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UNICEF Education Case Study

Integrating play-based learning throughout the early childhood education subsector in Nigeria April 2023

Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills. Play opportunities and environments that promote play, exploration, and hands-on learning are at the core of effective pre-primary programs. Children learn critical skills and develop as they play, not just setting the foundation for the development of critical social and emotional knowledge and skills but also developing skills in intellectual and physical realms as well. It is therefore imperative to integrate play into pre-primary education programmes and into the five *core functions* for effective pre-primary education, as well as into the *enabling environment*, a set of interrelated factors that affect the development of the core functions (Figure 1). Despite attention and efforts to improve the prevalence and quality of early childhood interventions and policy, there remains inequality in children’s access to high-quality pre-primary education. Learning through play (LTP) approaches present an opportunity to challenge this inequality and level the playing field for all children, including children from marginalized groups.

Across Africa, play has long been a key tool in children’s early socialization and development through songs, riddles, games, and more. This tradition of play as a tool for learning is often reflected in policy commitments in various countries. In Nigeria, play-based approaches have been adopted in early childhood education (ECE)¹ since 2015 and the pre-primary curriculum and teacher training tools have been revised accordingly. These play-based approaches have been contextualized to the country context using socially and culturally appropriate strategies, such as storytelling to stimulate early literacy and using locally sourced materials. The enabling environment for pre-primary education in Nigeria, with a focus on

¹ The terms ‘pre-primary education’ and ‘early childhood education’ are used interchangeably throughout this case study for readability.

learning through play and play-based approaches, as well as how these LTP approaches are integrated across the enabling environment and the core functions are highlighted below.



Figure 1. The enabling environment and core functions of an effective pre-primary subsector. For more information, please see the [Build to Last Conceptual Framework](#).

The enabling environment for ECE and LTP in Nigeria

Ministerial leadership. Determining which ministry, or ministries, oversee pre-primary education and whether there is a division of responsibilities among central and local administrative entities is important to ensure successful implementation of LTP approaches.

- In Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) has overall oversight for ECE and early childhood care development and education (ECCDE). The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), a specialized agency under the FME, manages basic education, under which ECE falls.
- The FME anchors the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development (2007), described below in “policies and legislation.”
- The FME and State Ministries of Education (SMOEs) hold the core policy mandate for education while the UBEC and State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) implement basic education programme, which includes pre-primary education.

Policies and legislation. It is critical to ensure that desired elements, such as LTP in the case of Nigeria, are clearly integrated into policies and legislation to ensure their successful implementation.

- Together, the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1977, revised 2013) and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004) mandate every public primary school to have a pre-primary school linkage to cater for children aged 3–5 years, with the aim of increasing school readiness and therefore enrollment and transition to primary school.
 - The NPE also specifically mentions that the main method of teaching at the pre-primary level is through play and that the curriculum of teacher education should be oriented to achieve this play-based learning.
- The National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development (2007) also emphasizes the need for a play-based environment with a focus on child stimulation through relevant educational materials and toys, to be provided at the home and community levels.
- Policies need to be articulated at the subnational levels as well. Since 2015, all 36 states as well as the Federal Capital Territory through the UBEC and State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) have adopted and institutionalized the LTP as the official pedagogical approach for ECE which was initially described in the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development (2007).

Public demand. There is a need of increasing awareness of the importance and benefits of LTP among caregivers and families to get their buy-in and facilitate LTP application.

- Public demand for pre-primary education remains low, with considerable differences in pre-primary participation rates between urban and rural areas, rich and poor families, and thriving and deprived regions of the country. Data from the 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) shows that the North West and North East have the lowest rates (12.8% and 11.9%, respectively), with ongoing insecurity continuing to threaten access to early learning, development, and nurturing care.
- Scoping studies are useful to help identify levels of and ways to increase public demand as well. A scoping study conducted in 2022 as part of a GPE-KIX project² found that there was low LTP knowledge and awareness for parents to encourage uptake.

Financing. Adequate public investment is important. Historically, however, public financing for pre-primary is the smallest percentage of education sector budget, so there is often a need to coordinate with other available funding sources.

² In 2021, GPE-KIX funded a project titled “Promoting positive early learning outcomes through strengthened capacity in learning through play: Evidence from Nigeria, the Gambia, and Kenya” which began in 2022. This project will generate evidence on how to build capacity of the ECE workforce on play-based approaches to enhance school readiness.

- Most of the support to ECE in Nigeria is from UNICEF, which has supported the development of the LTP model, development and revision of the ECE policies and curriculum, and building workforce capacity and the quality assurance systems. The World Bank and UNESCO have also provided funding for early childhood development.
- An investment case for ECE was developed in 2021, which demonstrates the impact, or cost-effectiveness, of ECE in Nigeria. This investment case is being leveraged in a country-wide advocacy program to increase government stakeholder's understanding of and commitment for financing the ECE subsector in order to increase domestic education financing for ECE.

Integration of LTP across the Core Functions in Nigeria

Planning and budgeting. Implementation of play-based approaches need to be taken into consideration in national and subnational workplans, including ensuring adequate budgeting.

- In 2013, Guidelines for Implementing the National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development were produced by the FME, with technical support from UNICEF. This guide aims to support all relevant stakeholders in the ECD sector, including private and public partners, to ensure alignment between the policy and its implementation.
- A national roadmap for implementing ECCDE, which covers up to the pre-primary years, was finalized in 2022. A roadmap was determined necessary to make as early childhood development is holistic, multidimensional, and intersectoral. Demonstrating the government's commitment to play-based approaches in early learning, all elements of the roadmap are aligned with principles of learning through play. The roadmap will also reinforce efforts to reduce the number of out-of-school children and seek to elicit the attention of ministries, parastatals, and local and international development partners to start efforts to promote ECD in Nigeria.

Curriculum implementation. Play-based learning approaches, such as those prioritized in Nigeria, helps to equip children with holistic skills, encompassing foundational literacy and numeracy skills as well as broader socio-emotional, creative, and physical skills, that will prepare them to successfully transition to primary education.

- From 2016, UNICEF supported the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) to begin the review of the One-Year Pre-Primary Education Curriculum to incorporate a play-based approach, with a greater emphasis on learners leading in their learning. This revised curriculum focuses specifically on the use of play based on Reggio Emilia and other child-centered approaches, valuing the child, parents, and environment as important contributors to the teaching and learning process. The curriculum emphasizes the use of low or no cost locally made and culturally appropriate materials in the classroom.
 - The process began with an independent review by an international consultant knowledgeable about ECE curriculum, development, and implementation, with reference to emerging issues in education, both globally and locally. This initial revision was then presented to a team of curriculum experts in Nigeria, comprised of academic and policymakers.
 - This was then followed by the writing / actual curriculum development process which was pilot tested across the six geopolitical zones in 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic put the pilot testing process on hold, it was finalised in 2021. The results from the pilot testing showed significant improvements in children's learning. By November 2021, the final draft of the revised curriculum was presented for validation by a wide range of

stakeholders. The revised curriculum was further benchmarked against global standards in November 2022. The curriculum was found to be of high standards.

When developing a new curriculum (or revising an existing curriculum), there may be other corresponding elements that also need to be updated to support implementation and scaling, such as teacher's guides, pedagogical inspector tools, etc. The teacher's guide to support the curriculum's implementation is currently being developed.

- In Nigeria, in addition to developing new teacher's guides, teacher trainer guides, and associated handouts, the National Minimum Standards for Pre-Service Teachers were adapted for LTP in within teacher training colleges.

Workforce development. Pre-primary teachers and other key personnel should have the essential competencies, training, and support required to promote play-based approaches in the classroom.

- *Official documents related to workforce development.* The government has aligned pre-service and in-service teacher education curricula with the LTP approach by implementing the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) National Minimum Standards for Pre-Service Teachers at the Colleges of Education (COEs) across the country. This process of alignment was done through workshops with key experts drawn from the curriculum development department, NERDC, National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), FME, and UBEC.
- *Capacity building of teachers.* Through capacity building of pre-service teacher educators in the COEs and other teacher training institutions on LTP via workshops and trial testing at the school level, the government aims to develop a critical mass of trainers to support the ongoing training and continuous professional development of pre- and in-service early childhood educators and school leaders.
 - As mentioned in the “policies and legislation” section, these processes are institutionalized and being led by the UBEC at the national level and by SUBEBs at the state level.
 - Teachers are being supported to develop teaching and learning materials using locally available materials by the National Teachers Institute (NTI) and UNICEF.
 - Efforts are also being made towards the professionalism of ECE teachers by working with the Teacher's Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN)³. The TRCN is a professional agency for licensing of teachers certified to practice. The provision of ECE requires the support of professional teachers with basic requisite skills to teach.
- *Ongoing work.* As mentioned in the curriculum implementation section, above, a teacher's guide for the newly revised One Year Pre-Primary School Education Curriculum is currently being developed by the FME, NCCE, UBEC, NERDC, and COEs.

Family and community engagement. Ensuring that families and communities are engaged in play-based approaches can help further support children's learning and development.

- At the local level, UNICEF has supported the establishment and operation of School-Based Management Committees (SMBCs), which aim to increase parental and community engagement in pre-primary education and to strengthen linkages across schools, families, and communities. SMBCs, as government-recognised school-based structures, support the whole school

³ The Teacher's Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) is an agency of the FME and is responsible for: 1) the registration and licensing of qualified teachers; and 2) accreditation, monitoring, and supervision of the courses and programmes of teacher training institutions in Nigeria.

development plan by mobilizing resources for school improvement and working with parents at the community level to support the enrolment of children in school, including pre-primary, and improving attendance.

- Some recommendations to better strengthen the capacity of both parents and communities to support LTP were to make parents aware of the need to engage their children in LTP and, in the case of communities, to fund community symposia, functional education centres and recreational parks, sporting events, and guidance and counseling centres.
- Parental engagement resources were developed in 2022 directly linked to play-based curriculum and are being deployed to engage families and communities in play-based approaches to learning.

Quality assurance. A coherent framework for monitoring and quality assurance of pre-primary education including play-based approaches should be in place and quality monitoring should be used to support continuing improvements in both policy and practice.

- A quality assurance framework and tools for monitoring ECE teachers' practices and for providing mentoring have been developed. Programme experts and officers from relevant government departments and ministries (quality assurance, basic education) and academia (ECD experts from universities and COEs, NGOs, etc) were pulled together at a workshop to develop the tools for monitoring teachers based on LTP and the revised curriculum.
- State teams have further supported this transition to play-based approaches by using these tools during scheduled school visits to ensure alignment with quality standards. Education quality assurance officers and school support officers (SSOs) have received training to implement the play-based framework and tools across states. SSOs provide supportive supervision, mentorship and oversight. Specifically, one of the areas in which they assess the quality of pre-primary education is play-based pedagogy. In piloting the LTP approach in 2018, the use of SSOs was key to supporting the adoption of LTP approaches⁴.

⁴ For more information about how SSOs and other supportive supervision practices enhance play-based learning in Nigeria, please see the following UNICEF case study: Enhancing play-based learning through supportive supervision.