

Box 4**How play-based curricula and pedagogies can enhance the learning of foundational skills (Ghana)**

Ghana has implemented two years of free, compulsory kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds in public schools across the country since 2008. Despite impressive gains in access to pre-primary education, equal gains have not yet been achieved in quality. Critically, almost 80% of children in Ghana still do not acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills by the end of primary school (UNESCO, 2022c).

To address these challenges in foundational learning, in 2019 Ghana introduced a new standards-based kindergarten curriculum that spelled out play-based and child-centred pedagogy. The previous curriculum had not explicitly highlighted play-based pedagogy and was delivered in a more traditional teacher-centred and rote-based approach. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, an agency under the Ministry of Education, was tasked with developing the new curriculum, supported by a team of local and international practitioners and experts.

Under the new curriculum, a play-based and child-centred approach to learning is promoted. The curriculum includes four main learning areas: Literacy, Numeracy, Creative Arts and Our World/Our People. The curriculum places significant emphasis on the development of literacy skills and includes more learning indicators on this skill than on the other three areas of learning. The curriculum includes daily plans for teachers that suggest ways to organize a class for different types of learning – whole group, small group, indoor play activities or outdoor play activities. This allows for active learning that is child-centred while also promoting the development of social-emotional skills through activities that engage children to work with others, learn to take turns in games or negotiate roles in play. Teachers are also provided with examples for how to set up learning and activity centres around the classroom (e.g. shopping centre, construction centre, book centre, etc.) that encourage imaginative and pretend play. These centres allow children to choose activities of interest in which they can engage with their peers or play as an individual.

While this detailed play-based kindergarten curriculum is now in place in Ghana, the vast majority of teachers still lack training in this play-based pedagogy, and therefore have not yet been able either to transform their classrooms into play-based learning environments or to transition to positive behaviour management approaches. To address the skills shortage, the Ministry of Education partnered with Sabre Education to implement and assess a teacher training intervention on the new play-based curriculum and pedagogy.

The training model was implemented across three terms of one academic year. The training workshops delivered to teachers move beyond theory to exposing teachers to what play-based learning feels like: they experience play-based activities themselves. This deepens teachers' understanding and interest in enacting play-based learning in their own classrooms. The training also highlights for teachers the impact of a positive learning environment on child development and the negative effects of corporal punishment (which traditionally has included the use of the cane). Teachers are provided with specific examples of positive behaviour management techniques and are given opportunities to role-play them with their fellow teachers in the training workshops. The training also supports teachers to make low-cost or no-cost Teaching & Learning Materials (TLMs) out of local items for their classrooms.

Importantly, teachers are also trained in how to assess each child's developmental progress across five foundational skill areas: Oral Language (e.g. the child can express his/her feelings and ideas), Early Reading (e.g. the child listens to stories and is able to respond to basic questions such as Where? When? and Who?), Writing (e.g. the child is beginning to write letters of the alphabet such as their own name without copying), Numeracy (e.g. the child can classify objects and count the number in each category) and Psychosocial Skills (e.g. the child works and plays well with others in a group and mostly follows rules of the games). Each child's development is assessed throughout the year by the teacher on a continuum from "Developing" to "Achieved" to "Mastered", replacing an end of year exam for kindergarten children.

The Sabre teacher training model was implemented across all public kindergarten schools in six districts in Ghana's Eastern Region. A recent independent evaluation of the teachers who were trained to implement the play-based curriculum shows impressive results:

- 75% of learners in intervention schools achieved target numeracy and literacy skills compared to 27% (numeracy) and 41% (literacy) in non-intervention schools
- 71% of learners in intervention schools had developed their psychosocial skills appropriately compared to 50% in non-intervention schools
- 71% of teachers in intervention schools performed considerably better than 39% of teachers in non-intervention schools in seven core areas (planning, teaching methodology, learner engagement and attitude, assessing learning and attainment, classroom/behaviour management, learning environment and teacher attitude).

The Ministry of Education now aims to scale this evidenced-based approach and play-based training model to all 48,000 public school kindergarten teachers nationwide, across all 261 districts, starting in 2024–2025. To make this ambition a reality, Sabre Education is partnering with Right To Play and Innovations for Poverty Action in providing technical assistance to the government. This scale plan is expected to transform learning outcomes for 1.2 million kindergarten children across the country, supporting Ghana to accelerate achievement of SDG Target 4.2.

Source: Sabre Education. <https://sabre.education/>