

Playing for Hope

Dialogues on Play-Based Education—a South-African project

Wietske Boon

“It is uplifting to work in a global network, to address universal issues using resources that are available in my local and global my community.”

Abstract: *Play is fundamental to child development. Play foregoes language development and the achievement of fine and gross motor skills. Play is a medium through which we learn, regardless of age. The integral role of play-based activities on cognitive, language, emotional, social, and physical development is often underestimated. When age-appropriate play-based education is integrated into the curriculum, learners are more willing and able to participate in learning activities, which enhances understanding of new concepts and promotes inclusion and quality education.*

The South African project 'Dialogues on play-based education' aimed to raise awareness and broaden the knowledge of different role-players about play-based education. The project also provided attendees with the opportunity to discuss and share their experiences on various topics related to play-based education and to find practical solutions to the challenges they face. An online event was arranged, and although it had a low attendance rate, the feedback received on the presentations and dialogues indicated that the insights gained were invaluable

and influenced how attendees understand and integrate play-based education into activities, lessons, and future decision-making processes.

Keywords: *Development; Inclusion; Learning; Play-based Education; Quality Education*

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Motivation for the project

Worldwide, considerable emphasis is placed on the outputs of educational systems, e.g., reading, writing, and mathematics skills. Different countries' educational performances are assessed, putting pressure on systems to improve the educational output (Archer, 2017), which can lead to additional pressure on teachers and learners to present satisfactory results. In a quest to raise performance, there is a drive towards earlier formal education ("schoolification") to prepare preschool children for primary school learning (Bipath & Theron, 2020, p.227). A concern about early years "schoolification" is that children's brains are not ready for formal, logical reading and writing activities until age 7 (Piaget & Webb, 2008). Instead of driving early formal learning, if we implement play-based education effectively, even after learners turn 7 years old, we can lay an even stronger foundation for later learning (Annandale, 2019; Parker et al., 2022) by stimulating creativity and sensory learning. When the foundation of learning is solid, and learners have achieved the necessary early learning outcomes, skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics will improve in the higher grades.

Fig. 28: *Sensory learning*

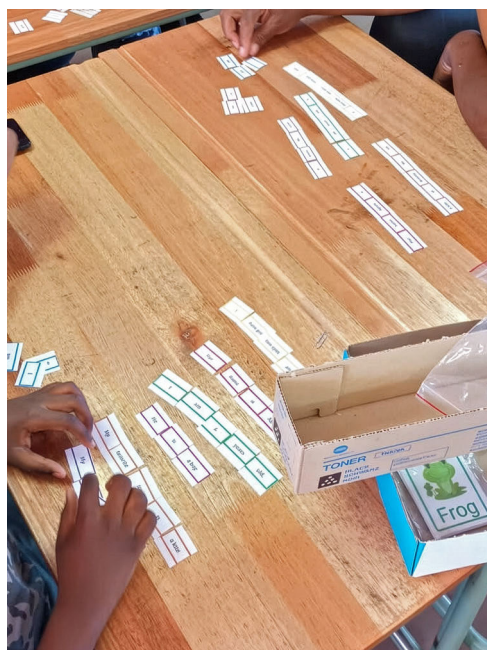


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Furthermore, factors such as neurodiversity, which affects 15 % to 20 % of the population (Brodey, 2022; Doyle, 2020), and differentiated learning styles, such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning, can pose challenges for quality education, well-being, and inclusion. When teaching learners from diverse backgrounds and with different learning needs, teachers often feel overwhelmed, and learners may feel excluded

from the curriculum. Play-based education can lift this burden by providing teachers with alternative teaching methods and tools, and learners with the opportunity to manipulate the learning apparatus and toys to suit their learning styles and the requirements of their sensory systems.

Fig. 29: Building sentences



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However, in many countries, the infrastructure of communities and learning environments does not allow for suitable teacher education, appropriate apparatus, games, and toys, or safe outdoor spaces for free or rough-and-tumble play (Aina & Bipath, 2022). This leads to lower-qual-

ity education, reduced well-being, and exclusion from the country's curriculum framework.

Through this project, we aimed to raise awareness and share knowledge about play-based education and to strengthen its implementation in learning environments. A curriculum and learning environment that caters to learners' needs and abilities promotes the quality of education. Lastly, if more learners can participate in the formal and informal learning activities through play, more learners can be included in the execution of the daily program, leading to a greater sense of well-being.

Dialogues on play-based education

As stated, this project aimed to raise awareness, provide knowledge, and identify opportunities for play-based education across different role-players and learning environments. The shared knowledge has the potential to make a significant impact if attendees transfer it to their family members, colleagues, students, learners, and communities.

Targeting individual schools would have made a significant impact on those identified schools and communities. By creating opportunities for more interested parties to participate, the event brought valuable knowledge to various learning environments, though it was less focused on specific community-based challenges. We opted for an event where knowledge could be shared, and challenges and ideas around play-based education could be discussed with as many people as possible, who were interested and able to attend. It was also considered that, through an online event, role-players without internet access would not be able to participate.

An online event saves attendees time and money and is much more accessible than a venue-bound event. Therefore, the event was presented via the Zoom platform, but we had limited space for up to one hundred guests. Invitations were circulated through the organizers' networks via e-mail and WhatsApp, and advertised on social media platforms, and were free to attend. Attendees were mostly South Africans, but registrations were also received from Namibia and European countries. The

duration of the event was four hours (9:00 to 13:00 SAST). The presenters are experts in their fields of education, and their topics were relevant to the event's theme. Through the presentations, the project organizers sought to include information applicable to all age groups in the educational system. Presentations included an introductory session on neurodiversity, different learning styles, sensory needs, socio-emotional development, and the role of play-based education in these developmental areas. A more in-depth presentation on learning and teaching styles guided attendees to their own teaching styles and to how learners in front of them gain information. This session was followed by a presentation on school readiness, age-appropriate teaching methods, and play-based education. *Care for Education* shared how teaching using the *LEGO Six Bricks* promotes quality education and wellness. Play-based education is not limited to children in a specific age group and can be applied in higher grades, higher education, and the workplace. Therefore, when children reach higher grades (from Grade 4, approximately 10 years of age), they can still enjoy the benefits of play-based education through robotics and technology offered by *Hands-on-Technologies*. The last was a dialogue session, in which attendees had the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, and challenges related to play-based education through breakout sessions aligned with the previously mentioned presentations. The highlights of those dialogues were shared during a feedback session in the main room. A summary of the key points from those dialogues, accompanied by articles from the presentations, was compiled into a booklet and shared via e-mail to attendees and registered interested parties who could not attend the event. The booklet was also made available on platforms such as LinkedIn and Slack.

Connection to the framework of GCED and SDGs

Play is universal. The benefits of play are immense. Although much research has been done on the connection between play and cognitive and developmental growth, play and play-based education have enjoyed renewed attention over the last few years. On 25 March 2024, the United

Nations adopted an “International Day of Play” to be held on June 11, 2024 (United Nations, 2024).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, play is essential for learning (SDG 4) and social and emotional well-being (SDG 3). Play can be regarded as a language in which children communicate and share their life experiences and emotions to make sense of the world around them. Through play, they can share their stories, learn to deal with different situations, establish new friendships, and foster old ones. Play lets in children, regardless of their gender or background, who may otherwise be left out (Brodey, 2022). When family members or teachers take part in these activities, they become a part of the child’s world, which communicates a sense of loving and belonging. When we communicate with children on their level through play, information becomes understandable in a “language” they have mastered. They can explore it, learn through trial and error in a safe environment, build on it, and improve their skills and understanding. With the proposed targets of the United Nations (n.d.) for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) in mind, the following are noted in terms of play-based education:

Play and tools for play-based education does not necessarily have to be costly. Games and toys can be made from natural sources or recyclable materials. Organizations such as Care for Education and Cotlands in South Africa provide training and materials to promote play-based education. Play-based education promotes literacy and numeracy skills by allowing children to name, count, add, group, build, and manipulate objects. They can expand their vocabulary and take part in conversations and role-play. All of these forego formal learning in the higher grades. Play-based education creates an inclusive learning environment in which children can participate in age-appropriate activities. Play-based activities can also be adjusted to meet the needs of learners with different abilities.

When a solid foundation is laid in the early years, lifelong learning can continue to be built on it. To achieve the above-mentioned play-based education, but not limited to, in early learning centers, teacher training is fundamental. Knowledge, insights, and challenges should be shared, discussed, and revisited to enable role-players, organizations,

and stakeholders to build on the groundwork that has already been done.

Lessons learned

Firstly, a team had to be put together: people willing to give their time and expertise to the project. It is evident through this project that some individuals and organizations are prepared to partner and take part in activities that promote local and global education.

The execution of the project was preceded by many brainstorming sessions before the final decision was made to host an online event. Online meetings made these sessions possible; otherwise, they would have been a challenge, as team members, including the GloCo team, are located far apart. Working within an online community brought knowledge and expertise together to execute this project.

Attendees from different countries participated in the event, thus reaching teachers from various learning environments. The project faced attendance challenges. Attendees had to register to receive the link to the online event. Although there was a high volume of registrations, attendance was low at approximately 36 %. The following reasons for the high number of registrations and low attendance were considered:

The event was free to attend. Thus, creating the possibility to register to secure a seat, but with no loss if they could not attend due to other responsibilities. If attendees had to pay a small fee to attend, they might have prioritized participation.

It is also understandable that other work or personal responsibilities, as well as crises, can take priority and lead to attendees withdrawing from the event at the last minute.

Incorrect email addresses on the registration form or spam filters can delay communication between organizers and attendees.

The platform could accommodate one hundred guests. At 100 registrations, the Google Form was closed to responses. If an unlimited number of guests could attend, more people may have registered. This might not have impacted the low attendance rate, but the number of attendees

might have been higher. In the future, frequent follow-up correspondence with attendees before an event will be implemented, providing a link for them to un-register if needed. Alternative contact details can be used, in conjunction with the primary e-mail addresses, to ensure on-time correspondence. The possibility of asking a small fee to secure their space might promote commitment to the event.

The dialogue sessions allowed attendees to share their knowledge, ideas, and challenges, as discussed in the breakaway sessions. It was evident that there is a need for affordable training opportunities, networking, reflecting, and the sharing of ideas. Furthermore, parents need to become more involved in their children's education and development. Parents should thus be included in the sharing of information and training opportunities. This will strengthen communities to share in the responsibility of educating the youth.

For further reading

To read more on play-based education and the Six-Bricks program, visit Care for Education: <https://www.carefored.co.za/>

Read more on learning through play by UNICEF and the Lego foundation: <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf>

Read more in different LEGO Education products for different age groups: <https://www.handsontech.co.za/>

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Erich Cloete: From Theory to Practice Parent-Child Centered Play-Based Education in South Africa

In response to the evolving dialogue surrounding play-based education and its potential benefits for learners facing significant academic and language barriers, Laerskool Westerlig, based in Pretoria, South Africa, has launched a pioneering trial. This trial aims to explore the effects of play-based education on a Grade 2 class, specifically focusing on learners who encounter substantial challenges in their academic and language development. By embracing this approach, Laerskool Westerlig seeks to uncover new insights into how play can be leveraged as a powerful tool to enhance learning outcomes and overcome barriers to education.

The decision to implement this trial underscores Laerskool Westerlig's commitment to providing an inclusive and effective educational environment for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or learning challenges. By adopting a play-based approach, the school hopes to tap into its students' inherent curiosity, creativity, and resilience, empowering them to engage with learning in a more meaningful and impactful way. This trial not only represents a bold step forward in educational methodology but also reflects Laerskool Westerlig's dedication to fostering holistic development and academic success among its learners.

The Departmental head and class teacher, Ms. Pienaar, initiated the program and invited 16 learners and their parents to the start of the program on Saturday, 9 March 2024. We wanted to involve the parents, as their involvement enhances academic performance, improves behavior, and fosters positive attitudes towards learning. It also strengthens the parent-child bond and creates a supportive environment for the child's overall development and well-being. It was further important for the school to coach parents during these sessions to assist their children at home with their homework cor-

rectly. The attendance recorded for this session was 81 %. This session was followed by two-hour sessions on 16 March 2024 and 6 April 2024, respectively. Although attendance declined largely due to parents' work obligations, the lower attendance rate provided an opportunity for more personalized feedback to parents on their child's progress during formal teaching.

The sessions included a variety of indoor and outdoor play activities to support gross motor skills, mathematics, critical thinking, phonics, and reading. Ropes, bean bags, clay boards, buckets, various board games with rules, and reading games where learners had to match words to pictures were used.

The school found that the biggest improvement, after these sessions, was in spatial awareness. We observed notable improvement in the learner's bookwork and handwriting. Some learners showed signs of improved concentration and better work completion, and we can conclude that we observed an approximate 50 % improvement among those who attended all three sessions. The learners who showed little or no improvement have either serious learning barriers or did not attend all the support classes.