

The Precious Fragility of the Youngest

Teacher Training to Cultivate a Playful Pedagogy in Early Learning Settings in South Africa

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“Engaging in GloCo has enabled us to cultivate a sense of interconnect-
edness, not only with the teachers
we work with but also within the
expansive network of people dedi-
cated to enhancing the well-being of
all children.”

Abstract: *Despite the crucial role of early childhood education, many practitioners in South Africa lack training, and numerous children lag in cognitive and physical development. This project investigated play and learning in South African early learning centers before and after providing training and resources for learning through play. Using the photovoice method and a qualitative design, we explored play and learning across five early learning centers, each with distinct settings, resources, and approaches to play. This initiative aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4, which aims to promote inclusive and equitable access to high-quality education. We found that training practitioners and providing them with resources improved classroom engagement and inclusivity. Our findings underscore the importance of quality training and ongoing support in promoting lifelong learning opportunities for both learners and practitioners.*

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education; Learning through Play; Sustainable Development Goals; Equitable Education; Equality Training*

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Project motivation

In South Africa, 1.6 million children under the age of 6 are enrolled in an Early Learning Programme (GROW Educare Centres, 2022). Early childhood education aims to deliver high-quality learning experiences that foster long-term development and benefits for both children and society. However, a recent Thrive by Five report (Giese et al., 2022:4) found that 57 % of South African children lag in cognitive and physical domains of learning. Their report assesses various areas, including gross and fine motor skills, numeracy, literacy, and cognition. Children's performance across these domains forms the basis for success in formal schooling and lifelong learning, with those who fall behind being less likely to reach their full potential (Giese et al., 2022:4).

Early childhood development practitioners play a crucial role in nurturing these learning experiences. They cultivate foundational skills and values necessary for addressing 21st-century challenges and promoting peace and sustainable growth (UNESCO, 2017:7). UNESCO's educational goals for sustainable development (2017:10) emphasize collaboration, critical thinking, self-awareness, and problem-solving as essential competencies for the 21st century. Research consistently demonstrates that play is the most effective way for children to develop these competencies and learning domains (UNICEF, 2021). Learning

through Play (LtP) stimulates cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills, fostering collaborative, creative, and curious thinkers.

However, South Africa faces significant gaps in professional skills development and teacher training. The latest ECD Census (2021), conducted by the Department of Education in partnership with the LEGO® Foundation, revealed that 22% of early learning practitioners lack training or qualifications. Additionally, 26 % have attended skills training programs, while the remaining practitioners have qualifications ranging from school level to university. Many early learning centers also struggle with limited access to age-appropriate educational materials and resources.

To address these gaps, Care for Education (CFE), a nonprofit educational training organization, partnered with the LEGO Foundation to provide training in learning through play (LTP) to children, schools, and organizations in need. Our training programmes aim to equip practitioners with the skills and resources necessary for effective early childhood education.

In early learning contexts, CFE trains practitioners to use the Play Box. The Play Box is a hands-on educational resource that engages children in playful learning, filled with a variety of new LEGO DUPLO bricks. These Play Box activities promote quality education through movement and active engagement, fostering holistic development in young learners. This training helps teachers create environments conducive to playful learning, offering children a diverse range of activities necessary for lifelong learning.

In 2023, Care for Education became a member of the Global Campus Online Project (GLOCO) network, participating in dialogue groups facilitating discussions among professionals from various global spaces. Collaborating with GLOCO and GEPARD (the Global Education Project Award) and supported by funding from GENE, Care for Education initiated this project to examine the impact of play and learning in South African early learning centers before and after practitioners receive LtP training using the Play Box. The study used the photovoice method and qualitative discussions to explore the implementation of play and learning across 4–6 early learning centers in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The research sought to gain insight into practitioners' attitudes, knowledge, and skills regarding LtP before and after undergoing skills development training. Ultimately, the project aimed to underscore the importance of implementing and investing in LtP and quality professional development within early learning settings.

Fig. 30: Learners playing and learning with the Play Box.



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Global Citizenship Education and Sustainable Development Goals

At Care for Education (CFE), our focus lies on SDG 4, which emphasizes quality education. The goal aims to ensure inclusive and equitable access to high-quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals, especially children. Its key objectives include eliminating gender disparities in education, enhancing the quality of education through improvements in learning environments and teaching methods, and fostering an inclusive educational environment that embraces diversity and promotes lifelong learning for children of all backgrounds.

Inclusivity is inherently intertwined with quality education as it seeks to cultivate a culture of respect, understanding, tolerance, diversity, and acceptance among all members of society. The SDGs and learning objectives were closely aligned with our research initiatives.

Care for Education advocates for experiential learning using concrete manipulatives to empower educators and children alike. Through promoting playful learning, we aim to inspire lifelong learning and equip learners with essential 21st-century skills.

Fig. 31: Golden Circle



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By providing Learning through Play (LtP) training, educational resources, and follow-up support for practitioners, Care For Education (CFE) aims to reach all children regardless of their context or circumstances. Through exploring play and learning before and after LT P training using the Play Box, our research aimed to underscore the important role of teacher training in promoting quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for both learners and practitioners.

CFE not only imparts knowledge on LtP implementation during training but also offers ongoing support to encourage practitioners to apply their newfound knowledge and sustain LtP practices. The research hoped to shed light on the application of this knowledge and the sustainability of LtP following teacher training.

The nature of our project also actively promotes Global Citizenship Education by empowering practitioners to enhance their teaching and learning practices and situating them within an interconnected network focused on quality education.

Project description

In this project, our objectives were to:

- Identify the current landscape of play and learning in early learning centers.
- Examine the impact of training in the LtP using Play Box on play and learning within these centers.
- Assess practitioners' attitudes, knowledge, and skills regarding LtP before and after training.

Through achieving these objectives, we hoped to:

- Emphasize the role of LtP in improving learner outcomes in the 21st century.
- Highlight LtP's contribution to lifelong learning for children, practitioners, and other stakeholders.

- Advocate for the pivotal role of teacher training and skills development in LEP for early learning practitioners.

Care for Education selected five diverse early learning centers, based on factors such as credibility and proximity to our offices in Olivedale, Johannesburg. These centers varied in terms of location (urban and rural), resources (under-resourced and well-resourced), and approach to play.

Fig. 32: Eighteen-month-old learner writing the number 2.



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After inviting these centers to participate in the research project, consent forms were obtained from both practitioners and parents. Care for Education visited the centers in June 2023 to explain the research

process thoroughly and conduct initial observations. Observation forms with indicators of playful learning were completed, and pictures of lessons were taken. Although some centers incorporated playful learning elements, many still used traditional methods, with young learners (some as young as 18 months old) sitting at desks and engaging in writing activities.

Fig. 33: Learners sitting on the carpet listening to their teacher read a story.



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Practitioners were then invited to Care for Education offices for training, and each practitioner received Play Boxes to implement in

their classrooms. Practitioners returned to their classrooms and soon began sharing images of their playful practices, revealing more laughter, movement, and engagement during lessons.

The project employed the photovoice method, which emphasizes active participation from community members in understanding and addressing challenges (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh, 2004:50). Early learning practitioners were central to the research process, providing insights into their evolving attitudes, knowledge, and skills regarding play-based learning. Their voices were recognized and valued, underscoring the significance of their contributions to the field of early childhood education.

Three months later, the research team revisited four of the centers. Sadly, one center in Thembisa had closed due to financial difficulties. Observation forms were completed during lesson observations, and practitioners engaged in individual conversations with the team, reflecting on their experiences before and after training. Looking at their pictures from before and after training, they shared how the training facilitated a shift towards a more playful approach, leading to improved engagement, learner-centered lessons, and greater inclusivity for learners with diverse learning styles.

“Normally, what we used to do was we would take whatever we had and just throw it there and say, ‘kids, you can play.’ But now, we engage. We do everything with them, and they like it. They say, ‘Teacher, look at my tower, it has balance ... look at the colors...’ We used to say they must do and you do another thing while you are looking at them, but now, whatever they do, it needs us to be there.”—Teacher from Fhulufhelo ECD, Soweto.

Fig. 34: Learners working together to build.



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Fig. 35: Learners engaged in free play on the carpet with their teacher.



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Lessons learned

Over the course of the project, we encountered some challenges but also gained valuable insights.

Challenges included

Difficulty arose in locating some early learning centers, particularly those in rural areas without physical addresses. At times, we had to park our car outside settlements and rely on locals to provide walking directions.

We encountered a *vetted location that turned out not to exist*, realizing this only upon arriving at a dilapidated building. Subsequently, we faced challenges in reaching the initial contact person.

We navigated around learners whose parents were *hesitant to give consent for their children to be photographed*. These learners had to be moved around to exclude them from appearing in the shots.

Encouraging practitioners to *consistently share high-quality pictures* and updates proved challenging.

Dealing with a *center unexpectedly dropping out* of the project posed a setback. Sadly, the center had to close due to financial struggles, which was a loss for the project because the center was enthusiastic, passionate, and playful.

A *research team member departing* from Care for Education necessitated restructuring our team to accommodate new responsibilities.

Instances arose in which principals attempted to present a curated image rather than allowing natural observations to occur.

However, through these challenges, we gained important learnings:

Practitioners demonstrate a *high level of receptiveness* to training and eagerly welcome resources and support visits. They take pleasure in showcasing their passion and work, eagerly highlighting the progress made with the provided training and resources.

Despite their dedication to their work, *practitioners often lack the training and resources needed to implement play-based learning*. While they aspire to deliver quality teaching and learning at their centers, they may not al-

ways possess the resources or knowledge to incorporate playful methods effectively.

Establishing trusting relationships is essential, as it helps create a supportive rather than judgmental environment to encourage practitioners to provide feedback and share their findings.

Some centers, situated in urban areas with more affluent learners and parents, may be better equipped with infrastructure and materials. In contrast, others in disadvantaged areas may struggle with lower fees and limited resources. However, *the setting and resources did not determine the playfulness of the centers or the practitioners*. Some centers, despite having fewer resources, exhibit a more playful approach than others.

Investing in quality training, resource provision, and follow-up support significantly affects teaching and learning outcomes and practitioners' attitudes toward playful learning.

For further reading

Homepage Care for Education: <https://www.carefored.co.za/>

Giese, Sonja et al. (2022). *Thrive by Five Index Report*, s.l.: s.n.

The Thrive by Five Index is South Africa's most extensive survey of early childhood development, aiming to determine whether learners attending Early Learning Programs (ELPs) are meeting developmental milestones. The 2021 index, the first in a series, serves as a baseline to monitor trends over time. Initiated by First National Bank and Innovation Edge, in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education, and supported by USAID and ECD Measure, the index provides crucial data on the developmental progress of preschool children aged 50–59 months across key areas of early learning, physical growth, and social-emotional functioning.

Heckman, James J. (2012). *Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy*. Heckman: The Economics of Human Potential, p.1–2.

In his summary, Professor Heckman argues that prioritizing investment in quality early childhood development for underprivileged children offers a good strategy for addressing societal deficits. He maintains that such investment yields major outcomes across the education, health, social, and economic domains, leading to increased revenue generation and reduced reliance on costly social expenditures.

Visser, Marieta et al. (2021). The Challenges Experienced by Practitioners from Under-Resourced Early Childhood Development Centres in South Africa: A Single Site Case Study. *South African Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 51(3), pp. 14–24.

Education is crucial for children's development, yet access to quality early childhood education remains a challenge in marginalized South African communities. This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by ECD practitioners and coordinators related to program quality. Six participants from an ECD organization were interviewed, and themes were identified through content analysis. Four main themes emerged, including the need for improved qualifications and resources.

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