



RIGHT TO PLAY
PROTECT. EDUCATE. EMPOWER.

Sierra Leone Play-based Learning Context Study

Report of Findings

- April 2023 -

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Acronyms

ECD – Early Childhood Development

FGD – Focus group discussion

KII – Key informant interview

MBSSE – Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education

NGO – Non-governmental organization

PBL – Play-based learning

SQAO – School Quality Assurance Officer

TA – Technical Assistance

TSC – Teacher Service Commission

WASH – Water, sanitation, and hygiene

Executive Summary

The technical assistance (TA) partnership between the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and Right To Play, along with BRAC International, seeks to support the national education priority of improving learning outcomes in Sierra Leonean schools. The focus of the partnership is on strengthening play-based learning (PBL) for foundational learning in lower primary classrooms, with child-centred learning and skilled teachers at the core. The approach focuses on creating impact and sustainable change at the education systems level, and building capacities of teachers and other district, school, and community stakeholders at the classroom level. Activities related to this TA centre on five key pillars of work: Ministerial Leadership, Teaching and Learning Materials, Teacher Professional Development, Community Engagement, and Quality Assurance. Teaching and learning materials, play facilitation skills, as well as community and family partnerships in PBL are emphasized to deliver curricular learning objectives in child-friendly and stimulating classroom environments.

This context study aimed to support the development of contextually relevant and easily integrated activities and tools by understanding the status of play in the teaching and learning process of early primary grades 1-3 and in communities. Findings from this context study are being used as evidence to guide and inform subsequent play-based approaches and intervention strategies and teacher training initiatives. Teachers, head teachers, and community participated in key informant interviews and focus group discussions on their perspectives of children's play and PBL in and outside the classroom, and teachers offered a glimpse into their classrooms through observation visits.

Findings from this study show that, overall, perspectives of PBL were limited to the social and emotional benefits and outdoor environments. A holistic perspective that includes academic learning in indoor settings, like classrooms, was limited in both perspectives and classroom practice, as teachers tended to lead in-classroom play in more structured and teacher-centered ways with infrequent connections between content, learning objectives, and play.

To integrate more holistic play perspectives and practice across schools and communities, awareness-raising efforts on the importance of play with teachers, headteachers, and community members, among others, is necessary. This should be done in hopes of seeing increased use and value around play-based learning in and outside of school. As part of these overall efforts, government and local and/or international partner investment to support ministerial coordination, engagement of community, and most especially increased training and support, through teacher professional development and quality assurance mechanisms, is critical. This report concludes with a series of recommendations that these TA efforts and the MBSSE can use to support the integration of PBL into Sierra Leone's early primary education system.

Technical Assistance Partnership with Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Sierra Leone

Summary Overview

The technical assistance (TA) partnership between the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and Right To Play, focusing on primary education, seeks to support the national education priority of improving learning outcomes by strengthening play-based learning (PBL) in schools in Sierra Leone. The partnership also includes BRAC, who are focusing on early childhood development/education.

The partnership was designed to respond to the national education priorities, as articulated in the Education Sector Plan. The focus of the partnership is foundational learning, including literacy and numeracy, at lower primary level, with the child at the centre of a play-based learning approach driven by teachers who have been trained and equipped with teaching and learning materials and play facilitation skills to deliver the curriculum learning objectives. There is also an emphasis on creating child-friendly and stimulating classroom environments where play and learning can take place as well as engagement with communities and families as partners in play-based learning.

Context

The TA programme is guided by the national vision on teaching and learning as identified in the National Curriculum Framework and Guidelines for Basic Education, 2020. Play Based Learning is considered by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education as one of the approaches which can help unlock the potential of teachers to deliver the curriculum and place children at the centre of learning as envisaged by the education sector plan. According to the National Curriculum Framework, in class 1 – 3 the focus is on “play-based” learning and “learning how to learn”. According to the National Curriculum Framework (page 30), the teacher is a Facilitator of Learning outlining that teachers can no longer simply be transmitters of knowledge, but must help students to understand, value, and act on what they learn. A Facilitator of Learning will help learners to develop inquisitive minds and critical and creative thinking processes, as well as problem-solving skills to deal with everyday realities and this ambition for the sector is at the heart of Play Based Learning.

The Right To Play technical assistance programme is centrally situated within these education sector reforms and priorities. Sierra Leone has carried out a comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum for pre-primary and early childhood, basic education and senior secondary education, and civic education by applying a 5Cs framework, Comprehension, Critical Thinking, Computational Thinking, Creative Thinking, and Civic Education, as essential learning elements that are nurtured and developed in student learning across the new curriculum. The new curricula were created around a learner-centered approach aimed at empowering students to make choices and embrace the joy of learning (MBSSE, 2022, pp. 4).

The Right to Play programme initially focuses on three core subject areas of lower primary, aligned to this vision: Mathematics (Numeracy), English (Literacy) and Civic Education, where teachers will be supported with playful pedagogical skills and PBL lesson plans and materials to deliver the curriculum learning objectives and to support learners to develop creativity and critical thinking skills.

The partnership with BRAC, who are focusing on pre-primary education, is essential to achieving results at the lower primary level, taking into account the need for a smooth transition from pre-primary to the early grades of primary. Many children, especially those identified in the Sierra Leone Radical Inclusion policy, start school without being “ready-to-learn,” in part because they have not benefited from the one year of pre-primary education through the Integrated Early Childhood Development (MBSSE, 2022, pp. 8). Parental and community engagement within the TA programme design is vital in supporting children’s readiness to learn and to participate successfully in play-based learning activities.

Impact of our work

As part of this technical assistance partnership, Right To Play and the MBSSE organized an induction workshop from 17-19 October 2022. The Play-based Learning Induction Workshop strengthened the understanding of PBL and its relevance and application in improving the quality of education at the lower primary education among key personnel in the MBSSE of Sierra Leone, and other relevant education stakeholders.

During the induction workshop, the overall results and activities of the technical assistance partnership were examined and education stakeholders advised on the strategic direction and specific activities required to strengthen play based learning at lower primary education. Below are the five pillars of the work plan:

The Five Pillars of the Work Plan				
Ministerial Leadership	Teaching and Learning Materials	Teacher Professional Development	Community Engagement	Quality Assurance
MBSSE has improved capacity to achieve holistic development goals in primary education through the integration of play-based learning.	Teachers in the pilot schools have improved access to play-based curriculum implementation materials and teaching and learning materials.	Teachers in pilot schools have capacity and tools to integrate play-based learning into their lesson plans. Core group of trainers from national and District level have capacity to scale up play-based learning.	Parents and community members in pilot schools have knowledge to support play-based learning.	Standards and processes for monitoring and assessing playful learning and environments are proposed for inclusion in the QA system.

The programme is working directly with pilot schools in two Districts - Port Loko and Bo – in coordination with BRAC. This piloting includes trialing the PBL materials being developed as well as the teacher training and orientation with community members, which will inform a future scale up of PBL.

The Technical Assistance programme, however, has a larger intent to impact the education system and build capacity at key levels within MBSSE to support a future scale up, detailed as follows:

- Development and dissemination of a Play Context Study, to provide MBSEE with an accurate picture and analysis of the current practice and capacities at the school level in implementing PBL, to inform sector planning;
- Induction Workshop with 30-40 MBSSE staff and education stakeholders to strengthen their understanding of and commitment to PBL within the Sierra Leone context;
- Inter-Ministerial learning exchange in Ghana (January 2023) for key MBSSE staff to deepen their knowledge of PBL in practice;
- Development of PBL lesson plans which are linked to the National Curriculum of early primary grades and which support the delivery of expected learning outcomes across three targeted subject areas: Mathematics (numeracy), English (literacy) and civic education, with an accompanying teacher training guide/manual, which can be used for any pre or in-service teacher training programmes;
- Development of a group of trainers on PBL, targeting key education officials at the national and District level – School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAQO); Teacher Service Commission (TSC) District staff; Teacher Training Institute Lecturers/Tutors in training. These trainers will be deployed to train teachers and head teachers at the pilot schools but will also be a skilled resource for the education sector to roll out PBL capacities to a larger target group.
- The implementation approach within the work plan envisages working closely with focal points and focal units within MBSSE for each pillar. This approach further builds the capacity and ownership of key MBSSE policy makers in PBL.

Purpose of the research

The Play Based Learning Context study is geared towards understanding the status of play in the teaching and learning process of early primary grades across schools and in various cultural settings in Sierra Leone. Findings from this context study will be used as evidence to guide and inform subsequent play-based approaches and intervention strategies for schools and communities in Sierra Leone, as well as to support targeted teacher training initiatives.

Literature Review on Play-Based Learning

This desk review examines literature on education and play, paying close attention to discussion on academic learning and development using play, and reports and policy documents from Sierra Leone, as well as at the global level.

Definitions

Evidence on childhood development refers to the holistic growth and well-being of children between aged 0-8 across the physical, social-emotional, cognitive, language and self-regulation domains of development (MBSSE, 2021). Supporting children's development through supportive and synchronized systems has been well established as a critical foundation for sustainable human capital, economic and societal outcomes and is dependent on an integrated framework of multi-sectoral services. These systems include health, nutrition, education, social protection, hygiene, and responsive caregiving. Global economic analyses further outline those investments in child development initiatives yield high returns (MBSSE, 2021). Play is thought to be integral to childhood development, with especially clear connections to health and physical activity, though defining it for purposes in the classroom has been a challenging task for researchers and practitioners (Burghardt, 2011). Despite this challenge, and though some see play as a mostly physical activity, those with more progressive dispositions on play argue that it could be stimulating, educative and contribute to the overall development of children. Educators and other experts generally agree that play is flexible, freely chosen by children, active, fun, often open-ended (i.e., without a specific goal or expectation in mind), pleasurable, and creative (Ashiabi, 2007; Brown & Cozad, 2013; Hassinger-Das et al., 2016; Sturges, 2003).

Types of play

Children's play could be divided into many types. These categorizations often speak to considerations about whether they are structured or unstructured, though in the larger scheme of things all play may be discerned as serving some developmental purpose (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013; Hassinger-Das et al., 2016, pp. 47). When used for pedagogical purposes, other groupings of types of play emphasize those where children are in control, those where adults are in control, and a number of types between these two ends of this spectrum of types of play. (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh, et al., 2017). In line with these categorizations, types of pedagogical play could include collaborative play, inquiry play, adult guided play, and free play.

Value of play in children's development

Play contributes significantly to children's development by promoting cognitive and social development and supporting children's exploration and assimilation to the outside world, for example (Piaget, 1962). Play also builds children's learning dispositions; among them are verbal and non-verbal communication skills social-emotional capacities (e.g., making friends, sharing, experiencing and understanding emotions, etc.), and reasoning and problem-solving skills

(Brooker et al., 2014; Whittaker & McMullen, 2014). Play is also especially significant in promoting creativity and artistic dispositions amongst children (Hestenes & Carroll 2000). It enhances children's abilities to imagine and to memorise, and these skills are important props for thinking about the past, present and future (Klein et al., 2003). In more clinical settings, play has also been used as a form of therapy in concert with other interventions to support more significant learning and developmental needs (Bray & Cooper, 2007; Schaefer & Drewes, 2015). The literature is also replete with assertions that PBL is an effective pedagogical tool for the development of children's emotional, social, intellectual, and physical well-being, as well as way to equip competences related to life-skills (e.g., Larsen, et al., 2023; Zosh et al., 2017). There is continually increasing evidence that indicates that PBL is more effective than direct instruction at developing skills (Han et al., 2010; Stipek et al., 1995). In several countries, research on the benefits of play have influenced curricular and pedagogical policies and activities. Those that argue in favour of PBL in classroom settings often describe developmental appropriateness, (e.g., Wood, 2014), and child-centredness, (e.g., Pyle & Danniels, 2016), as key factors. While PBL incorporates many of the same fundamental features of play as described above (such as being fun, actively engaging, and meaningful to the player), the inclusion of learning fundamentally differentiates PBL from play. Exactly what is most effectively learned, however, is actively debated between researchers and PBL practitioners (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Four distinct groups emerge to characterize this debate:

1. Academic learning through play
2. Developmental learning through play
3. Combining academic and developmental learning through play
4. Learning as a separate activity from play.

Academic learning through play. There is a great deal of existing research to support the belief that children learn academic skills through play. There is support for learning mathematics skills through play (Bergen, 2009). Siegler and Ramani (2009), for example, introduced playful games related to learning number sense (e.g. counting) and found significant gains after only one hour of play. Others have noted effectiveness of PBL for supporting geometric knowledge (e.g., Fisher et al., 2013), spatial skills (e.g., Casey et al., 2008), and logical thinking (e.g., Kamii, 2014). Play-based mathematics learning is believed to be effective primarily because children actively explore concepts, test theories, and use constructive materials (e.g., using blocks as manipulatives; Sarama & Clements, 2009).

Similar to mathematics, there is evidence supporting use of PBL for literacy learning. Roskos and Christie (2011), prominent researchers of literacy development through play, argue for a play-literacy nexus where play, language, and early literacy behaviours intersect. In play environments literacy materials encourage exposure to print (i.e. print awareness), children engage in dramatic play (i.e. oral language and narrative development, reading comprehension),

and play activities encourage cognitive-linguistic development (i.e. phonological awareness, vocabulary). Vukelich (1994), for example, argues for play in print-enriched settings offering opportunities for children to make associations between print materials and their understandings of those print materials. Pyle and colleagues (2018) reported that children who learn in integrated play environments are more likely to engage in literacy-play (e.g. reading books, drawing, writing). A substantial body of evidence linking reading and play exists and this has been an active research focus since the mid-1970's (e.g., see Wolfgang, 1974, for an early discussion).

Developmental learning through play. Although the term developmental learning is described in various ways it is used here to mean growth in general cognitive skills, social-emotional skills, and self-regulation (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). Ghafouri and Wien (2005) describe play as an “emotional landscape”, where children can develop a social competence to interact as “we” rather than “I.” Play has been linked to such cognitive skills as memory and imagination; prominent components of executive function (Carlson & White, 2013). Playful games and dramatic play provide opportunities for children to practice following rules which encourages prosocial development of self-regulation skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2008). Sobo (2014) calls attention to the way play encourages children to move, physically and mentally, and encourages healthy development of sensory-motor and flexible thinking into adulthood. Studies have also discussed how play supports successful school adjustment in kindergarten (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002), and improved social skills (e.g., cooperative play Andrews, 2015).

Combined academic and social-emotional learning. Since the early 2000's, a growing number of researchers have advocated for a more holistic definition of PBL by combining play with both academic and developmental learning. (Jensen, et al., 2019a; Jensen, et al., 2019b). This view does not favour one perspective over the other but rather supports a more synergistic view of play, learning and development throughout childhood. In practice, however, educators often fall into a more familiar practice of withdrawing students to directly teach necessary academic concepts (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Learning separately from play. This view holds that learning is what happens outside of play periods and is only effective with explicit direction from educators. In other words, play should be left as an entirely child-directed endeavour (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). Elkind (2003), for example, argues that children are biologically hardwired to play and the only intent of play is to be pleasurable for the player. Elkind does not discredit those who research play in school but rather suggests that studying play for educational purposes imposes an adult viewpoint on what is essentially a childhood phenomena. Any conclusions we draw, therefore, are adult explanations taken from adult experiences.

In the following context study findings, the study of Sierra Leonean perspectives of play for learning and development found that the majority of the respondents thought that play helps to eradicate barriers of interaction between the teacher and the learners. They elaborated, describing how it builds children's confidence to speak and share their opinions, and helps them

to foster bonds of friendship with their peers and engage in shared learning experiences. Play also helps children to be bold, outspoken, and actively engaged, and develops a sense of responsibility and leadership. As well, the respondents emphasized the power of play to minimize the relationship-building barriers that exist between the learners and the teachers.

Adult role in supporting play

Generally, teachers have diverse beliefs about play and participating in activities that are traditionally seen as the work of children or a childhood experience (Hargreaves et al., 2014). For those who hold a more traditional view of what play looks like and who participates, the teacher's role then might look like "to support, not to disturb" (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, pp. 48) and to avoid contriving or "hijacking" the play (Goouch, 2008, pp. 95). Consequently, teachers may oppose the idea of other types of play that necessitate adult participation to some degree (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). On the other hand, however, teachers could see play as an opportunity to support children's exploration and internalization of academic concepts (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013a; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013b).

In the below research findings, the location of the play period had a significant influence on how teachers were understanding their role in the play. Many of the teachers interviewed said that their role in play within the classroom has been to lead, organise and monitor play as much as trying to get every learner actively involved and engaged. Outside the classroom, on the other hand, they said children select, organize, lead, and implement play that interests them. Sometimes teachers' play the role of spectator and ensure that disputes or other conflicts that ensue from play do not result in fights and/or injuries, but rather are addressed accordingly. In the classroom, teachers are often found organizing and leading children's play, with the aim being to ensure that learning is fun and participatory and that curricular expectations are met. Outside the classroom, children are completely in charge, and they are actively involved and catered to. The teachers, based on the lesson, select play inside the classroom. Outside the classroom, children may exclusively take the lead, organise themselves, and choose their play according to their interests and motivation. They lead and organise themselves and set their own rules and enforce compliance.

National policy on early childhood education and play

Target 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals states that by 2030, all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development (ECD), care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education (Mundial & UNICEF, 2016). The provision of at least one year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education is encouraged, to be delivered by well-trained educators, as well as that of early childhood development and care (MBSSE, 2021). The pre-primary and lower primary landscape in Sierra Leone has experienced some challenges to the achieving of outcomes. Sierra Leone has some of the highest maternal, new-born, and under five mortality rates, stunting, high rates of poverty, and poor learning

outcomes, globally (MBSSE, 2021). The current government's commitment to human capital development aims to enable the country to achieve middle income status by 2035. A prioritization of investment into education, including early childhood education by the government will support the realization of this goal.

The new Basic Education Curriculum for Sierra Leone has demonstrated such an investment in their new framework that prioritizes, among other important elements of quality education, tapping into students' own interests to cultivate talents, a focus on nurturing problem-solving, and equipping learners with the confidence and skills to think critically and creatively toward solutions. The new curriculum also prioritizes the use of holistic approaches to learning that also touch on life skills development through inclusive and responsive cross-subject learner-centered pedagogy and child agency, like PBL.

Challenges teachers experience and envisage in supporting play-based learning in schools

It has been argued that education reforms that focus on traditional learning standards based purely on academic curriculum adversely affect the place of creative and social play (Almon & Miller, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2007). Concerns are being raised that traditional accountability measures put inappropriate academic pressures on teachers and children, even at particularly young ages to focus more on academics (Bodrova, 2008). There is also belief amongst some teachers that play negatively affects time for the 'more serious' academic learning. Thus, there is a focus on direct instruction activities with the teacher in charge and leading learning. This may have short-term advantages, however, the narrow focus on academic instruction through direct and teacher-centred pedagogical approaches may limit its impact on a child's overall academic and social and emotional development (Goldstein & Lerner, 2017).

There may also be the challenge of the poor quality and insufficient training of child caregivers and teachers to implement child-centred curriculum and pedagogy that mainstream play. Studies in Nigeria have revealed a gap between policy, curriculum, and training, as well as a lack of or low capacity for collaboration between schools and parents/community on integrating play into children's development (Aladejana & Adelodun, 2009; Ibiam & Undie, 2009; Oduolowu, 2008; Ogunyemi, 2012; Uyoata, 2014). Other common challenges to having a play-rich educational environment in Africa include misinformation about the value of play and play as pedagogy by stakeholders, inadequate funding, incompetent educators, lack of facilities and play-based learning materials, ineffective monitoring, policy inconsistency, and poverty (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016). In addition, such structural problems as large class sizes, inadequate classroom spaces, and as briefly mentioned above, inadequate training, previous experiences, and traditional beliefs about ways to exercise authority and impart knowledge are often cited as creating challenges to the use of play, globally (Schweisfurth, 2011; Vavrus et al., 2013).

Qualitative Research Study

Method

After receiving all necessary Ministry- and District-level approvals and ethics clearance, the Deputy Directors of the MBSSE and TSC, District Education Chairpersons, Community Stakeholders and SQAOs in each of the five research-focused districts were engaged as part of the entry protocols as they are custodians of Basic Education in their respective districts.

Participants and context

One-hundred and eighty-one teachers, head teachers, and community members participated in this qualitative study. Participants' interviews targeted head teachers and community members, while focused group discussions and classroom observations were conducted with early primary teachers. Participants were randomly selected based on availability and willingness to take part so that each member of the sampled schools and communities had equal opportunity of participating in this research. Key informant interviews were conducted for 81 community respondents and 15 head teachers, one from each school, and focus group discussions included 85 pre-primary and primary levels 1-3 teachers from the same 15 schools.

Districts	Respondents			Total respondents
	Teachers (Primary & Pre-primary)	Head teachers	Community members	
Port Loko	20	3	16	39
Kailahun	15	3	17	35
Bo	17	3	15	35
Bonthe	17	3	16	36
Falaba	16	3	17	36
Total	85	15	81	181

The study was conducted in five purposefully selected districts from five regions of Sierra Leone: Port Loko, Falaba, Kailahun, Bonthe and Bo. These districts were identified following a detailed analysis of the diverse cultural context of Sierra Leone and selection process that would ensure a representative sampling of communities that exhibit differences in spoken languages, as well as ethnic and cultural heterogeneity.

Port Loko District is in the North-west region of Sierra Leone and is occupied by the Temne, Limba, Fullah, Soso and Mende ethnic groups. Secret societies such as Ojeh and Poro for the men and Bondo for the women are fundamental to the social life of its inhabitants. Farming, fishing, petty trading, and animal grazing are the principal economic activities. There are 113 pre-primary and 565 primary schools in Port Loko district.

Falaba district is situated in the North of Sierra Leone, and it borders with the republic of Guinea. It is the home district for the following ethnic groups: Korankos, Mandingos, Fullahs, Yalunkas, Limbas, Lokos and Sosos. Trading, hunting, timber logging, farming and animal grazing are dominant economic activities. According to the 2021 Annual School Census Report, Falaba has 29 pre-primary and 254 primary government supported, mission, community and privately owned schools.

Bo district is in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone. It is the country's fourth most populous district. The district's administrative capital, also called Bo is the second largest city in Sierra Leone. It is predominantly occupied by the Mende ethnic group, the country's second largest ethnicity. The 2021 Annual School Census Report revealed that Bo has 147 pre-primary and 664 primary schools. Like other districts, farming, trading and animal grazing are the district's key economic activities.

Bonthe district is the least populous district in Sierra Leone. Situated in the Southern region of the country, it comprises several islands and mainland. During the nineteenth century, it was used as a slave control post by the British and it was later settled by freed African slaves. Bonthe has one of the world's largest deposits of titanium ore (rutile) and a tourist attraction. Matru-Jong is district's administrative capital. Its inhabitants include people from the Sherbo, Mende, Temne, Fullah and Mandingo ethnic groups. The dominant economic activities include mining, fishing, farming, and petty trading. The 2021 Annual School Census result revealed that there are 44 pre-primary and 234 primary schools in the entire district.

Kailahun is a district in the eastern region of Sierra Leone that borders Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. It is predominantly inhabited by the Mende, Kissi, Temne and Fullah ethnic groups. Cash crop production and petty trading are the major economic activities of residents in the district. The 2021 Annual School Census indicated that there are 59 pre-primary and 415 primary schools in Kailahun district.

Key informant interviews

Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with randomly selected community members from the above districts using an interview guide (see appendix below) with open-ended questions that allow respondents to answer in many ways as they perceive the questions (e.g., "what is your understanding of play?"). Conducive and safe spaces were identified for engagement with community members during every interview. Gender balance in terms of male-female representation in every community was a topmost consideration. Interview discussions were non-restrictive and follow up questions were asked based on the information/ answers given by respondents and when necessary to probe respondents further to fully understand their perspectives. Data collected for each community member/ respondent were recorded on the interview guide, and audio recorded on tape after seeking informed consent of all respondents and assuring them of the purpose and use of the recordings. Interviews ranged from

approximately 20-35 minutes for all community members. On the areas of confidentiality and anonymity, participants names were not recorded, and all data collected from the various districts were collated and analysed as a whole group.

Head Teachers in each of the selected schools were interviewed to explore their understanding of the concept of play and the type of support mechanisms they have or seek to support their teachers effectively. As with community members, interviews were also conducted for every head teacher in the 15 selected schools, using a recording schedule with open-ended questions that were designed to elicit as much information on play within the school and entire community as possible. Conducive and safe spaces were also identified for engagement with the school heads. Data collected for each school head was recorded on the interview guide (see Appendix A). Audio was also recorded after seeking informed consent of each head teacher and assuring them of the purpose and use of the data collected. One of the indicators of confidentiality and anonymity was that the names of the school heads were not recorded on any document and their responses were collated and analysed cumulatively, as can be seen in the results below. The time spent on one interview ranged from 25-40 minutes for all head teachers.

Focus group discussions

In all of the 15 schools selected for the study, a total of six teachers were drawn from the pre-primary and classes one, two and three for focus group discussions (FGD). Gender representation was reflected in all of the FGDs held, with at least an approximate ratio of 35:75 female to male, respectively. Before the discussions, all participants were reminded of the ground rules which included, (a) the importance of everyone understanding that the discussions were confidential, and the research is meant to gather as much data from every participant as possible, (b) participants should respect the views and or contributions from their colleagues, and (c) an organized system of discussion in which everyone has equal opportunity to contribute to the topics of discussion. Like the KIIs, open-ended questions probing the respondents' perspectives of play were included in the interview guide for FGDs (see Appendix A), as well as additional questions exploring how teachers were already using play-based learning in their classrooms. Generic and follow up questions were asked to participants who in turn responded based on their knowledge and experiences. Overall, there was very effective participation from all teachers during the group discussions. The same steps toward anonymity of respondents were taken as in the KIIs. The lead researcher was supported by a notetaker throughout the FGDs.

Classroom observations

Classroom observations were done in six schools in two of the five selected districts, Port Loko and Bo districts. This was done purposely at the direction of the MBSSE. Literacy and numeracy lessons were the focus of these classroom observations. An observation tool designed to capture information on the classroom practices relating to play during lesson delivery was used. The researcher took along the observation checklist and occupied the back of the class before the start of each lesson to avoid any incidents of interruption during the lesson.

Data Analysis

Data from the literature review and the above-mentioned qualitative study were triangulated during the data analysis stage. This was done to support the reliability of the overall findings of the study to ensure a complete picture of the context and interpretation of beliefs of play was captured by the study. Excel spreadsheets were utilized to organize and analyse KII and FGD data, while the visual classroom observation data was coded and then analysed using SPSS version 26. Prior to analysing the data, cleaning to remove errors that might have occurred during the research, checking to ensure that no answer to a question was omitted, as well as checks to ensure the data collection instruments were intact and complete was done. Results are presented by participant type and then thematically below, and tables and charts have been used, where appropriate. The method of interpreting findings was a thematic analysis of all responses, coded categorically, and a comparative analysis was done among respondent categories looking at strengths, weaknesses, similarities and variations in responses for each variable (Patton, 2015). This is important because it validates data and measures the level of openness and consistency of the various categories of respondents to the questions asked.

Results

The following results are organized first by respondent type, beginning with community members, and followed by teachers and head teachers, then by question within each respondent type. While the questions used for each respondent group are the same in theme, with the exception of one question not asked to teachers, the way the questions were worded differed slightly to align with the experiences and role of each type of respondent related to play-based pedagogy. Teachers were not asked for recommendations on the improvement of play in communities and across the country as it did not align with the professional focus of early grade teachers in the five districts of focus. Where it supports understanding of findings, tables and graphs are included.

Community Members

Community perceptions of play, types and general benefits of play

Though all the respondents knew play to be inclusive of ball and non-ball games (i.e., sport play and other non-sport play, such as Touch/Freeze Tag) in which children engage any time they have the space, good health, motivation and the equipment among other things to do so, approximately 27% of respondents could not explain play further as a means of learning among children. According to these respondents, the following were the main types of play children played: Football, “Adie,” “Stone Ball/ Balance Ball,” and “Touch.” On the other hand, a majority (73%) of the total respondents represented those who understood play and its benefits to children beyond just mere ball and non-ball play. They viewed play as a form of social interaction where children engage in ball and non-ball play, share knowledge and experiences, learn

counting and reading skills, communicate through songs, skits, drama, and develop the culture of working together both in the classroom and in the community.

On their perceptions of the importance of play in the teaching and learning process in school and the community, some community members in Port Loko and Bonthe Districts (13% of the respondents from each of the two districts) still believed that play is not important in the teaching and learning process of their children, referring to play as “a form of idleness.” However, there was still a large proportion of respondents from these two districts who believed that play helps children in their physical growth, social interaction with their peers and community members as well as improving the teaching and learning process and, overall, a large proportion of respondents across the five districts believed that play improves teaching and learning, in addition to physical growth and interaction between children.

Community support for play in schools and the community

When it comes to the role of the community in supporting play in the school and the community, respondents were able to differentiate their roles into two categories: monitoring and supervision; and community awareness raising on the importance of play and the provision of enablers of play which include: the materials, time, space and the opportunity for children to play.

This position was reaffirmed by a member of the Moriba town community in Bonthe district when he said that “we need to provide food for our children so that they can be fit and healthy to play, provide them with play materials like balls and monitor them while they play”. A large proportion (89%) of the respondents stated that creating the enabling environment by providing food, materials, space and the opportunity for children to play is paramount.

On the other hand, 11% believe that monitoring and supervising children when they play to ensure safety is just quite enough because they do not consider play as anything that needs extraordinary attention from community members. For this set of respondents, they saw monitoring and supervising children when they play as a parental role by default but providing the materials, space and the opportunity to enable play with the exception of the basic needs of food shelter and clothing is just something they did not consider a priority but rather an extra burden on parents.

What do you think is the role of community members in supporting play in the school and the community?					
Districts	Target respondents	Monitoring and supervision and community awareness raising on the importance of play		Provision of play enablers like play materials, food, toys, space, and opportunity to play	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	16	1	6%	15	94%

Kailahun	17	3	18%	14	82%
Bo	15	1	7%	14	93%
Bonthe	16	4	25%	12	75%
Falaba	17	0	0%	17	100%
SUB TOTALS	81	9	11%	72	89%

Support from schools or other non-profit organizations to promote play for children's learning

Play-based support has taken various forms from individuals to organizations. Cumulatively 51% of community members interviewed mentioned that they have received support from either individuals or organizations. Of this percentage, 25% stated that they have received support from individuals and 26% said from organizations. However, on the other hand, 49% of respondents mentioned that they have not received any support to promote play-based activities from neither individuals nor from organizations to enable them to promote play-based activities in the schools or communities.

It is worth noting that at the individual community level, Bo District is receiving the least support. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents from this district said they have not received any support from any individuals or organizations so far, while 82% of respondents in Kailahun District said that they are receiving support from influential individuals who are largely indigenes and well-wishers who are based in or hailed from the district in the form of play-based materials to support both the schools and the communities. 'We are receiving play-based learning materials and training support from World Vision and Catholic Relief Services' respondents from Bonthe and Falaba posited.

Have you received any form of support from schools or other non-profit organizations to promote play for children's learning? If yes, please give examples of the support received							
Districts	Target respondents	No support received from individuals or organizations		Support received from individuals which include play-based materials & community participation		Support received from organizations include play-based teaching and learning materials, training and school feeding programme	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	16	10	63%	3	19%	3	19%
Kailahun	17	3	18%	14	82%	0	0%
Bo	15	12	80%	1	7%	2	13%
Bonthe	16	7	44%	1	6%	8	50%

Falaba	17	7	41%	2	12%	8	47%
SUB TOTALS	81	39	49%	21	25%	21	26%

Play within communities

The table below shows clearly how perspectives were divided on how children play and interact in the districts. When describing how pupils engage in play in the community, gender issues were often brought into the conversation. Gender variations and considerations were made frequently across all five districts. The differences in culture and tradition across the different districts came out clearly in terms of gender construction. It is interesting to note that Kailahun District had the highest score in terms of gender inclusivity where boys and girls play together. This is likely because Save the Children as the main Non-Government Organization (NGO) that provides support to the district have stronger gender-focused projects and activities. Falaba on the other hand had the lowest score as their culture, traditions, and religious/cultural beliefs largely prevent boys and girls from openly interacting together. Overall, in terms of gender inclusion, 64% of respondents mentioned that boys and girls play together while 36% said boys and girls play separately. This was also supported by the statement of a community member in Bo district who described sex as one of the many ways children separate themselves in their play, sharing: “children organize themselves into teams by challenging. They play by sex, girls separately and boys separately. For the snake and ladder game, it is played by colours and between individual children”.

It was also noted by respondents that children largely provide their play materials and select the type of play that interests them at a given point in time. Respondents shared, ‘children choose games they want to play based on the timing and location,’ and that ‘most times physical/hard games are played during the day especially at lunchtime breaks in schools and immediately after schools at home.’ They described children’s play in the evening as consisting of more storytelling and brainteaser activities, but with sufficient moonlight, Touch is often played by both boys and girls.

How do pupils engage during play within the community?					
Districts	Target respondents	Boys and girls play together		Boys and girls play separately	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	16	5	31%	11	69%
Kailahun	17	9	53%	8	47%
Bo	15	6	40%	9	60%
Bonthe	16	5	31%	11	69%
Falaba	17	4	24%	13	76%

SUB TOTALS	81	29	36%	52	64%
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Challenges experienced and envisaged in supporting play in communities

Challenges to supporting play ranged from community specific challenges, including lack of knowledge on the importance of play to children's holistic development, lack of parent/community support in terms of time, space, and material support, and giving children the opportunity to play. Children also faced other peculiar challenges such as ill health, hunger, and being overwhelmed with domestic chores, which often prevented and/or limit their ability to engage and play in school and the community.

A very large proportion of the challenges (75%) were made of these child-specific challenges (e.g., hunger, poor health, lack of play materials). On the other hand, community-specific challenges included lack of interest in supporting play, not because they did not want to, but because they were not aware of the importance of play for children. They just saw play as a natural phenomenon for children, which should not be considered something extraordinary. Some parents were overwhelming their children with a lot of domestic chores, and poor parenting leading to hunger, poor health, etc. In one district-specific case, Bo district had more child-specific challenges, as 87% of respondents stated that child-specific challenges were the most common challenges inhibiting play among children.

What challenges are you experiencing and envisaging in supporting play in your community?					
Districts	Target respondents	Community Specific challenges		Children specific challenges	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	16	6	38%	10	63%
Kailahun	17	3	18%	14	82%
Bo	15	2	13%	13	87%
Bonthe	16	5	31%	11	69%
Falaba	17	4	24%	13	76%
SUB TOTALS	81	20	25%	61	75%

Recommendations on improving play in communities

As can be noted from the data, 88% of respondents expressed a dire need for significant support on infrastructure and material components, including construction of standardized playgrounds, provision of PBL teaching and learning materials, and construction of ECD centers, among other things. Notwithstanding, there is still a need to focus on knowledge-building

support, such as trainings and awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of play and the role of the community in supporting play.

What recommendations will you make to improve PBL in your community?					
Districts	Target respondents	Knowledge-building recommendations including trainings		Hardware oriented recommendations mainly construction and installation of PBL structures and materials	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	16	1	6%	15	94%
Kailahun	17	4	24%	13	76%
Bo	15	2	13%	13	87%
Bonthe	16	2	13%	14	88%
Falaba	17	1	6%	16	94%
SUB TOTALS	81	10	12%	71	88%

Teachers

Teachers' perceptions of play

From FGD's held with teachers in all the selected districts, all stated that, broadly speaking, children learn best through PBL, though when probed further they described this methodology as only involving teachers using songs, rhymes, skits, and concrete objects to deliver lessons to early grade learners in the classroom. The teachers also suggested that children learn differently from the different types of play-based teaching and learning methods they are introduced to in the classroom. Though these teachers saw play as the easiest and most active method to help children grasp concepts, this perspective of play as a pedagogical approach did not reflect the broader and more open-ended approach to play as an inclusive and learner-centered pedagogy described both in the literature and Sierra Leone's current curriculum framework.

Teachers understanding of play and its role in children's development

The teachers discussed play under two broad categories, understanding play as games children play that involve interaction, communication, and relationship building, and on the other hand, through a focus on what it does to children's physical growth and general development. Interestingly, all the teachers were able to categorize and discuss play under these headings and were able to identify the benefits play has for children, including improving their health, communication skills, building on their confidence to interact with their peers, as well as parents, teachers, and the wider community. When it comes to children playing games, they stated that the games children play rely on many factors such as the opportunity, the space and the materials

available. As for the benefits, play helps children to be healthy especially when they engage in physical and energy intensive play. In the classroom, they described how games, songs and rhymes introduced by teachers help boost the retentive memories of children. The need for play also extended beyond the classroom context and into the home, as a teacher from class 3 in Port Loko district shared, “educative games help children learn fast, therefore children need to have playing time both in school and at home to reduce mental fatigue and increase class participation.”

How play supports learning

Play in terms of supporting the teaching and learning process was viewed by teachers as a holistic process. It came out clearly that play supports all forms of the teaching and learning domains, including social and emotional and cognitive learning. In terms of cognitive learning, teachers shared that play helps children develop retentive memory because of the use of concrete objects such as counters, games, songs, skits, and other tasks that they complete with their hands, minds, and other senses, helping them remember quickly. From the social learning angle, play helps children interact and improve their communication skills as well as solidify their relationships with their peers, teachers, and the wider community. With play, especially games that require physical exercises, children develop their physical capacities in terms of health, physical abilities, and dexterities. They also noted some gender differences in what aspects of learning and development are bolstered by play, stating that boys prefer more physically demanding games like football and Touch as opposed to girls who are more often engaged in “Balance/Stone ball,” “Monday-Tuesday,” and “Adie.”

Children play inside and outside the classroom

According to the responses from teachers, play inside the classroom is organized and led by teachers. They select the type of play based on the topic of the lesson being taught and ensure to involve all learners by giving them different tasks based on the play chosen and model for easy understanding. For instance, teachers use songs to teach the human body parts, days of the week, and months of the year. Through songs, it was argued that learners become excited and, therefore, more involved in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, respondents said they use songs in teaching the alphabet, during which learners learn to sound out and identify letters, and rhymes. Another example of play in the classroom described by the teachers was a number identification game locally called “Number Balay Number.” This game is often used by teachers to help learners identify numbers on the board. The teachers in this study shared how they would integrate competition into the game by splitting learners into groups. Group members are called to the chalkboard in turns to find a random number the teacher writes in a circle. The learners are expected to find the number that the teacher will pronounce whilst singing the “Number Ballay Number” song. The learner to first identify the number pronounced by the teacher becomes the winner. The teachers also acknowledged how these examples all promote teamwork and pair learning among the children in their classrooms.

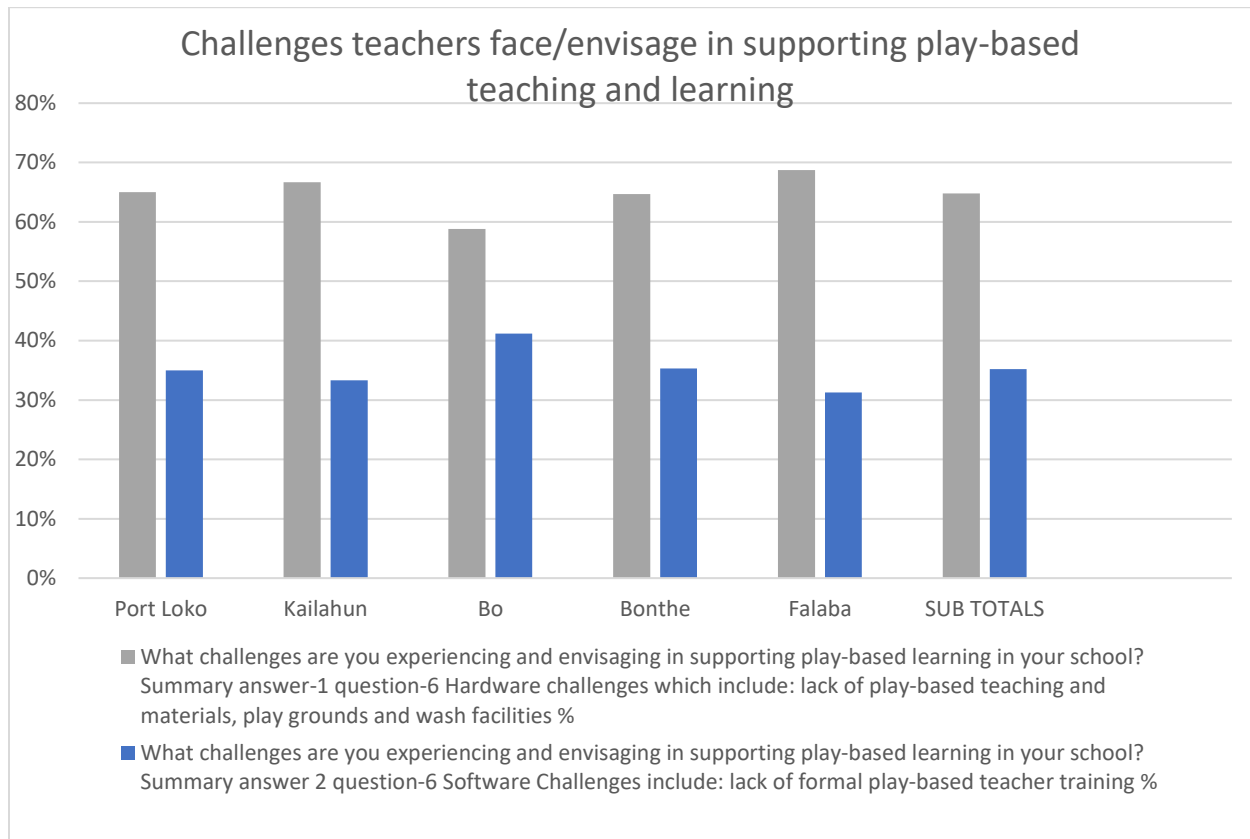
Outside the classroom on the other hand, the teachers noted that children lead their own play. They converge in spaces available to them and first decide on games they want to play based on their skill set, orientation, time, materials, and available space. Boys and girls tend to play separately depending on the type of game, the community, and their ethnicity. In Falaba District for example, a large proportion of both the community members and the teachers believed that boys and girls playing together was not ideal due to their cultural beliefs. They further shared a belief that violence, conflict, mischief, and premature sex are common when boys and girls play together. In general, children select, organize, share roles and responsibilities, set rules and monitor themselves during play within the parameters of social and cultural customs in their context, and definitively without adult participation or interference beyond general safety.

Teachers' role in children's play

Inside the classroom, all teachers described their role in pupils play as being to organize and lead. This would involve selecting play activities, sharing roles and responsibilities, giving out instructions, and monitoring process. Outside the classroom on the other hand, the teachers said their role was limited to serving as onlookers and monitoring the games children play to ensure that violence, bully, and conflict is prevented and/or minimized. This was evidenced by the words of a class 1 teacher in Port Loko district who said, "during lunch and even at home children choose their games, select their team members, and set their own rules. What we teachers do is to just look at them when they play and at times settle the issues and disputes that are reported to us." The teachers' responses demonstrate, therefore, that they did not see a role for themselves in their learners' play in the way the role of the teacher is described and necessary in play-based pedagogy.

Challenges teachers face and envisage in supporting play-based teaching and learning

The below diagram represents the challenges teachers face or envisage facing in supporting play-based teaching and learning in schools. These challenges have been categorized into materials and physical resources (hardware) and knowledge-building (software) challenges. The hardware challenges include material challenges that include the lack of play-based teaching and learning materials such as picture books, crayons, vanguard, classroom spaces, well-constructed playgrounds, WASH facilities, and first aid kits. Falaba District had the highest percentage in terms of challenges related to hardware support (69%), while Bo District experienced fewer challenges with hardware for the obvious reason that it is quite developed in terms of infrastructure, as well as more equipped in comparison to other districts. Knowledge-related challenges noted by the teachers included those to do with a lack of formal training of teachers on play-based pedagogy, community sensitization campaigns on the importance of play for children and integrating play-based teaching and learning into the school curriculum.



Head Teachers

Head teacher perception of play

Key informant interviews were conducted for 15 head teachers in the selected schools and districts. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents defined and understood play as ball and non-ball games, which included football, "Adie," "Stone Ball," and "Touch," while 73% expanded this view of play as including ball and non-ball games as well as songs, skits, and drama that foster social interaction where children communicate and share skills, knowledge, and experiences. A large proportion of respondents who perceived play beyond ball and non-ball games described how play facilitates and enhances early grade learning especially for counting and reading. This larger group of head teachers demonstrated that they held a perspective of play as a method for children's interaction as well as a learning platform, in line with perspectives described by empirical research that see play as a holistic learning approach. Notably, all respondents in Port Loko and Kailahun considered play to be a means of social interaction and learning through various types of play.

What is your understanding of play for children's development?			
District		Respondents who define and understand play as ball and non-ball games which	Respondents who viewed play as a form of social interaction where children play games,

	Target respondents	include football, "Adie", "stone ball" and "touch"		communicate, share skills, knowledge and experiences through ball and non-ball games, songs, skits and drama	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	3	0	0%	3	100%
Kailahun	3	0	0%	3	100%
Bo	3	1	33%	2	67%
Bonthe	3	1	33%	2	67%
Falaba	3	2	67%	1	33%
SUB TOTALS	15	4	27%	11	73%

How play support teaching and learning

The data clearly indicates that all head teachers interviewed posited that play supports the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. They described how the use of play and concrete materials largely improves numeracy skills, communication skills, vocabulary, retentive memory, and class participation. The interaction between learners, teachers, and play-based learning largely increased understanding of learning material and outcomes. According to the head teacher of a school in Bo district, “play can arouse the interest of learners, encourage their full participation, and makes learning meaningful to them. It also breaks the communication barrier between teachers and learners and among learners themselves.” All the respondents also shared that play significantly promotes the physical and mental fitness of children. Many of the head teachers also attributed increases in attendance and enrolment in their school’s use of play by teachers in their classrooms.

Children play inside and outside the classroom

The perception of head teachers on learners’ engagement during play was not significantly different from that of the teachers. Head teachers viewed the way learners engage during play from two angles: inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, all the respondents interviewed stated that play is teacher-led, with the choice and organization of play solely determined by the teacher; he/she gives instructions, roles, and responsibilities to the learners to carry out. Learners are then asked to either participate individually, in pairs, or in groups after the teacher has modelled or explained the activity. This approach to play offers little agency to students to integrate their own perspectives, ideas, and curiosities, but create structured environments where teachers are able to maintain more control over the play.

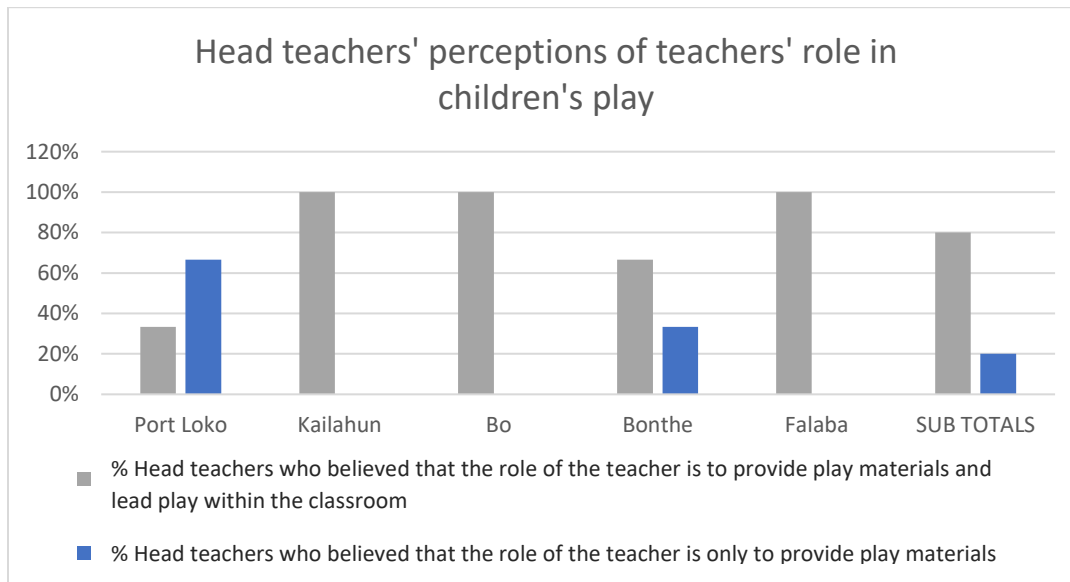
While playing inside the classroom, learners are engaged in signing songs, sounding rhymes, reading and number games. This view was further echoed by the head teacher at a primary school in Falaba district who compared play inside the classroom to play outside, sharing

how “inside the classroom children engage through group work, organized drills, dialogue, role play, and dramatization, and outside the classroom they organize themselves into groups, select games, share responsibilities, set rules, and monitor them.” A head teacher from a school in Port Loko district shared what they felt was ideal for their classrooms but was reminded of the training-related barriers that make it a challenge to bring to reality: “Ideally, classroom play is supposed to be collaborative and both teacher and child led but lack of training has made it completely teacher led.”

Some head teachers viewed play outside the classroom as completely child led. Boys and girls would at times play together or separately, buying or making the necessary play materials themselves. The head teachers also described learners’ choice of outdoor play being based on the space, time, interest, and materials available. Also like the teachers, the head teachers described how children would set their own rules and enforce compliance, while teachers would serve as onlookers and intermittently solve conflicts that ensued from play. Specific to ECD, children at the pre-primary school level, head teachers noted, replicate play they have learned in the classroom, at home, and in the wider school environment, sometimes modelling and pretending to be their teachers.

Head teachers’ perceptions of teachers’ role in children’s play

The below diagram illustrates that 20% (subtotals bars) of head teachers interviewed agreed that teachers should only be providing materials, such as bottle tops, counters, pictures, cards, etc., for children’s play, while 80% stated that teachers should both provide materials and lead children’s play through, to some extent, initiating, directing, demonstrating, and/or monitoring. Teachers, the head teachers recounted, are expected to ensure all learners fully participate during classroom play and select play that can be integrated into the lesson and geared towards improving learning outcomes. These views were largely shared by respondents in Kailahun, Bo, and Falaba districts, where no head teachers indicated the role of the teacher being only to provide materials (i.e., absence of green bars in the table below). Some respondents in Port Loko and Bonthe districts, however, did share a perspective that identified the role of teachers as simply providing materials for classroom play. The perspective of the teacher as only to provide materials by approximately 33% of head teachers in Bonthe is understandable as one of the three head teachers to participate from that district also shared a more rudimentary perspective of the value of play for children’s development, only touching on ball and non-ball play with no connections to academic and social and emotional learning as was shared by their peers. The significant spike in Port Loko head teachers’ perspective that the role of teachers is only to provide materials could arguably be explained by a focus on learning outcomes and a preference for teachers’ use of direct instruction rather than play, though this would require further probing and exploration of contextual realities of Port Loko classrooms to confirm.



Head teacher support to teachers in play-based teaching and learning

The table below shows that almost all head teachers (93%) provide play-based teaching and learning support for their teachers. The support largely fell within two categories: provision of play items that will support teaching and learning, and knowledge and capacity-building. The material support included the provision of vanguarders, crayons, markers, bottle tops, sticks, slates, ECD kits, snakes and ladder game, football, volleyball, net ball, and various local materials. Knowledge and capacity-building support consisted of school-based professional development discussions on early grade teaching principles, coaching and feedback on the selection and use of play such as songs, rhymes, and skits in lesson delivery, and what they described as supportive monitoring and supervision. Head teachers also said that they provide financial rewards for volunteer teachers and those who perform extremely well as a form of extrinsic motivation.

Have you been giving any form of support to teachers to promote play-based teaching and learning in your school? If yes, please give examples of the support given.					
Districts	Target respondents	Head teachers who provided material and learning support to their teachers		Head teachers who do not provide any form of support to their teachers towards play-based teaching and learning	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	3	2	67%	1	33%
Kailahun	3	3	100%	0	0%
Bo	3	3	100%	0	0%
Bonthe	3	3	100%	0	0%
Falaba	3	3	100%	0	0%

SUB TOTALS	15	14	93%	1	7%
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Organisations working with head teachers on play-based learning

Regarding working with organizations on the use of play-based learning in Sierra Leonean classrooms, 73% of head teachers have worked and are still working with NGOs such as Save the Children and Volunteer Services Overseas for Kailahun District, Catholic Relief Services for Falaba District, World Vision, War Child, and Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level for Bo and Bonthe Districts. Respondents in Kailahun district's experience working with several different NGOs on play-based learning could reasonably explain why Kailahun teachers encourage boys and girls playing together more than in any other district in this study. Though one head teacher indicated having worked with an NGO on play-based learning in the past, no specific NGOs were identified by head teachers in Port Loko district; two of the three head teachers said they had never collaborated with any play-based NGOs, which is worrying considering the number early grade children in the district. "These organizations have supported our schools and communities over the years on play-based teaching and learning which include models of how to integrate play/concrete materials into lesson delivery, using play such as songs and rhymes to get pupils attention" said a head teacher from Kailahun district. Apart from play-based pedagogical training, some of these organizations also provide play materials such as toys, swings, snakes and ladder game, draft, Ludo, and cards to enhance learning. Though not an NGO, the MBSSE was also mentioned as one source for training and some play materials like footballs, vanguards, markers, crayons etc. to promote play-based teaching and learning in schools.

Have you worked with any organization on play-based learning?					
Districts	Target respondents	Head teachers who said that they have worked with organizations on play-based teaching and learning		Head teachers who said they have not worked with any organization(s) on play-based teaching and learning	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	3	1	33%	2	67%
Kailahun	3	3	100%	0	0%
Bo	3	2	67%	1	33%
Bonthe	3	3	100%	0	0%
Falaba	3	2	67%	1	33%
SUB TOTALS	15	11	73%	4	27%

Challenges head teachers face and envisage in supporting play-based teaching and learning

Similar to the teachers, challenges faced by the head teachers were categorized into the two categories of knowledge-building and materials and physical resources. Knowledge-building challenges referred to training on play-based pedagogy, curriculum review, and supportive monitoring and supervision, while material challenges ranged again from WASH facilities, functional playgrounds, and play-based materials to school feeding and first aid kits. According to the data, 87% of the respondents mentioned that the most dominant challenges that they are encountering are hardware challenges, while 13% noted software challenges as most significant. Port Loko, Kailahun, and Bo districts specifically recounted that they are only challenged with a lack of access to materials and resources, while Bonthe and Falaba were caught across both sets of challenges. Kailahun district head teachers' identifying only material and resource challenges could arguably be explained by the support that has been received from Save the Children and Volunteer Services Overseas over the years. The remaining district head teachers' emphasis on almost exclusively material challenges suggests they see no need to develop the capacities of their teachers on play-based learning. The above variation in both head teachers and teachers' perspectives on the value of play for learning, however, suggest that perhaps head teachers do not recognize the need for continued capacity-building in their teachers due to a lack of understanding of why and how to use play-based learning for early grade teaching and learning.

What challenges are you experiencing and envisaging in supporting play-based learning in your school?					
Districts	Target respondents	Hardware challenges including building enough classrooms, WASH facilities, standard playgrounds and play-based materials, school feeding and first-aid kits		Software challenges including trainings on play-based teaching and learning, integrating play into the early grade school curriculum, and supportive monitoring and supervision.	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	3	3	100%	0	0%
Kailahun	3	3	100%	0	0%
Bo	3	3	100%	0	0%
Bonthe	3	2	67%	1	33%
Falaba	3	2	67%	1	33%
SUB TOTALS	15	13	87%	2	13%

Head teachers' recommendations to improve play-based learning in Sierra Leone

Like challenges, recommendations were grouped into two categories: knowledge-building, and material and physical resources. The table shows that 53% of respondents

interviewed preferred the construction of playgrounds, provision of materials and more advanced play, provision of additional classrooms to reduce overcrowding, and WASH facilities to improve hygiene and school feeding. According to head teachers, playgrounds should be fenced, and toys and play materials largely plastic to reduce the chances of injury on children. First aid kits should also be provided to treat injuries that will be caused by and during play. Diverging from the perspectives shared on play-based learning training in relation to challenges, 47% of head teachers favoured training on play-based pedagogy as a strategy for improving the use of the pedagogy across Sierra Leone. The head teachers suggested that the curriculum should be reviewed, training should be conducted at both the pre- and in-service levels, and play-based pedagogy integrated into teacher training programmes at both colleges and universities. The divergence in perspectives from challenges to recommendations could be explained by the framing of the questions themselves, where the discussion on challenges was focused on head teachers' own districts, while that of recommendations was framed in relation to country-wide reforms toward play-based learning in classrooms. While the head teachers did not feel their own districts needed to further develop knowledge and capacities on play, likely due to limited understanding of play-based pedagogies themselves, when thinking of other districts and the country collectively they did feel that an emphasis on knowledge and capacity-building would be important for improvement.

What recommendations will you make to improve play-based learning in Sierra Leone?					
Districts	Target respondents	Hardware oriented recommendations mainly construction and installation of play-based structures and materials		Software oriented recommendations including trainings	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Port Loko	3	2	67%	1	33%
Kailahun	3	1	33%	2	67%
Bo	3	2	67%	1	33%
Bonthe	3	2	67%	1	33%
Falaba	3	1	33%	2	67%
SUB TOTALS	15	8	53%	7	47%

Classroom Observations

Observations from six classrooms in two districts, Port Loko and Bo, are summarized here. Observations focused on only two districts as these are the districts of focus for the current partnership between the MBSSE, Right To Play, and BRAC.

Class populations

Seven teachers were included in this portion of data collection, one teacher in each of five classrooms and two teachers in one classroom in Port Loko. Of the seven teachers, five were female, and two were male. The one classroom that was taught by two teachers included one of each gender. The average classroom size across the six classes was 37 boys and girls. Five of the six observed classrooms had class sizes in the mid 30's, however the one classroom in Port Loko with two teachers had a class size of 52. Three of the six classroom included one or two children with special education needs, while the others did not include any children with special education needs.

District	Gender	
	Female	Male
Port Loko	3	1
Bo	2	1

Physical space

Inside the classrooms, most of the environments were noticeably lacking in concrete teaching and learning materials. One classroom's physical space was divided with another classroom by Celotex, an insulation board material. This immediately posed challenges related to noise as this material is not typically soundproof and increased what was perceived as disruptive noise carried to nearby classrooms.

The most observed types of outdoor play were Football and Ardie, and Balance Ball and Monday-Tuesday closely followed in popularity. In one school there was a noticeable gender difference in outdoor play choice, with boys choosing to play Football and girls choosing to play Monday-Tuesday using a skipping rope. Only half of the schools were equipped with playgrounds in their outdoor play spaces.

Teaching practice

Outcomes. No learning outcomes given at the beginning of the lesson in 5/6 classrooms. In the one classroom that did make clear the learning outcomes to learners at the start of the lesson, outcomes were written on the board. At the end of the lesson, while four of the six classrooms did not relate the learning in the lesson back to outcomes through some playful method, two classrooms did make some efforts to do so.

Materials. Minimal to no play materials were available in the six classrooms, thought this is not surprising, given the lack of any concrete teaching and learning materials in the space, and the perspectives shared above on the need for more play-based materials. In classrooms where some materials were available, the use of counters for math lessons was common. In most classrooms the learners were given some or no time to engage with any available materials, both generally and in the context of a specific lesson.

Types of play. Songs, rhymes, games using rhymes were the only types of play observed in the six classrooms. In all of the classrooms, these types of play were used as a tool to regain attention or energize learners during a lesson, however in three of the classrooms, rhymes, and games using rhymes were also used that directly related to the content and outcome of the lessons. In one classroom the teacher also used some body movement, specifically jumping on the spot, to get students ready for an upcoming lesson. In one classroom in Bo district, a female teacher also used pictures to have learners play a “choose your picture” game, asking them to read rhyming words and match with the corresponding pictures.

Instruction. Of the six classrooms observed, four were observed using only whole group instruction strategies, where the teacher stands at the front of a room of children seated and facing forward. This approach to instruction means that information flows in unidirectionally from the teacher to the learners. In the other two classrooms, however, small group instructional strategies were used, with learners in groups with peers, and information flowing bidirectionally from learner to learner and teacher to learner. There were no observed instances of one-on-one interactions between the teachers and a single student. This is likely due to the large class sizes, however, and the teacher’s need to maintain focus on as many students as possible during the learning period.

Observations of play in the classrooms showed that while no one teacher was observed using play as their primary mode of instruction, there were a few instances of play-based learning or learner-centered pedagogy across the six classrooms. For example, though the majority of the play observed was teacher-led, some classrooms also offered some opportunities for their learners to lead their own learning. In these classrooms where there were some opportunities for child-led learning, the learners were observed demonstrating playful behaviours (e.g., laughter, active participation, etc.). These same behaviours were noticeably absent in classrooms where the play was teacher-led or not used. Additionally, when play was used in five of the six classrooms, there were not connections made between the concepts learned, learning objectives/outcomes of the lesson, and any playful experiences had. In only one classroom was there an effort to connect the play to the learning content and objectives/outcomes of the lesson.

Upon observation of the teachers’ practice generally, the teachers were observed guiding their learners during lessons through modelling, asking questions, redirection, extending learning, etc., somewhat regularly, though not as often as direct instruction followed by quiet independent work. In the context of play, very few teachers were seen circulating the classroom some of the time to support learning, again through providing support in different ways, and only one was seen circulating frequently. This frequently circulating teacher was also the only one to make the play learning connection described above.

Conclusion

Play is integral to Sierra Leonean culture, but it is often dismissed in the general society as something that does not lead to or support learning in and outside the classroom. Instead, play is largely seen as something for fun and entertainment, not as an important tool for development and learning skills important in life. This is in stark contrast to the efforts of the MBSSE to champion play and other learner-centered pedagogies toward radical educational change for all children in Sierra Leone. There is therefore a need for understanding how stakeholders closest to children's classroom learning conceptualize the value and use of play in Sierra Leone's education system for children's diverse skills development. This study sought to explore those perspectives to glean a better understanding of how best to provide technical support to the government in making a concrete shift toward play and other learner-centered pedagogies.

Through semi-structured interviews, this study found that while the stakeholders involved generally agreed on the importance of play, these perspectives were limited to the social and emotional benefits and emphasizes outdoor environments rather than the more holistic perspective that includes academic learning in indoor settings like classrooms. Further, the findings of the classroom observations seemed to support the above findings, showing teachers tending to lead in-classroom play in more structured and teacher-centered ways that leaves little space for learners to practice agency, making few and/or infrequent connections between the content, learning objectives and play-based experiences in a lesson, and only influencing play within the school because, as responses gathered during interviews found, any play that happens outside of their classroom is seen as a children-only activity.

These findings taken together suggest that to integrate more holistic play perspectives and practice across schools and communities, there is a need to raise the awareness of the importance of play with necessary stakeholders, including but not limited to pre-primary and early primary teachers, headteachers, and community members so that play-based learning can be used and valued for the varying ways in which it supports children's learning and development in and outside of school. This may require investment from the government and support from relevant partners in supporting ministerial coordination, engagement and discussion between community and both bodies of the MBSSE focused on the pre-primary and early primary level, as is the focus of this study and to support transition of children from ECD to Primary Education, and most especially increased training and support, through teacher professional development and quality assurance mechanisms. This training will be critical for both formally and informally trained early grade teachers and should focus on emphasizing the importance of play for learning and a broad range of development markers and the use of play-based learning into existing curriculum and education structures and teaching practice.

To support these needed investments, Right To Play offers a series of recommendations that these technical assistance efforts and the MBSSE can take forward toward the integration of

play-based learning into Sierra Leone's early primary education system. As there are numerous types of play in Sierra Leonean society, these recommendations highlight the value of local ways of playing that could be utilised for play-based learning and the enhancement of children's cognitive skills, social skills, and physical development. In recognition of the numerous hinderances to teaching practice noted in this study (e.g., community perceptions of play as idleness, lack of adequate support for play in the school system, etc.), these recommendations aim to support the MBSSE to create sustainable system level mechanisms (e.g., development of teacher training and professional development content, resources for implementation of play-based learning, tools for effective monitoring and quality assurance, etc.) for integrating and supporting the use of play-based learning into curricula and practice.

Recommendations

- Provide in-service training to strengthen teachers' skills and knowledge on play-based pedagogy especially in classroom practice and management, integrating and linking play activities to learning outcomes. (Include opportunities to integrate play-based learning content and learning into pre-service teachers' training institutions and universities)
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Deputy Chief and Higher Education Officer-Ministry of Technical and Higher Education
- Train teachers and headteachers on preparing and effectively using locally available play-based teaching and learning materials for lesson delivery.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Director, Teacher Performance and Development Unit-Teaching Service Commission, and Director, Curriculum and Research Directorate
- Train teachers on Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Pedagogy to ensure that teachers can reflect on the needs of different students and play-based teaching practices are appropriately responsive.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Deputy Director, Gender Unit, and Director, Special Needs Unit
- Update tools and capacity of School Quality Assurance Officers to effectively monitor and mentor teachers in play-based learning.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Director, School Quality Assurance and Resource Management Directorate-SQUARM
- Support MBSSE to identify appropriate local and sustainable play-based teaching and learning materials to support instruction.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Curriculum and Research Management Directorate
- Raise awareness on play-based learning with community members to ensure buy-in on the use of play inside the classroom extends beyond the school.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Deputy Director, Early Childhood Development/ Primary Unit
- Support School Management Committee on enhancing their capacity to effectively monitor play-based teaching and learning in schools.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Deputy Director, Early Childhood Development/ Primary Unit, Director, Curriculum and Research Directorate, and Director, Teacher Performance and Development Unit
- Teachers and communities trained and/or provided knowledge to recognize and leverage child-led out of classroom play activities that can be used as learning opportunities.
 - **Recommended individual, Unit, or Agency:** Chairperson, School Management Committee, Chairperson, Community Teachers Association, and Deputy Director, Early Childhood Development/ Primary Unit

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Appendix A. Data collection tools

Play-Based Learning in Sierra Leone Interview Guide for Community Members

Section A: Bio Data

Enumerator's Name: -----

Date: -----

Region: -----

District: -----

Community/Location: -----

Sex of Respondent: Male ☐ Female ☐

Occupation: -----

Section B: Instructions for the Conduct of the Research

- Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of this visit
- Explain that the interview will not last more than 45 minutes
- Reassure the respondents that information is confidential and collected to improve teaching and learning in Sierra Leone
- Complete Respondents' Bio data before the start of the session.

Section C. Understanding, Implementation, Supporting and Challenges of Play-Based Learning

1. What is your understanding of play?

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2. Do you think that play is an important aspect of teaching and learning in the school and the community? If yes, please explain with examples

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3. What do you think is the role of community members in supporting play in the school and the community?

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4. Have you received any form of support from schools or other non-profit organizations to promote play for children's learning? If yes, please give examples of the support received.

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5. Have you been giving any form of support to the school and the pupils to promote play for children's learning? If yes, please give examples of the support given.

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6. How do pupils engage during play within the community?

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7. What challenges are you experiencing and envisaging in supporting play in your community?

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8. What recommendations will you make to improve Play-based learning in your community?

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Thank You for Participating in this Interview.

Play-Based Learning in Sierra Leone

Teachers Focus Group

Section A: Bio Data

Enumerator's Name: -----

Date: -----

Region: -----

District: -----

Community/Location: -----

School: -----

School Ownership: -----

Sex of Respondent: Male ☐ Female ☐

Grade the teacher teaches: -----

Respondent's Teaching Experience in years: -----

Section B: Instructions for the Conduct of FGD

- Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of this visit
- Explain that there are 7 discussion points, and you will wrap up in about an hour. Also make sure to spur participants during the discussions so that all aspect of each topic will be covered.
- Reassure respondents that information is confidential and collected to improve teaching and learning in Sierra Leone
- Complete Respondents' Bio data before the start of the session
- Complete the FGD Guide by recording and summarising respondents' responses to each item.

ITEM/DISCUSSION POINT 1

In your experience, how do children learn best? Please give examples

ITEM/DISCUSSION POINT 2

What is your understanding of play and its role in children's development?

ITEM/DISCUSSION POINT 3

In your opinion how do you think play support learning? Please explain with examples

ITEM/DISCUSSION POINT 4

Please describe how your students play, both inside and outside the classroom.

ITEM/DISCUSSION POINT 5

What has been your role in children's play?

ITEM/DISCUSSION POINT 6

What challenges are you experiencing and envisaging in supporting play-based learning in your school?

Play-Based Learning in Sierra Leone

Interview Guide for Head Teachers

Section A: Bio Data

Enumerator's Name: -----

Date: -----

Region: -----

District: -----

Community/Location: -----

School: -----

School Ownership: -----

Sex of Respondent: -----

Designation: -----

Respondent's Teaching Experience in years: -----

Section B: Instructions for the Conduct of the Research

- Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of this visit
- Explain that the interview will not last more than 45 minutes
- Reassure the respondents that information is confidential and collected to improve teaching and learning in Sierra Leone
- Complete Respondents' Bio data before the start of the session.

Section C: Understanding, Implementation, Supporting and Challenges of Play-Based Learning

1. What is your understanding of play for children's development?

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2. How do you think play supports teaching and learning?

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3. How do pupils engage during play inside and outside the classroom?

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4. What do you think is the teacher's role in supporting play in the teaching and learning process?

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5. Have you been giving any form of support to teachers to promote play-based teaching and learning in your school? If yes, please give examples of the support given.

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6. Have you worked with any organisation on play-based learning? If yes, what is the Organisation's name and what did you learn from them about play?

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7. What challenges are you experiencing and envisaging in supporting play-based learning in your school?

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8. What recommendations will you make to improve Play-based learning in Sierra Leone?

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Thank You for Participating in this Interview.

Play-Based Learning in Sierra Leone

Classroom Observation Tool

Instructions for the interviewer

Before you join the classroom, explain that you would like to sit quietly in the back of the class and observe her/his teaching and learning practices during their lesson. Mention that you will not interrupt any of her/his activities but just silently observe. Assure the teacher that you are not in the classroom to evaluate her/his teaching performance. Emphasize that you are simply interested in the way the lesson is delivered in schools. Invite her/him to carry out her/his class as if you were not here.

Full Name of observer	:	
Full Name of Teacher (optional)	:	
Sex of Teacher (F or M)	:	
Location	:	
Name of the School	:	
Subject	:	
Grade Level	:	
Unit and Lesson	:	
Total # of learners (F and M)	:	F M
Ask teacher the # of children living with disability	:	
Date of the Testing	:	
Time (XX:YY AM / PM)	:	Start time: End Time:

Part B: Observations during teaching		Circle number ----- >	Codes
01	Are the learning outcomes for the lesson made clear to the learners?		1
		Yes, written on chalkboard.....	2
		Yes, explained by teacher.....	3
		Yes, explained and written on board.	4
		No.....	

		Other means (please indicate): _____	
02	Does your school have a playground?	Yes.....	1
		No	2
03	Does the classroom have a learning corner with sufficient materials that are geared towards promoting play-based learning? (e.g., concrete objects like counters, bottle tops, blocks, etc.)	Yes.....	1
		No	2
04	Does the teacher give the learners time to interact with or explore the teaching and learning materials?	Very Frequently.....	1
		Frequently	2
		Sometimes, but not regularly	3
		Not at all	4
05	Are the learners given opportunities to lead their learning during the lesson?	Very Frequently.....	1
		Frequently	2
		Sometimes, but not regularly	3
		Not at all	4
06	Do learners demonstrate some element of play when given the opportunity to lead their learning?	Very Frequently.....	1
		Frequently	2
		Sometimes, but not regularly	3
		Not at all	4
07	Is the teacher able to demonstrate or guide learners on how to engage with the materials during lesson?	Very Frequently.....	1
		Frequently	2
		Sometimes, but not regularly	3
		Not at all	4
08	Do teaching and learning activities happen in pairs, small groups or whole groups using play?	Learning activities in pairs	1
		In small groups	2
		In whole group	3

09	Are the learners given sufficient time and space to engage with teaching and learning materials during lesson?	Very Frequently..... 1 Frequently 2 Sometimes, but not regularly 3 Not at all 4
10	Is the teacher circulating the classroom to identify and support play-based learning activities? (e.g., asking questions, modelling, answering learners' questions)	Very Frequently..... 1 Frequently 2 Sometimes, but not regularly 3 Not at all 4
11	Is the teacher leading and encouraging play activities during the lesson?	Very Frequently..... 1 Frequently 2 Sometimes, but not regularly 3 Not at all 4
12	Does the teacher relate content using play to lesson outcomes? (e.g., using songs, rhymes, skits etc.)	Very Frequently..... 1 Frequently 2 Sometimes, but not regularly 3 Not at all 4

Please note any types of play you observe inside the classroom (e.g., songs):

Please note any types of play you observe outside the classroom (e.g., balance ball, football):

Please note any additional information you view as useful or necessary to understand this observation (e.g., classroom management strategies, methods for discipline, classroom context features):

Thank you so much for the opportunity to observe your class.

Appendix A. Sample classroom observation data







