning was a powerful way of achieving curriculum targets.

With respect to challenges in implementing play-based learning, both groups perceived a need for follow-up training. Various structural/societal factors, infrastructural issues and environmental factors were also mentioned as potential hindering factors, such as class sizes and availability of resources. The study also found that teachers tended to rely on games and teacher-directed play, as opposed to using play-based learning as a broader child-centred pedagogy.

Factors that hinder or encourage the integration of play-based learning were also identified in the data from MoEST officials. Evidence for academic achievement and play-based learning as a teaching method, and regular communication and follow-up with teachers, were supporting factors for integration of play-based learning in teacher practice. Financial constraints limiting training opportunities, possibly negatively loaded sociocultural perspectives related to play, and lack of materials and safe space were hindrances.

What Do These Findings Tell Us?

This study demonstrated that the Tanzania MoEST and its teachers believe in the power of play. Across all stakeholder groups, and in the documentary analysis, play-based learning was repeatedly praised as an effective approach to teaching and learning. RTP's methodology had significant influence including adoption of RTP games and the use of RCA, and the teacher manual was found to be the most practical and efficient supporting document for teachers who do not interact with policy.

Challenges to implementing play-based policy in classroom practice also persist. While RTP partner schools receive regular follow up, others rely on the ToT model. This is more cost effective but less comprehensive. Socio-economic conditions, such as available space in the classroom, oversized classes and community buy-in, also pose barriers to play. Additionally, while the teacher manual is a practical tool that makes it easier to find activities that directly link to a curriculum outcome, such a manual may compromise the values of teacher autonomy, creativity and empowerment that RTP promotes. There also remains room for teachers and MoEST officials to move towards more child-directed and teacher guided play, though at this time teacher-directed play is the most comfortable entry point into play-based learning for teachers in Tanzania grappling with oversized classes.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In Tanzania and elsewhere, RTP aims to support governments to implement MoEST policies and priorities effectively, particularly in regards to play-based learning. Overall, this study validated the strategies that RTP has been using for play-based learning policy integration. The Policy Integration Strategies matrix (Table 1), which was developed through RTP's technical expertise and country experience beyond Tanzania, was used to analyse data from the study and the results validated the tool. Going forward, we see that RTP Tanzania's strategy of engaging with stakeholders at teacher level first to collect data and later share with government policymakers as evidence of effective programming should be reinforced in Tanzania and elsewhere to facilitate play-based learning policy integration. RTP Tanzania continues to respond to MoEST requests for support at national level with monitoring the implementation of the play-based approach in pre-primary and primary curriculum delivery. RTP global teams are currently exploring the potential for enhancing training content on guided play and playful integrated pedagogies with a view towards piloting in the next calendar year.

Key Thematic Action Areas	Table 1: Policy Integration Strategies			
	Resource Development	**Capacity Building**	**Curriculum Review**	**Policy Review**
Pre-service Teacher Training	• Develop and collect sample lesson plans • Support development of competency-based framework for teaching PBL	• Hold PBL workshops with tutors from teacher training institutions • Train/advocate for PBL with deans and leaders of institutions • Establish peer exchange and mentoring systems between teacher training colleges/universities	• Support for revision and incorporation of PBL into pre-service teacher training curriculum • Connect teacher training colleges/institutions with model schools and its curriculum (implementation)	• Embed PBL into the national government policy and/or certification requirements for teachers; as part of the basic requirements of particular teaching certifications, PBL principles can be included
In-Service Teacher Training	• Develop teacher manual with games mapped to curriculum outcomes • Develop and collect sample lesson plans • Support development of competency-based framework for teaching PBL	• Training of stakeholders in cascade training model including master trainers and teacher trainers, on PBL • Establish communities of practice and peer coaching/mentoring systems • Hold PBL workshops with tutors from teacher training institutions and other in-service training providers (public and private)	• Support for revision and incorporation of PBL into in-service teacher training curriculum • Connect teacher training colleges/institutions with model schools and its curriculum (implementation)	• Develop accreditation or certification recognized by MoE after completing CoTT/PBL training, or after in-service PBL training by any other institution • Connect training certification with career development and teacher status • Advocate for allocation of Government budget to PBL & in-service teacher training
Curriculum frameworks	• Review teacher subject manuals to integrate PBL • Align taxonomies (learning achievements measurement) with PBL methodologies and life skills measurement	• Train curriculum developers in MoE directorates on PBL • Where possible/ appropriate, support local curriculum developers on PBL and local traditions/languages	• Support for revision of national ECD, pre-school/kindergarten or primary curriculum to mandate PBL as a pedagogical method • Support for revision of subject specific curriculum for any one content area, to mandate PBL as a pedagogical method • Align taxonomies with the curriculum implementation methodology	• Have national curriculum policy documents reflect principles of PBL, language around child-centered and active learning
Teacher supervision and management	• Develop and strengthen the implementation of tools for teacher supervisors and district officials to use to monitor and observe teachers' application of PBL principles • Develop and/or contextualize coaching and mentoring guide for system-level adoption	• Training and capacity building of teacher mentors and supervisors in PBL, as well as coaching and mentoring support • Provide coaching and mentoring support to teacher mentors and supervisors	• Connect/circle back quality assurance approaches & instruments with the pre- and in-service teacher training curriculum	• Informing the monitoring and supervising (national internal and external quality assurance) policy for teachers to include PBL

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[i] Ghana, Jordan, Mali, Mozambique, Palestine, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Thailand.
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