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REPORT TITLE: PHASE 2 QUALITATIVE STUDY AT PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE LEVELS

BUILDING TEACHERS' CAPACITY TO ENHANCE EARLY LEARNING -THROUGH CHILD FOCUSE AND PLAY-BASED APPROACHES IN GHANA AND SIERRA LEONE:

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1.0 Study Overview and Methodology

This is a KIX/GPE and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) supported research project being conducted by the Institute for Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana and Associates for Change in Ghana along with the Division of Education Studies, University of Sierra Leone. The KIX IDRC research seeks to bring together multiple stakeholders in early childhood education in Ghana and Sierra Leone to enhance the capacity of teachers to implement innovations in play-based learning at early childhood levels of education. These innovations in play-based approaches will assess the shift in teaching towards more play-based approaches by evaluating the teaching and learning outcomes across a variety of schools in urban and rural areas along with the cost of implementation. The purpose is to generate evidence of what works to improve classroom practice of play-based learning in early childhood education in Ghana and Sierra Leone.

The overarching objective of the study is to explore how the selected education innovations can help close the trained teacher gap at early childhood education levels and within community-based learning centers particularly in rural and extreme poverty zones across Ghana.

1.1 Research design

Original Research Areas

The study's research questions are:

1. How is the new early learning curriculum with play-based approaches integrated into the pre-service and in-service teacher training programs?
2. How is the educational system adapting to the changes in the new early learning curriculum?
3. What innovations in play-based learning exist to support teacher capacity to implement play-based learning and what added value are these making (e.g., volunteer teacher models and right to play models)?
4. How are education innovators in the early learning space influencing the early childhood education quality and uptake in Ghana?
5. Can there be more cost-effective approaches to scaling up early learning activities through volunteer teacher programs?
6. What is the value addition of play-based learning methods compared to schools which do not implement these, particularly in relation to early grade reading outcomes?

Additional Research Areas

- Why are upcoming teachers not pursuing ECE (both the degree/ COE programs)?

•What can be done to equip tutors to set up ECE specific resource centers in their respective COE?

•What systems can be put in place to ensure trainee teachers who receive training from interventions are posted to appropriate grade levels for teaching?

Study areas

The **first** phase of the study was conducted across selected Colleges of Education within Central region as represented below:

S/N	Region	College of Education
1.	Central Region	Komenda COE or Our Lady of Apostles (OLA) COE
	Upper East region	St John Bosco COE

The **second** phase of the study at the community/district level the study was conducted across selected communities/schools across 2 districts as represented below:

S/N	Region	District	Schools/Communities	Target Teachers
1.	Central Region	Cape Coast Municipal/ Komenda-Edina- Eguafo-Abirem Municipal	3	5-6
2.	Upper East region	Kassena-Nankana District	3	5-6

Instrumentation: the following were the instruments for this study:

Training college level instrumentation

1. Interview guide for principals/deputies in charge of academics
2. Interview guide for college tutors
3. Observations of teacher trainees and tutors
4. Post Lesson Observation Follow-up Interview with Tutor
5. Focus Group Discussion with Teacher Trainees

Community/School Level Instrumentation

1. Interview guide for head teachers
2. Interview with KG and Primary teachers
3. Observation in classrooms (KG1-P2)
4. Post Lesson Observation Follow-up with Teacher
5. School-based checklist

2.0 Integration of play-based pedagogy

2.1 Overview of Play-based learning

Play-based learning, recognized for its interactive and child-centered approach, has gained attention in the field of early childhood educational discourse. This methodology, is rooted in the belief that play serves as a crucial avenue for children in their early years to explore, create, and comprehend (Bubikova et al., 2019). This section provides insight into how play-based learning is perceived, understood, and utilized by college tutors and early-grade teachers both at the pre-service and in-service levels for teaching. Respondents shared their knowledge on play-based learning and their perceptions of its effectiveness. They also demonstrated their understanding of its principles, the practical incorporation of this approach into their teaching methodologies, the factors that influenced those decisions, and the importance of play-based learning in complement to structured teaching approaches.

According to the respondents' understanding, play-based learning is primarily seen as an activity-driven approach, emphasizing practical, hands-on experiences in the classroom. They perceived it as a method where the role of the teacher transforms from an instructor to a facilitator, guiding and supporting students rather than directing their every action. Respondents noted that PBL allows children to actively engage with their learning material, promoting a deeper and more personal understanding of concepts. According to them, PBL presents an environment where students can explore, discover, and learn in a manner that is both enjoyable and educational. Some excerpts in support of this finding include:

My understanding of PBL is that it is activity-oriented lesson where the teacher who is a facilitator and shows the learners concepts through teaching them. However, this teaching must be in a playful way that will enable the student to get a concept very well in a practical manner rather than the theoretical model of teaching. **(Central, Komenda COE, Vice Principal)**.

When we say play-based we are talking about engaging activities that the teacher or the facilitator engage the students in. It is normally talking about the practical aspect of learning that facilitate the student performance in a particular discipline or subject. **(Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males, R3)**.

2.2 Knowledge of play-based learning and examples

Across various regions, educators convey a shared view of play-based learning as a dynamic, child-centered approach that integrates play activities into the learning process. This approach is appreciated for its interactivity, positioning teachers as facilitators guiding learners to acquire

essential skills and knowledge. Additionally, educators recognize play-based learning as a natural and effective method, fostering exploration, deeper understanding, and unconscious absorption of knowledge. The responses highlight the adaptability of play-based learning, emphasizing its role in making education relatable, enjoyable, and developmentally suitable for young learners.

Play-based learning is learning in which play activities are incorporated in the learning process, e.g. games used in the learning process to enable learners to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed to acquire in that particular lesson. When we talk about play-based learning, I think it's a child-centered and activity-based learning where the teacher or facilitator uses various learning activities to engage the learners in the teaching and learning activities that will help him or her achieve the learning objectives. **(Upper East, John Bosco COE, FGD Trainee Teachers, Females, R2)**

When we refer to play-based learning it involves the concept of children learning almost effortlessly. They engage in activities that may seem like mere play, yet it's a process where they explore and manipulate objects, leading to a deeper understanding in their minds. It's like children learning unconsciously, as they absorb knowledge through the act of play. **(Headteacher, Central region, Ghasel Basic)**

Play-based pedagogy is whereby you bring the learning to the children's level for them to get a better understanding of what you are teaching them or what you want them to understand. **(Headteacher, Central region, Komenda Practice Basic)**

These voices are examples of existing views on play-based learning as a dynamic, engaging, and effective approach to education. It is mostly seen as a method that not only facilitates the learning process but does so in a manner that is natural and enjoyable for children. The educators' perspectives suggest a broad understanding and appreciation of the benefits of play-based learning, along with a readiness to implement it in their teaching practices.

To ascertain their knowledge on play-based learning, respondents were asked to mention some play-based approaches they used and how they used it. Most of the respondents cited examples of structured play-based approaches, which is a type of play where clear objectives are set by the adult, in this case the teacher, and they control the direction of the play. Notably, the structured play approaches described by respondents often centered around cooperative activities, where children engage in interactive play with shared objectives, negotiated roles, and common materials. Examples included activities such as jolly phonics, role-play, think-pair-share, and dramatization. Below are examples of what participants said:

We use role play in the teaching by assigning children to play the role of characters in a particular given story. **(Upper East, St. Mary Primary, Teacher).**

Jolly phonics is all about sounds as we are using that in play-based learning, after you teach a) for apple, b) for ball, c) for cat. In fact, we are singing at the same time we are teaching and learning. **(Central, Ghasel Basic, Teacher KG)**.

I use think-pair-share mostly in the introductory and assessment stage of most of my lesson to test the knowledge of learners before and after each lesson. **(Upper East, St. John Bosco Primary, Teacher)**.

You can engage students in dramatization. Maybe you can bring up a concept that is related to what you're teaching in the class. So that the students will perform to, so in their performance they will get proper understanding of what is about to be taught or what is being taught in the classroom. **(Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males, R4)**.

A few educators in the southern sector mentioned innovative indoor play-based activities they used to enhance the engagement of early-grade learners. These included making mathematics fun through using objects like bottles or boxes to count, and syllabus blending through word games. By incorporating such approaches, teachers aim to cultivate a stimulating and enjoyable learning environment that promotes active participation and listening, while deepening understanding among young students.

In addition to structured classroom activities, certain respondents highlighted the inclusion of outdoor experiences like field trips and nature walks as forms of play-based pedagogies. These outdoor activities were perceived as valuable opportunities for children to engage with their natural environment, fostering experiential learning and exploration.

“We do go for nature walk and I ask learners about what they saw and from their responses will give learners a clue of what we are coming to learn today.” **(Central, Ghasel Basic, Teacher P2)**.

Moreover, most examples of play-based pedagogies were mentioned by tutors and trainee teachers at the college level, as well as by teachers at the school level. It appeared that headteachers and college principals possessed limited knowledge regarding examples of play-based activities. Furthermore, none of the respondents offered instances of unstructured play, indicating a possible preference for structured and goal-oriented play experiences in their educational practice.

2.3 Perceptions about Play-based learning

The overall consensus among the participants regarding play-based learning was overwhelmingly positive, with respondents considering it an excellent and suitable teaching method for young children. They perceived play-based learning as highly advantageous for children's development, particularly in the socio-emotional domain, where their communication skills witnessed significant improvement. Respondents strongly believed that play-based learning emphasized a child-

centered approach, thereby facilitating the achievement of lesson objectives. Moreover, participants described play-based learning as an enjoyable experience for students, fostering a genuine love for learning within them.

My opinion about the benefits of the play-based activities is that I think it is very appropriate at this grade level, because looking at it when you engage students you know those kinds of play-based activities it improved their communication and collaboration. The children come together so the fact that they come together they communicate, they collaborate and do things together. So, first of all, to improve their collaborative and communication. And then it also improves their interpersonal relationship because when you put them together ... **(Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males)**

My perception is that when you use it, the children learn faster even on their own and it also helps them grab the lesson. It also helps them come to a realization that what they are leaning is part of them and not something far from or new to them. **(Central, Komenda Practice Basic, Teacher P2).**

2.4 Factors influencing use of Play-based pedagogies

Understanding the factors that shape the utilization of play-based pedagogies is crucial in fostering their widespread implementation. By further exploring the reasons behind the discrepancies in perceptions and experiences, it becomes possible to identify potential barriers that hinder the consistent use of play-based approaches in the field. In the southern sector, at the college level, tutors reported that trainee teachers do not employ play-based pedagogies when they are in the field. However, this perspective contradicts that of the vice principal, who asserts that when trainee teachers are assigned to schools, they actively utilize play-based pedagogies, receiving positive feedback from the respective headteachers. Excerpts from college level participants:

“Most teachers on the field are not using play-based but are still stuck with the lecturing and the teacher-centered methods to teach.” **(Central, Komenda COE, Tutor 2)**

“Here we do have a particular person assigned to ECE, but we have different subject teachers who tutor the trainee teachers at the ECE level in different subjects. Therefore, in their teaching, they try to make the lessons as activity friendly as possible so that these trainees can implement it. So far, they have gone for their first STS teaching practice at our demonstration school and the feedback from the head teacher was positive.” **(Central, Komenda COE, Vice Principal).**

The situation is not so different in the northern sector. Over there the tutors pointed out their commitment to integrating play-based activities in their teaching methods. They reported that they train their students on using PBL and also encourage them to do the same when they are assigned

to teach in their respective schools. However, the tutors could not ascertain whether these trainee teachers use PBL when they are assigned to schools to teach.

“One of the things we do is, we follow them up on the field to see how they are implementing the strategies. And that's why we talked about the STS (support teaching school) when they go for this STS, we monitor them, we interview them, we discuss with them what have they observed”. (**Upper East, Navrongo Interview with College Tutor, Bosco COE**).

A headteacher at the school level in the northern sector expressed a firm belief that early grade teachers refrain from utilizing play-based methods in teaching due to the perceived time-consuming nature of such approaches. This assertion was substantiated during an interview with a teacher from the same school, who disclosed that despite recognizing the appropriateness of play-based learning for early graders, it remains largely underutilized. Another teacher from a different school in the northern region highlighted the lack of play materials as a significant impediment to the implementation of play-based methods. This scarcity of resources further hampers the widespread adoption of play-based approaches in the classroom. Excerpts in support of this findings:

“Most often teachers do not like including play in their lessons with the excuse that it is time-consuming.” (**Upper East, St. John Bosco Primary, Headteacher**).

“I would use play-based teaching and learning approaches in my classroom because it helps learners understand the concepts that are being taught better. It is, however, very difficult to practice in my class.” (**Upper East, St. John Bosco Primary, Teacher P1**)

“I wanted to use the play-based materials but there are no resources available in the classroom.” (**Upper East Navrongo, St. Mary Primary, Teacher, Post Observation Interview**).

Despite the overall limited implementation of Play-Based Learning (PBL) across both college and school levels, there were instances at the school level where some teachers reported actively incorporating PBL activities into their lessons. These educators identified opportunities within their teaching frameworks to weave in play-based elements, demonstrating an adaptive approach to the curriculum. The following are the voices of some teachers who incorporate some play-based activities when teaching.

“Sometimes I use the learners themselves to demonstrate something but in subsequent days, for instance in Natural Science and we are treating natural and artificial source of light, I started with the natural source, and I draw them and indicated it on a cardboard and same with the artificial, I draw them on cardboard and in pictures for them to see. We also use role-play by losing the learners eyes with a blind fold or some of their uniform belt and

then ask learners what can they see? Later, I explain to them to understand that without light, you cannot see anything.” (Central, Komenda Practice Basic, Teacher, P2)

“Yes, we use the jolly phonics through singing a song of the letter sounds.” (Upper East, St. Mary Primary, Teacher)

The respondents shared their perspectives on the key determinants influencing their decision to integrate Play-Based Learning (PBL) into their teaching approaches. The primary motivating factor identified was the remarkable effectiveness of PBL in achieving learning objectives. Numerous respondents emphasized that when children are exposed to PBL, they demonstrate an elevated level of comprehension, highlighting how this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of concepts. Furthermore, several teachers highlighted the inherent ease of teaching associated with PBL, as it minimizes the reliance on extensive verbal instruction. Supporting quotes from participants are as follows:

“The children will understand the concept faster than you coming to stand there and teach with the lecturing method. It also helps reduce your talking. You can also easily get feedback from the children.” (Central, Aldersgate Basic, Teacher P1)

“It makes teaching easier for you as a teacher and you can easily get feedback from the children. Maybe if you are using 30 minutes to teach because it is about play, it makes teaching simple.” (Central, Aldersgate Basic, Teacher P1).

At the in-service level, some teachers expressed that their primary reason for implementing Play-Based Learning (PBL) in their teaching practices is due to its inclusion as a requirement in the curriculum. Despite encountering challenges such as scarcity of appropriate materials, these teachers make conscious effort to incorporate PBL into their instruction because it is mandated by the curriculum. Their dedication to adhering to the curriculum guidelines underscores their commitment to providing a comprehensive and holistic educational experience for their students, despite the obstacles they may face. This is what one of them said, “*It is part of our syllabus, so I have to use it. But the materials are not there. Also, children like play and they understand more when you use play to teach.*” (Central, Komenda Practice Basic, Teacher, KG).

2.5 Support offered to implement Play-based learning

Respondents provided insights to the support received to implement play-based learning both at the college and school levels. The support ranged from training sessions, assistance from district offices and NGOs to the provision of teaching and learning resources. Additionally, the role of supervision was highlighted, presenting an understanding of the multifaceted support mechanisms influencing the successful implementation of play-based learning. There were also instances where educators received no support.

2.5.1 College-based training/ Pre-service training

Respondents acknowledged the significance of training in supporting play-based learning. It was reported that aside the theoretical training the trainee teachers receive on PBL, during their Supported Teaching in Schools (STS) at the basic schools, they get to demonstrate what they had learned.

“The only support I can say is that the school allows the students to go out for STS to observe. This is from the government, but the school helps because they provide the vehicle that carry them out of the school. So far as I am concerned that is the only thing. And then recently when the children vacated, they asked some to stay and do practice at our demonstration school to help the early grade teachers over there. Apart from that I do not know of any other support. If it is about materials sometimes the students themselves prepare it” (**Central, Komenda COE, Tutor 2**).

Another source of training on PBL at the college level is the Professional Development (PD) training session. The PD training sessions are organized solely for the college tutors. One college tutor from the northern sector noted that the college arranges professional development training sessions for them, during which they receive materials to learn about play-based methodology.

“The support we receive here is, I would say, our PD sessions where teachers use this time to share ideas as to how to go about play-based pedagogies and also the school support us with materials and refreshment to do this.” (**Upper East, St John Bosco COE, Tutor**)

2.5.2 School-based training/in-service training

Both teachers and headteachers from both the northern and southern sectors strongly affirmed that they receive substantial support through training on play-based pedagogies. These training sessions are frequently organized at the district level, where educators are carefully selected from various schools within the district to participate in these specialized programs. This targeted approach ensures that teachers receive comprehensive and practical training on play-based pedagogies, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement these innovative teaching methods in their classrooms. Quotes from participants to buttress the finding:

“The training was about play-based learning. So, I gave out two of my teachers for that workshop. When they came, they had a lot of activity-based approach. The training was about child-centered approach. (**Upper East, St. John Bosco Primary, Headteacher**)

“They sometimes go for workshops at the Municipal level but the two teachers who had the training have left unfortunately. There are some workshops at the KEEA Municipality, Teachers Credit Union in Elmina. No NGO has come in to provide training, but I attended Sabre’s training.” (**Central, Ghasel Basic, Headteacher**)

“I use my experience from workshops I have attended to promote the use of play in my lessons. The workshops are organized by the district. At these workshops they teach us how to use some play activities.” **(Central, Komenda Practice Basic, Teacher, KG)**

In the southern sector, respondents highlighted the Professional Learning Community (PLC) as a valuable school-based training session that offers a platform for exploring and learning about play-based pedagogies. The PLC serves as a collaborative forum organized at the school level, where the head teacher convenes with teachers to engage in meaningful discussions and exchange innovative ideas. During these gatherings, teachers who have been selected for district-level training have the opportunity to share their newly acquired knowledge and insights with their colleagues, fostering a culture of continuous professional development. One headteacher had this to say:

“The school itself offer some in-service training for all the teachers. We hold PLCs in the school. We have it every Thursday morning. One teacher does the facilitations and leads the rest of us, and it is rotated each week.” **(Central, Ghasel Basic, Headteacher)**

A notable pattern emerged as most teachers at the school level expressed that district-level training sessions lacked significant impact since they do not recall any lessons from the training sessions. This is what a participant expressed:

“We go for some workshops where they teach play-based activities. But not all the teachers go, sometimes they choose one person. ... I had one or two other trainings on play-based methods. I have the certificate, but I have forgotten what it was about.” **(Central, Ghasel Basic, Teacher KG)**

Another prevalent issue that came up was the fact that teachers openly acknowledged undergoing training; however, they encountered difficulties translating that training into practice due to the absence of adequate teaching and learning materials. The scarcity of essential resources hindered the effective implementation of the acquired knowledge and strategies in their classrooms as reported below.

“Yes. This training was about differentiated learning which emphasized in learning based and play based activities in teaching English and Mathematics. But the materials for practicing this initiative have not been provided yet since the training therefore making it impossible to be practiced.” **(Upper East, Navrongo, St. John Bosco Primary, Teacher)**

2.5.3 Direct assistance by the District and NGOs

Direct assistance from GES through the districts and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as USAID and Right to Play was recognized as a significant external support system. Respondents cited the contributions of these entities in providing resources, expertise, and

guidance to teachers at the school level. Such external support was deemed instrumental in overcoming challenges and enhancing the overall quality of play-based education. Here are some excerpts:

“Interventions from GES partnering with some corporate bodies have been provided. Non GALOP schools in the area also benefit from differentiated learning program from P1 to P6. USAID Learning is also available. These have made the teachers very resourceful and innovative in planning their lessons.” (**Central, Komenda Practice Basic, Headteacher**)

“I have only received training from the workshop that I spoke about earlier, where I learnt ‘making maths fun’ activity from. It is organized by KEEA (Komenda Edina Eguafu Abrem) district office, the municipality. They organized it for KG teachers. It is not often; I have attended about 5 or 6 times.” (**Central, Ghasel Basic, Teacher KG**)

At the college level, these Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) extend their support to schools by establishing resource centres. These centres serve as valuable facilities where trainee teachers can apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in their classrooms to practical, hands-on experiences. By creating this bridge between classroom learning and real-world application, these resource centres enhance the trainee teachers' educational experience, providing them with a platform to actively engage and implement the skills and concepts learned during their academic coursework. This is what one of the students had to say:

“I will say it is in the pipeline because we are now having our Montessori block which they are now putting things in order. So, for now, I will say no, but I believe they have put things in place hoping that next semester we will be having practical aspect on that.” (**Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males, R2**)

At the school level, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) go beyond supporting individual teachers; they extend their assistance to headteachers as well. This support involves offering training in Play-Based Learning (PBL), aimed at equipping headteachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively oversee the implementation of play-based methodologies within their respective schools. A quote from a participant in support of this:

“Right to play has prepared me to be able to supervise my teachers. Before you can achieve the objective of right to play your class size should be manageable.” (**Upper East, Navrongo, St. Mary Primary, Headteacher**)

2.5.4 Supervision

Supervision was acknowledged as a supportive element in the effective implementation of play-based learning. Regular monitoring allows for the assessment of teaching practices, feedback on performance, and the identification of areas for improvement. This form of support contributes to

maintaining a high standard of play-based education within the classroom setting. Excerpts from participants:

The support we receive from our tutors is that they guide us on how to implement play-based activities in our lessons; the lesson plans for instance, they guide us on how to prepare the lesson plan for play based activities in the sense that all learners irrespective of their background or their social economic status, learners with special educational needs all their learning needs are met. **(Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males)**

I know because we will finally get into the field. We post our final year students doing their internships programs to some of these schools and we also go there to monitor them and that alone will let us know whether they are implementing the methods or not. **(Upper East, Navrongo, St. John Bosco COE Tutor)**

Other teachers have challenge in inculcating PBL learning in their lessons because they may not be able to catch up with time. So, in supervising them we have to ensure that they use it. **(Upper East, Navrongo, St. John Bosco Primary, Headteacher)**

2.6 Lack of Support

Interestingly, some respondents have shared their experiences of encountering a lack of support when it comes to implementing play-based learning. These voices highlight the absence of assistance or guidance in incorporating play-based pedagogies into their teaching practices despite their enthusiasm for utilizing these methods. Excerpts from participants:

No because there was no training in play-based approaches for us. **(Upper East, Navrongo, St. Mary Primary, Teacher)**

For me I can say, we haven't received much support from our tutors when it comes to play-based activities. **(Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males, R1)**

One of these respondents highlighted the challenge of solely learning theoretical aspects without practical demonstrations, emphasizing the need for hands-on experiences to effectively implement play-based methods. The absence of practical guidance from tutors was perceived as a hindrance, potentially impacting the participants' ability to incorporate play-based activities into their teaching practices. This lack of support reveals the importance of bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, advocating for comprehensive training that encompasses both aspects to enhance the successful implementation of play-based learning. A participant said that,

(...) there are some things which needs practical demonstration. But here's the case, we are only learning the theoretical aspects. So, when we go out there, it is going to be something that is going to hinder us out there because we have not been shown how we can use the

practical things to demonstrate or to help our learners when it comes to something like play-based activities. So, I can say we have not received much support from our tutors when it comes to play-based activities. **(Central, Komenda COE, FGD, Males, R1)**

Some pre-service respondents expressed reservations about the level of support received, particularly citing challenges within the college system. The bureaucratic procedures inherent in the system were identified as barriers, hindering the acquisition of necessary resources and support for play-based learning. Specifically, they highlighted a lack of support in terms of materials, highlighting the difficulty in obtaining essential resources for effective play-based activities. This was expressed by a participant thus:

As for me for now I will say no because of the system. You know in the university system if you want something you have to go through a lot of procedures before you get it. So, for now, I will say no. in terms of materials there is no support. **(Central, Komenda COE, Tutor 2)**

This insight draws attention to the systemic hurdles that educators may face within academic institutions, indicating a need for streamlined processes to ensure efficient and timely support for the successful implementation of play-based learning.

3.0 Play based learning Gender and Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

In this section, the study explored the intersection of play-based learning with gender dynamics and the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Play-based learning is an innovative approach that promotes active engagement, creativity, and critical thinking among students. It offers a rich learning environment that can benefit all learners, regardless of their gender or individual learning needs. However, it is essential to examine how play-based learning practices have been tailored to address the unique requirements and experiences of different genders and children with SEN.

3.1 Knowledge of gender inclusion by teachers

Gender norms are essential in ensuring equity as well as equality in children participation during lessons delivery or play activities. Giving learners the ability to participate in teaching and learning opens room for effective understanding and confidence in expressing their interest and understanding of a topic of discussion. Nonetheless, majority of teachers expressed adequate knowledge on gender inclusion in the classrooms. Teachers and head teachers alike shared insightful perspectives on the importance of actively involving and engaging both boys and girls in lessons at their school. They emphasized the vital need to incorporate a gender-inclusive approach during lesson delivery, emphasizing that gender roles should not be assigned to learners

solely based on their biological sex, even in a girls' school setting. These educators recognized that nurturing an inclusive and equitable learning environment goes beyond traditional gender norms and stereotypes.

Interestingly Saint John Bosco's Primary School, which was observed to have a mixed-gender student population, had respondents conveying the profound impact of integrating boys and girls in lessons and play activities. According to the headteacher, both boys and girls experience a sense of equality and inclusivity when they are brought together for learning and play. This is what he said to this effect:

It makes both boys and girls feel equal. The learners now know that gender is not a barrier to learning. They equally know that both boys and girls can be involved in all learning activities (**Headteacher, St John Bosco's Primary School**)

In addition, there were strong assertions regarding the critical importance of gender and inclusion in enhancing learning outcomes during lesson delivery. Educators emphasized that gender and inclusion serve as drivers for promoting gender equality and ensuring equitable access to education, resources, and opportunities for all students. Here is what one of the teacher participants said to this effect:

They promote gender equality by ensuring that both male and female students have equal access to education, resources and opportunities (**Teacher, Upper East region**).

Furthermore, teachers emphasized the direct correlation between gender and inclusion approaches and the confidence that learners exhibit in positively challenging one another. They highlighted that by integrating gender-inclusive practices, students' horizons are expanded and their interest in the learning process is heightened. This not only leads to improved learning outcomes but also provides students with valuable opportunities to engage and interact with peers of the opposite sex.

A female Trainee student from the Komenda College of Education confirms this by saying:

Yes. For instance, when we talk about gender and inclusion, there is no discrimination like when you are teaching, you don't only call the girls but the boys as well so there will be no discrimination, we ensure that everyone is involved in the lesson.

3.2 Perception on Gender sensitive play based activities

Majority of respondents shared their perceptions on all gender involvement in classroom teaching and learning processes and play based activities. Based on responses of teachers, all children by nature deserve equal participation and access to effective teaching and learning which in the long run, promotes child's development and foster an environment where children feel safe and valued. A headteacher from the KEAA Ghasel Primary School in the Central region shared a perspective

in involving all gender in the teaching and learning process, noting how she perceives the participation of both sexes irrespective of their physical abilities or cognitive differences.

The understanding is that every child, irrespective of physical abilities or cognitive differences, is unique. The goal is to foster an environment where each child feels valued and capable, ensuring a positive learning experience according to their individual needs.

A tutor from Komenda College of Education added:

So in early grade education, we involve both female and male students. Some people have the perception that early childhood education is for only females. In fact, those who are completing we have about 27 males, so everybody is included.

Similarly, a trainee teacher from Komenda College of Education said:

Even the new curriculum has been talking about gender. So, if most of the talkings are like we should respect every gender, there shouldn't be any gender stereotyping. There should be equal access and opportunities to every student being male or female, irrespective of their sex or their background, socio economic background. And then also avoiding harassment..

A male student trainee from the Focus Group Discussion in St John Bosco College also stated:

What we seek to achieve is that all the students should understand any lesson that would be conveyed in the classroom equally without leaving some behind and when we need to use the concept of equity, we need to use them to apply it so that you do not say boys needs attention more than girls or girls needs attention more than boys

By implementing gender-inclusive approaches, both inside and outside the classroom, teachers become vigilant guardians in effectively delivering lessons and overcoming biases associated with teaching students of different genders. Training sessions on gender inclusion conducted by COE tutors, government bodies, or NGOs provide teachers with valuable insights and strategies for effectively managing students of all genders, resulting in significant improvements in learners' educational outcomes. Tutors emphasized the critical importance of such training and the tangible benefits it has demonstrated for teachers. A tutor from the St John Bosco College of Education asserted:

The training of gender was something that we did in our usual teaching so that it will enable us to be aware in our teaching we should show that we include equal participation to do away with discrimination like pointing to boys only or girls only. This ensures equal opportunity to remove biasness. **(Tutor, John Bosco College of Education)**

A headteacher from the St John Bosco Primary school responded by explaining how teachers involve both boys' and girls' during lesson delivery to make them feel equal.

They do not discriminate, because they do not say because you are a boy, you should answer this question or you are a girl, have this activity or that. **(Teacher, John Bosco Primary)**

3.3 Training on gender

Regarding training on gender, it was acknowledged how some teachers, tutors and students from the training colleges indeed undergo gender and inclusion training to handle all children regardless of their gender. However, some respondents expressed their worries of not having any training on gender and inclusion or of it being insufficient. Overall, they demonstrated little knowledge on implementing gender inclusive approaches and incorporating play activities into their teaching. Instead, the focus was on traditional teaching practices, which has been mentioned previously, are not always inclusive or easily understood by the pupils in comparison to play-based activities.

Nonetheless, all respondents interviewed alluded to the impact gender-based training has on learners, both boys' and girls' education, and the transformative changes in learners' ability to learn as well as their attitudes and behavior in their societies. These trainings were seen as helping both genders understand and appreciate each other's role, while changing learners' perception of the role of gender in teaching. Several accounts mentioned learners' view of a gendered approach to teaching as an equal opportunity to access education, and not as a barrier or limitation to learning.

According to a male tutor from St. John Bosco college, gender-based training:

(...) makes teaching holistic. It makes all the sexes contribute. Because when you open that space for them, that shyness, or relegation that I am inferior will not be there. It will allow both sexes especially that child to participate in the teaching and learning activities very actively. **(Male tutor, St. John Bosco COE)**

Relatedly, a respondent from Komenda COE (tutor) added:

It impacts my teaching positively because everybody feels at home, everybody is included, nobody is left behind both male and female are all included. Initially that misconception was there, and the females were feeling bad. But now that they understand, everybody is taking part. **(Tutor, Komenda COE)**

Talking about the impact of gender-based training, a tutor from St John Bosco COE, mentioned how mindful he had become of the role gender plays in teaching, particularly relating to children with special needs by making him change his teaching methods. Similarly, a female tutor from the

same college acknowledged how gender and inclusive education raised awareness to how questions were posed during lesson delivery, and to the physical access difficulties of classrooms, which are not designed for children with special needs. Moreover, several other accounts mentioned the importance of non-discrimination within the learning environment based on gender, social background, or disability, and referred to inclusion as cornerstone for effective teaching and learning.

3.4 Inclusive approaches to SEN

Based on the findings of this study, only a few of the respondents interviewed understood how to include children with special educational needs in their classrooms, although majority acknowledged its significance, especially for children from less privileged backgrounds. Moreover, knowledge of inclusive approaches with learners with special education needs in lessons and play activities is clearly absent, with 80% of schools not even recording students with special educational needs in the first place.

Nevertheless, some of the methods that are currently being employed by teachers toward children with special education needs were captured. For instance, a male student trainee from the Focus Group Discussion stated that sitting arrangements should be thought of in a way where both boys and girls are mixed, irrespective of their disability, and not segregated according to their gender. Other examples were profered by a male respondent and two teachers from Komenda COE, respectively.

For now, it's internally examined and compulsory for every student to do a sign language and that is especially for inclusivity. So, when he or she gets outside, at least if you run into children with special needs or challenges, you know how to assess the person. Yeah. So, it's something that is very high in the college's teaching and lessons. Inclusion of all learners is a priority in this school. **(Tutor, Komenda COE)**

And there was another one who had writing problem but this child in question is very good in oral works, answering questions in class and communicating. I had to talk to the new teacher that this is the problem that this child has so she can also help the child in the new class but personally, I have provided an intervention for this child where the child will be tracing alphabet letters in his books to help improve the writing skills. **(Teacher, Central Region)**

These training has helped teachers in their teaching to bring all children on board, and to ensure that no child is left out or behind. For instance, I was having a child who had speech problem and I did not neglect this child but involve him. **(Teacher, Central Region)**

From the data collected, it was observed that there was a shared understanding that being a child with special educational needs must not restrict them from their educational prowess. Instead, teachers should focus on learning about teaching methods tailored to children with special needs

and according to their individual capacities to implement them during their classes. According to a teacher from the Joseph Adabayeri Primary school, “learners with Special education needs may have unique strengths, preferences and learning styles”.

4.0 Existing innovations in the early learning space

Innovations in the early grade learning contributes significantly to the improvements of the learning outcome of children ensuring that every child learns through any innovation recognized and implemented by the Ghana Education Service. Moreover, an innovation friendly space makes room for effective teaching and learning and the ability to create new set of ideas in the teaching environment. However, the interviews including observations revealed that existing innovations in the early learning space has influence on the use of role play and games thereby also improved how learners learn. For instance, a male respondent (headteacher) from the upper east region during the interview explained how it has influenced his teaching;

It has enabled early graders to learn at their own pace. Learners are now involved in the teaching and learning process than ever (**Headteacher, Upper East Region**).

4.1. Examples of the Play-based education innovations

The findings from the research showcase a varied understanding and awareness of existing innovations within the early learning space among respondents. It is evident that different perspectives emerged, highlighting both the presence of innovative practices and the lack of comprehensive knowledge in this domain. However, despite these insightful examples of innovative techniques in early learning, it is noteworthy that a significant portion of respondents lacked detailed knowledge of specific innovators or initiatives. For instance, only a few mentioned GALOP as an example of innovators, suggesting a gap in awareness or exposure to prominent players in the field of early childhood education innovation. The mention of "capitation and GALOP fund" hints at some familiarity with financial mechanisms supporting educational innovation, yet it also points to a possible need for more widespread dissemination of information regarding such initiatives.

4.1.1 Professional Learning Community

Respondents provided valuable insights into various examples of innovators within the educational landscape. These perspectives shed light on the diverse approaches and initiatives shaping the early learning space. Notably, respondents showcased an understanding and appreciation for professional learning community programs as significant contributors to innovation in education.

4.1.2 Right to Play

When considering existing innovations, such as Right to Play, it was found that a significant number of respondents from the Upper East Region and the Central Region demonstrated a clear understanding of Right to Play as an organization, as well as the crucial roles and contributions they make in supporting early learning. Specifically, respondents highlighted the organization's provision of trainings and workshops on early grade teaching and learning, along with the supply of teaching and learning materials that benefit both teachers and learners. These initiatives play a vital role in ensuring effective teaching and learning, consequently improving the learning outcomes of early graders. However, it is worth noting that the interviews conducted in the regions revealed that Right to Play's effectiveness is limited to only a few areas within the regions. Respondents expressed their awareness of Right to Play's initiatives, but their knowledge and familiarity with the organization varied. Respondents expressed their knowledge on Right to Play below;

"I know Right to Play, constantly invites teachers to train them on play-based pedagogies. They have some play-on pen drives and books for teachers to refer to" (**Female Tutor, Central Region**).

"I know right to play to be a global organisation that is out there to support children and to empower children to overcome their learning challenges" (**Male College Tutor, Upper East Region**).

"I think it is an organization that is basically into children to improve their quality of education and that is trying to integrate playing activity into the educational system to help the children coping up in the education to better their life in the future" (**Female Respondent, Focus Group Discussion, Upper East Region**).

"The Right to Play I have heard of it as an organization that aims in providing learning materials for children at the early grade in order to improve upon their teaching and learning and their level of understanding" (**Male Respondent, Focus Group Discussion, Upper East Region**).

"It is a program aimed at building teachers' capacity in implementing child centred and play based pedagogies. It is a program aimed at building teachers' capacity in implementing child centred and play based pedagogies" (**Male Headteacher, Upper East Region**).

"Right to play is the only group that came to my school to train teachers in that direction. They always organize workshops for us and at times they inculcate all these into it but not specifically on the child learning approach" (**Female Headteacher, Upper East Region**).

This knowledge of Right to Play was not limited only to the in-service but at the colleges of education as well. Both tutors and trainee teachers alike expressed some ideas about the activities

of RTP in the early learning space within Ghana. Various stakeholders at the pre-service level reflected this by saying

"Right to play concentrates mainly on integrated play pedagogy in teaching and learning for early grades. They concentrate on KG 1 to primary 6" (**Tutor, Komenda Basic School**).

"I know they offer training to teachers in different schools in play-based activities and how to use the things in their environment to create materials for carrying out the Play based activities" (**Respondent Vice Principal, Central Region**).

"We have the coordinators for play-base, I mean right to play coordinators who come to support us in doing this" (**College Tutor, Upper East Region**).

"Yeah, for the right to play. We have tutors who embark on workshops, right to play workshops. And the lead is the one I introduced you to who actively participates in RTP workshops. So, in terms of numbers, two tutors have attended the right to Play workshops. We had some kind of a committee for them to share what they might have learned with department during sharing sessions" (**Male Respondent, College, Central Region**).

4.1.3 Sabre Education

Regarding Sabre Education, all respondents from the interviews conducted in the Upper East Region expressed a lack of information about any of Sabre Education's activities. Consequently, they have not participated in their workshops or programs due to the organization's limited presence in the region. However, a minority of respondents from the Central Region also indicated limited knowledge or awareness of Sabre Education. Below are their responses reflecting their understanding of Sabre Education:

"Unless you ask the headmaster. I don't know about them. I have just heard their names" (**Respondent Teacher, Central Region**).

"I have heard of them personally but not had a personal encounter with them. Although, I have visited some schools elsewhere and I saw that they have provided them with materials and they had learning corners or centers, and I saw the kitchen corners and materials are available for children to explore" (**Teacher, Central Region**).

"During my internship, I had an experience with Sabre trust, and I would say it was very nice and okay. Their classroom is very nice and lively, and the class size is very okay and attractive" (**Female Teacher, Central Region**).

Interestingly, at the Colleges of Education level tutors and principals had fair knowledge of Sabre Education and could express their encounter with them. Several respondents, including college tutors and trainee teachers, highlighted Sabre Education's recent partnership endeavors aimed at

enhancing the quality of early childhood education. These partnerships involve training programs for early childhood student teachers and teachers from partner schools, along with the establishment of resource centers. The emphasis is on practical experiences to complement theoretical learning, particularly focusing on kindergarten (KG) education. Furthermore, there's a recognition of Sabre Education's specialization in KG interventions, pedagogies, and resource provision, ensuring a comprehensive approach to support KG teachers and improve learning outcomes for young children. The creation of classrooms, provision of teaching materials for play-based learning, and setup of early childhood centers at training colleges showcase Sabre's commitment to holistic educational development. Respondents had this to say:

They identify schools and identify some teachers. They train their professors so that they use them as people who bring intelligence **(Tutor, COE Central region)**

For Sabre recently we had partnership with them. We just signed an MOU last week Wednesday. So, they are coming to help us train and ensure quality early childhood education. They are coming in to help us train our early childhood student teachers. Also help us some teachers from our partnership schools and our demonstration school as well as organizing workshop for early grade teachers here. And even coming to set up a resource centre for us. So that resource center will be a place for practical. Because in the classroom, though we use play and other things, it is theory, theory, theory. So, they have to get more experience from the practical work. So, if the resource is ready, it will be helpful". **(Female Tutor, COE Central region)**

But Sabre, they concentrate more on KG. Apart from introducing the pedagogy they also prepare resources and create Resource Centres for KG. So, they are specialized, ensuring that there is a proper practice when it comes to KG one and two, so, they concentrate more on the KG interventions, strategies as well as providing resources for KG learning. **(Female Tutor, COE Central region)**

I know Sabre offers assistance in the form of training, assistance in the form of providing like, the books, work books to their partner Schools. Not even books alone. We are talking about TLMs in general including online teaching materials. So, it could be in the form of either television or sometimes even providing chips shelf for schools. Yeah, and they educate and involve tutors in training, workshops and those things. That is pay the MOU that I saw because we are not yet working with Sabre. We just signed the MOU last Friday. **(Vice Principal, COE Central region)**

4.1.4 Other Innovations

The responses regarding various educational initiatives, including UNICEF, USAID Learning (FHI), and T-TEL/T2E, reflect a mix of awareness and engagement within the central region's educational landscape. UNICEF was mentioned in relation to educational games designed to support teaching across subjects like math and language. Collaborations with universities, such as UEW and VAKEY, were highlighted, indicating a broader reach and partnership approach.

USAID Learning (FHI) was acknowledged for its role in teacher training, particularly in literacy aspects like reading and English language proficiency. The emphasis on using innovative teaching methods, such as phonics, to improve communication skills among learners was noted. However, very few responses were recorded for T-TEL and T2E, suggesting a potential gap in awareness or engagement with these specific initiatives within the surveyed group.

USAID Learning is also available. These have made the teachers very resourceful and innovative in planning their lessons. Mostly that these innovations provide training followed up with resources from the schools they work **(Headteacher, Central region)**

4.2. Volunteer teachers

Volunteer teachers are resource teachers who devote their time to voluntarily offer their services freely in educational sectors through teaching without being paid for their services. Their services serve as a tremendous impact to both teachers and learners because some of them take part in preparing and planning lessons, teaching or guiding learners during play activities, marking of scripts and grading among others. Respondents during the interviews expressed their knowledge and experiences with volunteer teachers and the services they offer. Whereas some had knowledge to what their services are, others did not have any knowledge about them and did not also have any experience with them.

4.2.1 Knowledge of volunteer teachers

Volunteer teachers play a crucial role in education by offering their services without monetary compensation. Their commitment reflects a genuine desire to contribute to the community and support educational activities. The definition of volunteer teachers varied slightly across responses, with some emphasizing the voluntary nature of teaching without coercion or payment. In contrast, the teacher as well headteacher from the upper east region emphasized the voluntary nature of volunteering, highlighting that it involves individuals committing their time and efforts without expecting financial remuneration. In an overview, respondents gave their opinions of volunteer teachers based on their knowledge as who they are as far as teaching and learning among early graders are concerned. This is what they said:

I am picking it from the word volunteer. They teach voluntarily without forcing them. I have not had an experience with such people. As I said earlier, when we vacated some of the early grade students went to the demonstration school to help them willingly so that one can come under volunteering **(Male College Tutor, Central Region)**.

The ones I would consider volunteer teachers are the college of education trainee teachers who come here for their STS. Also, we had a few people volunteering to teach during the BECE period” **(Headteacher, Central Region)**.

When they went, I think I was there about three times. They were teaching, the class teachers were there but they were teaching as class teachers, and they were doing well **(College Tutor, Central Region)**.

Volunteer teachers are people that commit their own time to teach in the community schools without being paid **(Teacher, Upper East Region)**.

They are individuals who willingly offer their services to teach or support in educational activities without being paid or given monetary compensation **(Headteacher, Upper East Region)**.

4.2.2 Benefits and importance of having volunteer teachers

Volunteer teachers play a pivotal and indispensable role in boosting the efforts of regular teachers and enhancing various facets of education delivery. Their presence brings forth invaluable contributions, including fresh perspectives, supplementary resources, and a wide array of teaching methodologies. These dedicated individuals introduce a renewed vitality into the learning environment, fostering an atmosphere of enrichment and empowerment for students. By collaborating with regular teachers, volunteer teachers create an environment that enhances the educational experience and promotes holistic development. Some participants explained as follows:

They were 13 in total and they assisted the class teachers in their activities. 2 took over the KG classes and did not have to be supported by the class teachers. They run the classes themselves. They were all male trainee teachers who were at the KG level. At the time there was a vacancy for the KG teachers so they had to step in and support the school. Now the vacancy has been filled... **(Headteacher, Central Region)**

The benefit we had from them was, they helped with the English language and Mathematics and also, they were always having early morning classes that was solely on reading. And those of us who had them, we saw the impact they had on the children's reading, and it's really helped a lot. I saw that most of the children's English improved and it was a plus for having them around. **(Male Primary 2 Teacher, Central Region)**

Children get additional support from them. 2, Children gain diverse fresh.... 3, mentoring and role play modelling 4, community engagement, 5, language acquisition 6, enrichment of activities. **(Female Teacher, Primary 1, Upper East Region)**

"The volunteer teachers are very beneficial to the young children because some schools do not have enough teachers. So, if the volunteer teachers are there, they can help in teaching the children". **(Teacher, Upper East Region)**

Amidst all positive benefits mentioned by the respondents based on their knowledge of how volunteer teachers are important, a respondent expressed a concern and uncertainty as to whether they are actually beneficial or not. Below is the concern a teacher from the central region raised;

I think it's beneficial since they teach for free. But what if the thing they are teaching is not the right thing. So, is it good for them to teach or not? I am also asking. So, I'll say it's 50,50 because some will do the right thing, and some will not do the right thing. It all depends on how they will teach and the method that they will use to teach the children"

4.3 Perceptions about the innovator's programme

The perceptions about the innovator's program as expressed by various respondents offer valuable insights into the educational landscape and the potential impact of innovative programs. Teachers and educators recognize the importance of continuous professional development. The emphasis on programs aimed at promoting child-centered learning through play-based activities and differentiated learning indicates a desire for holistic teacher training that aligns with modern pedagogical approaches. There is a positive perception regarding play-based curriculum and resources. Teachers acknowledge the value of incorporating play into education to enhance student engagement, understanding, and overall learning outcomes. The use of innovative play-based assessment tools is also seen as beneficial for gauging student progress and development. The mention of technology and digital tools in the innovator's program reflects a recognition of the role technology plays in modern education. Blended learning, design thinking, and the use of resource persons showcase a forward-thinking approach to integrating technology for effective teaching and learning experiences. Headteachers and teachers alike believe that the innovator's program will be beneficial to learners. The focus on child-centered learning, play-based activities, and professional development opportunities indicates a commitment to enhancing the quality of education and promoting student success. Some respondents had this to say:

The Transition to Education and Differentiated Learning programs are two initiatives that support play-based pedagogies and organized a few trainings for teachers to be well informed about these pedagogies. **(Female Primary 1 Teacher, Upper East Region)**

Teachers are given the opportunity to develop themselves professionally. They are excellent programs in that they are aimed at promoting child-centered learning through play-based activities. **(Male Headteacher, Upper East Region)**

My perceptions about the innovator's programme include blended learning, child-centred learning, cooperative learning, design thinking, and the use of resource persons. **(Primary 2 Male Teacher, Upper East Region)**

The programme implemented will be beneficial to the learners, but I think follow ups immediately after the workshop will help in the implementation of the programme. The content is right for the learners. **(Teacher, Upper East Region)**

4.3.1 Content and applicability in the classroom context

Teachers and tutors from both the central and upper east regions acknowledge the applicability and appropriateness of innovative teaching content in the classroom. They highlight the importance of modifying content based on specific classroom environments while generally affirming its suitability for schools. This recognition underscores the adaptability of modern pedagogical approaches to different educational settings. Moreover, educators emphasize the active engagement of students through participatory tasks and role-playing activities. They note that such approaches not only facilitate learning but also promote essential skills like socialization, patience, and obedience, which might not be as effectively acquired through traditional teaching methods. The incorporation of innovative methodologies, such as those from Right to Play workshops, reflects a commitment to enhancing student experiences and outcomes. A teacher participant stated thus:

For instance, in this book that USAID gave us, there is a dialogue activity in it. So, with this you can call 2 or three children to come. Then you say it for them to repeat after you. If there are any actions in there then they do it. So, it helps them to be included in the activity. **(Teacher, Central Region)**

A tutor from the central region explained the context and applicability in the classroom as follows:

It's applicable. And the content is also appropriate. And it depends. Sometimes there are some environments you need to modify one or two. But it's said that generally it's appropriate for our schools.

A college tutor from the upper east region added that;

“People participate and take tasks. You give them certain tasks and they play roles and by so doing they learn something like socialization, patience, obedience and other things that they would not learn if teacher did not integrate into the play. I was once invited to a workshop on Right to Play so that we can incorporate it into our teaching in the College”
(Tutor, Upper East region)

However, another tutor from the Upper East region explained differently how teachers do not go by the method again, saying: “Teachers do not go by the traditional method again”.

However, challenges related to application are also mentioned, particularly concerning high enrollment rates and environmental factors. Despite these challenges, innovative approaches are credited with making early learning activities more accessible and promoting inclusivity in the classroom. The collaborative and networking aspects of these programs are highlighted as contributing to teachers' enriched experiences and improved teaching practices.

4.3.2 Effectiveness of the programme in urban and peri-urban areas

The effectiveness of innovative programs in urban and peri-urban areas, as highlighted by educators from the Central and Upper East regions, reveals significant insights into their impact on teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

Tutors expressed satisfaction with the training sessions provided by Sabre Foundation, emphasizing the practical aspects such as creating play materials and implementing play-based activities in classrooms. This positive feedback underscores the success of the training in equipping educators with essential skills and strategies applicable to urban and peri-urban settings. The tutor's role as the team lead further indicates the program's depth and relevance.

Teachers from the Upper East region acknowledged the effectiveness of teaching methods learned through the program. Despite not being familiar with FTTTTP, the emphasis on questioning techniques underscores the program's focus on interactive and engaging teaching practices, which are particularly crucial in urban environments with diverse student populations.

A college tutor from the central region stated that;

Oh yes, I would say the training were all successful, because we learnt on creating play materials for teachers and schools and also educating us on ways in implementing play-based activities in our classroom teaching. I would say all training sessions I have had from Sabre foundation is worth going to. Lao, I was the team lead for all the Sabre training for our school.

A headteacher from the Upper East region added that;

I only know the approaches of the methods of teaching the children the way of questioning. That was what my teachers went and learned, and they came and shared. No knowledge on FTTTTP.

A college tutor from the central region added that;

It's very good, very good. The interventions are good in equipping the teachers with 21st century skills so that they are able to make their KG learner-centered so that the learners enjoy being at the KG or at the early grades.

A female headteacher from the Upper East region;

I was just informed that they want to deal with my school, which I allowed them, so the school was invited for a programme and two teachers were assigned to attend. The teachers attended and came back to educate the colleagues on the programme.

5.0. Impact of Early learning play-based programme by NGOs

This section delves into the significant impact of play-based programs implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the context of early learning. Recognizing the vital role of play in a child's development, NGOs have been instrumental in designing and implementing innovative programs that prioritize play as a means of fostering holistic growth and preparing young children for future academic success. This section explores the various ways in which these play-based programs have positively influenced early learning outcomes and highlights the transformative power of play in shaping a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Both negative and positive outcomes were recorded as impacts from the data collection exercise from Upper East region and Central region respectively. Amazingly, the positive outcomes outweighed the negative outcomes from the respondents in the respective regions.

Educators from the Central and Upper East regions viewed innovative teaching methods as both applicable and appropriate for their schools, albeit with occasional adjustments to suit specific contexts. They emphasize the value of play-based activities in nurturing essential skills like socialization, patience, and obedience, aspects often overlooked in traditional approaches. This shift towards innovative methods is attributed to their effectiveness in promoting inclusivity and engagement, particularly through dialogue activities and role-playing.

Moreover, educators express positivity towards capacity-building initiatives, recognizing their role in enhancing teaching skills and improving interactions with students. Despite challenges like high enrollment and environmental constraints, innovative approaches are seen as catalysts for creating inclusive learning environments and fostering collaboration among educators. This collaborative effort not only enriches teachers' experiences but also benefits teaching and learning practices, ultimately promoting child-centered learning and enhancing overall educational outcomes.

5.1 Overall positive outcomes

On the aspects of the positive outcomes from the play-based programs by NGOs, almost all respondents from the interviews alluded to the fact that the Early learning play-based programs especially from communities where NGOs spreads their wings expressed positively how they think it has impacted their teaching and improved how learners learn. Even though some of the schools did not have the experience of the activities of some NGOs run in their schools or communities. Below are the responses indicating how it has impacted their teaching.

I have integrated play in my lessons, so it makes it lively. It has reduced much of the work of the teacher, it makes lesson lively, and it develops the interests of the students in a lesson.
(Teacher, Upper East region)

It makes the student to see the concept practically. it makes the students participate in the process. I brainstorm and plan how to integrate the approaches in curriculum assessment during the learning processes. **(Teacher, Upper East region)**

A basic one male teacher from the upper east region added;

it emphasizes on the teaching and learning of English and has provided books with guidelines to guide in the facilitation of the lessons which include some play activities. It emphasizes on inclusive teaching and learning and emphasizes more on activity-based learning, mostly play based.

5.2 Impact on learners

There were several responses relevant to the benefits of play-based learning which were recorded during the interviews. These encapsulated the fact that play-based learning is important in children's developments ranging from their memories, vocabulary and the easy flow of teaching and learning during lesson delivery. Play based improves the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children because it is only through play that children learn about the world and themselves to gain their confidence.

5.2.1 Improved Participation in learning

Some of the approaches teachers use based on the trainings they have had enthruses learners to always attend school. Few of the approaches are because of the plays teachers use in teaching them. It influences the children more to participate attentively and in numbers during lesson deliveries. A teacher from the post lesson observation in the central region attested to learners' participation during the lesson delivery and below is what she said;

A teacher from the Upper East region added;

Yes. The teaching strategy was effective because the students were sent outside the classroom to make some observations. Upon their return they were able to mention the names of the things they saw outside.

A teacher from the Upper East region;

It really helped because children learn without even knowing they are learning. So, it made participation very easy and motivated learners to learn more and made teaching easier for teachers

A headteacher from the Upper East region added that;

Play based learning stimulates creativity and imaginations, allowing children to explore and interpret concepts in unique ways, fostering a deeper understanding. It makes learners fully involved during teaching and learning.

A KG teacher from the Central region explained that;

It is very easy to get what you are trying to teach them because they participate in the lesson. For example, if you are teaching counting, you can write the names of numbers let's say one to five. Then you give them a ball to throw and try to hit the bottle. So, the number they hit they mention that number. When you do such a thing everyone would want to participate. So, you arrange them in turns so that they take part. So when they hit the number, we all mention it and they become excited. And even when they miss the number there is some excitement attached to that. Because they are participants of either drama or role play it helps them to remember some of the things they say. Even after that they play with the words that they say during the role play.

This finding was further alluded to at the pre-service level. Findings suggest that tutors agree with the participatory nature of PBL. A male college tutor from the Upper East region said;

It also encourages children to open up and talk and they have more fun, and there's a lot of interaction among them.

However, a student trainee from a Focus Group Discussion from the Central region explained how play-based improves participation. Below is the responses;

“It also helps the students understand any concept that you are talking about. Let's say you are talking about pollination, and engaging students in brainstorming, it will help the students to come out with their own idea and understanding of that concept that you are teaching. Even though if the child does not understand the concept based on the demonstration that you did, the child will just get the concept.” **(Trainee teacher, Central region, Komenda COE)**

5.2.2 Learning Outcomes

Improving learning outcomes is a primary goal of early childhood education innovations. Play-based learning, in particular, has been associated with significant improvements in various aspects of children's development. According to research by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009), play-based learning not only enhances cognitive and social skills but also promotes greater engagement and motivation among young learners. Findings offer insights into the positive impact of play-based learning on early childhood education. Teachers and headteachers from the Central region have observed notable improvements in their students' learning outcomes, particularly in foundational cognitive skills and social interactions.

Head teachers from the central region added that;

Children are really excelling in their learning outcomes at the foundational level. Cognitive development skills and social skills have been improved amongst learners.

A teacher from the central region added that;

Because it's play-based especially for the phonics, like /a/ and /b/ they are able to blend the sounds and segment the sounds, and mention the words as well.

Beyond improvements in classroom learning and participation this PBL approach has indirectly contributed to attendance levels among learners. Teachers from the central region disclosed that;

That was when I was having my teaching practice, children didn't like coming to school but because of their intervention, it has improved the learners' school attendance.

The children have become active. Initially, they didn't like coming to school so class attendance has increased. At first, they used to follow their parents to the seashore for fishing but now it has changed because they know that when they come to school their madam will make them play more and have access to more play materials to play with. Also, at times they don't come to school when it rains but now it has changed.

5.2.3 Benefits related to cognitive development

Teachers and Head teachers alike affirmed the benefits of the use of PBL and its direct correlation to improving the cognitive development of children. This they highlighted is evident in the assessment conducted for learners and the feedback learners provide during and after the lessons.

A Head teacher expressed this sentiment by saying: “play-based pedagogies promote cognitive learning. Cognitively, learners are able to remember what they learnt as they play along”. Play-based pedagogies promote cognitive learning and social skills among learners and with learning disabilities

A Basic one teacher after the post lesson observation interview expressed how she made children go outside to play and later mention the things they saw after a lesson on natural science. Her strategy was testing to know their cognitive development from the topic that she taught. Below is what she said

Upon their return they were able to mention the names of the things they saw outside. They were able to describe the picture before them.

Amazingly when she was asked if the teaching strategy used was effective, she responded positively and indicated that;

The teaching strategies used were effective because the children were able to describe the picture that showed the health practitioner and a sick person”

A headteacher from the Central region explained how children mostly use their imaginations in what they learnt most often. He said:

Children use their imagination a lot. Learners become creative and innovative in contributing to their own teaching and learning.

A male teacher from the Upper East region added that;

Play based learning facilitates the understanding of concepts among learners in such a way that as they play and perform some tasks, it sticks into their minds and they learn very fast. Play based learning facilitates the understanding of concepts among learners in a way that as they play and perform some tasks, it sticks into their minds, and they learn very fast.

A female headteacher from the Upper East region responded that;

“Play based learning stimulates creativity and imaginations, allowing children to explore and interpret concepts in unique ways, fastening a deeper and more personnel understanding”.

“For cognitive development, we learn from our memories; we think from our memories anything we want to do comes from our memories but as they use their hands to manipulate the things, they are doing it broadens their mind. It helps them know what entails in the environment” said by a teacher from the central region.

At the pre-service this sentiment towards the improvement of cognitive development as a result of PBL was shared by participants interviewed. A male student trainee from the COE from the Upper East region added that, “I think the play educational system actually opens up the child’s imagination “

“Using imagination to form some sort of a picture and all things which may help the students become more creative and that particular lesson” responded by another male respondent from the focus group discussion from the upper east region.

Another male student trainee from the FGD added that;

The children like playing a lot so as you introduce it to them, they will get the idea very fast

5.2.4 Benefits related to emotional development

By engaging in play-based activities, children are provided with tools to express their emotions and learn valuable skills in managing their fears, sadness, and anger. This is achieved through a range of activities, such as role play, storytelling, and dramatization, which enable children to

explore and understand their own emotions. Teachers have observed firsthand the profound impact of these activities on the emotional development of children, as it significantly influences their self-esteem and overall well-being. The transformative benefits of play-based approaches in are evident, as they create a safe and supportive environment for children to navigate their emotions. Below are statements to corroborate this;

It also builds their self-esteem. For instance, I was a shy person, I didn't get that exposure when I was young, so I found it difficult to talk. So, through role play when the children start from the scratch when they grow up they can do that. So, it builds their self-esteem". **(P1 Teacher, Central Region)**

the children physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually". **(P1 Teacher, Upper east region)**

A female headteacher from the Central region added that; With PBL, learners are always eager to answer questions in class improving their confidence levels ..."

Meanwhile, a college principal from the central region stressed on the benefits related to children using the play-based as strategy of building confidence in children while making learning interactive. Below is what he explained; "It builds their confidence and makes learning interactive"

In confirming to the benefits, a male college tutor from the central region added that;

"It also boosts their morale. They become independent, confident"

5.2.5 Benefits related to language development

Language and communication are widely known to be the best and initiation of child development. This development is best achieved through play-based activities in schools/communities. Thus, it was observed during post lesson observations and from the interviews that children learned how to pronounce sounds of letters and numerals, learn vocabularies forexpression and communicate among their friends in play. These gave an indication of how children learn to build their foundation on communication. Among some of the play activities they were observed doing were role-play, jolly phonics, storytelling and through dramatization. Teachers expressed the following about benefits related to language development through play-based activities.

The jolly phonics is mostly used in English because they will know the words that rhymes in the word or English. And they will be able to know the letter sounds like /k/, and /c/ and so on. It also improves the pronunciation and conversation becomes better. **(Teacher, Central region)**

Another teacher added that; “when used it helps learners get the sounds of the letters of the alphabets and are also able to pronounce words”.

And it makes them fluent. For instance, I am not fluent in both the local language and English because I didn’t get that exposure. Because sometimes when I look at my children at home the way they are fluent in speaking their language and English it everything. I didn’t get that one **(Basic 1 teacher, Central region)**

A KG teacher during a post lesson observation interview from the central region added that; “Also in a playful way, they will enjoy themselves and bring out the pronunciations of the sound.

A teacher from the upper east region added that; “It helps them to learn how to spell and with their pronunciation”.

At the COE, a male trainee teacher from the Focus Group Discussion added that; “integrating play-based activities can improve learners’ cognitive development when it comes to speaking and listening”.

5.2.6 Benefits related to physical development

Play serves as a powerful tool for promoting the physical development of children by providing them with ample opportunities to be active and engage in movement. As children participate in play-based activities, they gradually exhibit increased gross motor control. The respondents from both regions emphatically conveyed their understanding of how play-based approaches positively contribute to the physical development of children. The transformative nature of play becomes evident as it empowers children to build strength, develop agility, and cultivate overall physical well-being. For instance, a headteacher from the Upper East region expressed that;

Physically, learners get the chance to play different kind of play activities which may build them and make them fit.

Teachers alike shared this sentiment of physical development by saying:

It develops the children physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually **(KG teacher from the Upper East region)**

So, I will say it helps a lot in physical, social, and emotional, all helps. **(KG teacher Central region)**

However, a Basic 1 teacher from the Upper East region felt that once a child is physically exercising through play, it helps the child’s health and physical well-being. Below is what she explained;

The child is exercising which helps the child's health and physical well-being.

5.2.7 Benefits related to social development

From a broader perspective, social development in children encompasses their ability to effectively cooperate and interact with one another. Play acts as a driver for this development, as children engage in imaginative scenarios through activities such as dramatizations or role play. However, it was noted that not all visited schools had access to play-based activities. Nonetheless, respondents displayed a solid understanding of the significance of incorporating play-based activities during lesson deliveries, particularly in terms of fostering social development in children. Teachers highlighted the benefits associated with social development when children have access to play-based activities, explaining that through discussions and interactions with their peers, children are able to share ideas and learn at their own level. This collaborative approach not only enhances their social skills, but also cultivates a sense of teamwork, empathy, and effective communication among children. “(...) yes, as they discuss they share ideas with their peers because it is at their level”

A teacher from the Upper East region explained that it makes children open up to play with the opposite sex. Below is the response “They also play with the opposite sex”.

A female student trainee from the Central region added that; “It helps students with issues as in personal issues actually opening up during class activities. it brings the learners together because when the activities are introduced the learners sometimes come together and then communicate with each other and then try to think critically so it improves communication and critical thinking”.

A headteacher from the Upper East region indicated that; “Socially, learners interact, mingle with their peers and make new friends”.

At the pre-service levels both college tutor and Principals highlighted this augmented social development as a result of PBL. These are some statements expressing this:

They collaborate in the activities given because sometimes we group them and they interact in the groups in which they belong to and so they learn to collaborate with one another socially **(College tutor, upper east region)**

It builds their confidence and makes learning interactive. As they are interacting with each other they develop social skills **(Vice principal, COE Central region)**

Trainee teachers during the Focus Group Discussions mentioned how play-based activities improves collaborations and communication among children. Below are their responses:

Another reason is that it also improves collaboration and communication. Involving students in play-based activities helps them to collaborate and communicate effectively in the classroom setting. **(male student trainee, central region)**

Also, they will acquire social development. They will tend to socialize with their colleagues in the classroom. Some might be introverts and extroverts in the class but when you engage play activities in the classroom they will tend to socialize with one another. Also, some students have anxiety issues so when you engage them in play it reduces stress and address some of these problems. **(Female trainee, Central region)**

“With this process I think the children will share different experiences. All these things will help the children build confidence when it comes to collaboration and communication among the students” added by another student trainee respondent from the focus group discussion from the Central Region.

Interestingly from the Focus Group Discussion, a student trainee gave examples of how he takes children through during lesson delivery and raising their competence of communication. Below is his response;

We all mentioned some play-based methods that we are going to use like dramatization, role play, etc. I will go by the field trip aspect of it. There is a school that was recently built at Asokwa and it is closer to a bush. So, if I am teaching in that school on a topic like plants. At the beginning of the lesson, we are not going to sing songs I will send the students out so that each learner will bring a plant. Going there will be conversations. Maybe two learners might come together to discuss the plants to select. There, you are instilling the core competency of communication and collaboration.

5.3 Impact on Teachers

The section delves into the topic of the impact of play-based learning on teachers. As educators play a crucial role in facilitating and guiding play-based activities, it is essential to examine how this teaching approach influences their professional lives. This section explores the transformative effects of play-based learning on teachers, including the ways in which it enhances their instructional strategies, promotes creativity, and fosters a deeper understanding of children's development.

5.3.1 Improvement in teaching approach

The integration of play-based activities has brought about significant improvements in teachers' approaches to instruction. This shift in attitude towards children's learning is evident in the dynamic and engaging teaching methods employed both inside and outside the classroom. In a typical classroom, students possess diverse learning styles, including those with Special

Educational Needs. With the implementation of play-based activities, teachers are now able to enhance their teaching practices by effectively catering to the individual needs of all learners.

One notable change is that teachers now allocate ample time to ensure that every student is actively participating and comprehending the lesson's content. By closely monitoring the progress of each child during lesson delivery, teachers can identify any potential areas of difficulty or confusion. This proactive approach enables teachers to promptly address any learning gaps and ensure that all students grasp the concepts being taught.

A teacher from the Central region explained that;

It helps you to group the learners according to their levels of understanding in teaching as a whole, like a child who is a beginner, you will know that this child is at this level, and you do emphasis more on that for the learners. You will know when to use the L1 and with English, you will know when to use the L2". Also, on the side of the teachers, it has improved my teaching especially when using charts to teach, it makes the teaching easier with less talking.

A college tutor from the Upper East region added that;

It helps educate old teachers of the new ways of teaching so that we do not use one way of teaching but a variety of them. And that variety of methodology of teaching also adds more knowledge and makes the pupils understand it better than the one way.

Innovations in early childhood education have significantly transformed teaching styles and methodologies. Modern approaches emphasize inclusivity, practicality, and adaptability, ensuring that all learners, including those with special educational needs, receive a comprehensive education. Research by Pianta et al., (2009) indicates that effective teaching strategies in early childhood settings lead to better developmental outcomes and more equitable learning environments. Headteachers affirmed this by saying;

Right to play has prepared me to be able to supervise my teachers for the fact that before you can achieve the objective of right to play your class size should be manageable. Resources must also be available. **(Head teacher, Upper East region)**

The style of teaching among teachers has changed **(Headteacher, Central Region)**.

Teachers have tailored their methods of teaching to suit the needs of learners with special education needs by making learning activities accessible to them **(Headteacher, Upper East Region)**.

It has made teaching to be practical **(Headteacher, Upper East Region)**

5.3.2 Provision and Utilization of Teaching and Learning Resources (TLRs)

The provision of adequate Teaching and Learning Resources (TLRs) is essential for effective teaching and learning. According to Quartey and Casely-Hayford (2023), the availability of TLRs significantly enhances the quality of education by providing teachers with the necessary tools to deliver engaging and comprehensive lessons. While some respondents acknowledged the provision of TLRs by NGOs, it is evident that not all teachers have received these resources. The impact of TLRs is noted in the improved teaching environment and effectiveness. Excerpts from the teacher participants:

It has because they have provided us with some materials freely. **(KG2 Teacher, Central Region)**

A serene environment and adequate TLR's. **(P1 Teacher, Central Region)**

5.3.3 Training on Play-Based Methods

Training teachers in play-based methods is crucial for the successful implementation of innovative educational practices. Research indicates that professional development in these areas enhances teachers' skills and confidence, leading to better student outcomes (Zaslow et al., 2010). The training on play-based methods has been positively received, with teachers noting improvements in their teaching practices and the effectiveness of these methods in engaging students. Quotes from participants in support of this:

As a teacher and as someone who has participated in the play-based method of teaching. I have trained a lot of students who went through such methods. A typical example is that when teaching students, a topic like personal cleanliness, you ask them questions about how they keep themselves clean. **(College Tutor, Upper East Region, Bosco COE)**

The training was a child to play. So, I gave out two of my teachers for that workshop. When they came, they had a lot of activity-based approach. **(Headteacher, Upper East Region)**

5.3.4 Gender and Social Inclusion in Education

Incorporating gender and social inclusion in educational practices is essential for ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students. UNESCO (2018) emphasizes that gender-sensitive education contributes to reducing disparities and promoting inclusive growth. The transcript highlights efforts to integrate gender and social inclusion into teaching practices. This includes training teachers to avoid gender stereotyping and to ensure that activities are inclusive for both boys and girls. This was what a teacher said in support of this finding:

Yes. Even with Sabre we did gender stereotyping. They said that the activities shouldn't be only boys playing football but we should equalize the activities among both girls and boys. **(KG2 Teacher, Central Region)**

5.4 Value Addition to Headteachers' Supervision

Enhanced supervision by headteachers plays a crucial role in the effective implementation of new teaching methods. Effective supervision ensures that teachers adhere to innovative practices and provides ongoing support to improve instructional quality. Headteachers have reported that innovations have empowered them to better supervise and support their teachers, ensuring that the play-based methods and other innovations are implemented effectively.

Headteachers were there as monitors to ensure that teachers actually implemented exactly what Sabre had taught the teachers at these trainings. **(Headteacher, Central Region)**

Yes, I was empowered to supervise and monitor the teachers implementing the PBL. **(Male Headteacher, Central Region)**

The innovations in early learning, particularly those focused on play-based methods and teacher training, have shown significant positive impacts on teacher attitudes, teaching methods, and overall classroom dynamics. The provision of TLRs, gender-sensitive practices, and enhanced supervision have all contributed to a more inclusive and effective learning environment. The evidence from the findings supports the conclusion that these innovations are making a meaningful difference in the quality of education in the regions studied.

5.5 Negative Outcomes

A Primary 1 teacher from the Upper East region responded to the negative impacts during a post lesson observation interview as the inadequate provision of teaching and learning materials contributed in children not able to understand what she taught;

Because the questions I asked and the responses I wanted to get, I did not get it. It was not what they answered. They did not answer what I wanted them to answer. Before I started the lesson, I wanted a percentage in the class that after the lesson I will get that percentage. But I observed that not even half of the class understood the questions.

When asked how she knew, her responds was that;

It was their responses because I finished and then I reviewed the lesson and they were not giving the responses. Some were having the confidence to talk but they were not saying the correct things/answers.

6.0 Challenges to play-based learning and solutions

Several challenges were discovered from the interviews pertaining to the use of play-based learning with early grade learners in basic schools. Although, it is important for all tutors or teachers to infuse the use of the Play-based activities into their teaching as it helps early graders to understand lessons with ease, certain issues hinder the implementation of this. In this regard some challenges were raised concerning using play-based learning from schools in both the Upper East region and the Central region.

6.1.1 Class Size

The issue of large class sizes impeding the effective use of PBL methods was particularly prominent at the pre-service level. For instance, a college tutor from the Upper East region mentioned the class size as a challenge and below is what she said;

They are challenges because it will not allow you to carry out your mandate as a teacher in class. So that efficiency and effectiveness will not be there because of the lack of those things

Other tutors affirmed this stance with statements below:

The challenges we have with implementing play-based instruction is the nature of our classrooms, it does not really support some of the activities that we want to do aside that some of the classes have large numbers and so it makes it difficult (**Female college tutor, Upper east**)

Well, the challenge is that the number of students on roll is large. Because the students are many sometimes it becomes difficult in grouping them. If it is a small class, it is easy. If the class is large, it becomes difficult for me. And the materials you would want to use maybe you wouldn't have access to. (**Tutor, COE Central region**)

The size of the classrooms that are provided for the students are not suitable for some games to be incorporated into the lessons that are been delivered (**Male trainee student, Upper east region**)

6.1.2 Difficulty in class control

At the in-service level one of the biggest challenges recorded during both observations and interviews was the large numbers of children in the classrooms. Children were observed to be congested in the classrooms and as a result not paying attention to what teachers were teaching. The nature of congestion made it difficult for teachers to easily walk through learners to monitor well the understanding of learners during play activities or lesson delivery in the classroom. It also resulted in most children having turns through coughs, and noise among others in some schools.

Some of them will not concentrate. It also depends on the topic; some topics can be noisy. So while others may be sitting down quietly others will be making noise. It also depends on the population of the class. These children are more than forty. You can get more than a quarter of the class not concentrating on what is going on. After that when you ask them any question, they won't be able to answer because they didn't pay attention (**Teacher, Central region**)

A Basic 1 teacher from the Upper East region expressed that; "The class is not sizable enough considering the number of students I have in the class. The large number of learners make it difficult to control them during the play-based learning".

Another Basic 1 teacher from the Upper East region said; "The class number is large for the classroom therefore, making the classroom not spacious enough for some play activities".

However, a KG teacher from the Central region expressed her views after a post lesson observation interview that;

Class control. Even though I was controlling the class since I am the only person teaching it was difficult. A large class like this must have two teachers. So, if we had two teachers the lesson would have gone the way I wanted it. Because I am the only person teaching at the same time controlling the class it was not good for me. So, I might need another because I can't handle this class alone; we are more than 40.

Other KG teachers were in support of this findings with the following expressions:

And then sometimes over-excitement makes the classroom also noisy. This is a challenge because you have to bring them to order. And sometimes because the learning materials are not enough everybody would want to have a feel of it so they will be struggling here and there. (**KG teacher, Central region**)

Just look at the children now they do not want to keep quiet. They would all want to participate so it is a challenge you will even be confused. If you choose someone for a role play another person will say you don't like him or her and that you favour others more. (**KG teacher, Central region**)

But interestingly, a female student trainee from the Central region explained how some children do get carried away by play activities and do not even wish it ends. Below is what she said;

Sometimes, even after the play activity and you want to end it, these learners don't want to end it and so that becomes an issue. It makes class control an issue.

Another female student trainee from the focus group discussion in the Upper East region expressed difficulty in class control even in the colleges. This gives an indication that difficulties in class control is not limited to the basic school but also extends to the college level of education;

The number of students at times in the lecture, the teacher is not able to attend to all of us or make you portray your skills in whatever he or she is able to teach.

Tutors also shared their sentiments on the difficulty in handling the class control with large numbers. Supporting excerpts for this finding:

Basically, the problem we face is the numbers. You know when you have large number in the classroom it becomes very difficult to be able to run the activities. Sometimes we encourage the children to come out in the open because if you have a class of about 200 or 300 in a class, and you are going to do an activity in the classroom, normally it becomes impossible to do that **(Upper East region, College Tutor-Male)**

When the numbers are so big, it is difficult to use play-based activities in the classroom. **(Upper East region College Tutor-Male)**

A headteacher from the upper east region added that; “the number of learners per class is so much that the attention needed cannot be given for all”.

6.1.3 Inadequate knowledge or training on PBL

Findings shed light on the challenges faced by educators and students regarding play-based learning in the Central Region. Respondents, including a college tutor and student trainees from focus group discussions, highlighted key issues such as the difficulty in selecting appropriate games to teach specific concepts, the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, and the inadequate training of teachers in utilizing play-based materials effectively. Excerpts from participants in support of this finding:

Sure, I remember one time somebody told me that it's difficult for her to get appropriate play or game to teach a particular concept. So sometimes it's difficult for them to select the appropriate game for a particular concept. If you don't select the appropriate game, the concept may not come out well. **(College tutor from the Central region)**

“We are only learning the theoretical aspects of the play-based, but we are not being exposed to the practical aspect of it. So, this is a challenge because we are still learning and it the duty of the tutors to demonstrate to us how play-based materials are used when we go out there. So far as we are learning only the theoretical aspects when we go out and the materials are there it will be very difficult for us to demonstrate it. Although we can do part but not 100% perfectly because we only learnt how they can be done theoretically. We have not been taught how to use it practically, so this is going to be a challenge for some

of us when we go out there and the materials are available”. (**Trainee teacher, Central region**)

“There is also inadequate training of teachers. When you go to the universities where they are doing research and stuff, they are not doing all these things. But at the end all of us will go to the classroom. You see, improper training. Some people will go for the contact, they will take their money in their pocket, and they will come and force some people to; meanwhile the people that they have to sit down for that work they will not call them. These are the inadequate training for teachers. Even sometimes they will call them to go for workshop they will finish, and they will not mind you. Even the workshop that they are doing, they want to take money from you” (**Trainee teacher, Central region**)

6.1.4 Inadequate TLMs

Inadequate teaching and learning materials deprive learners from understanding what teachers teach. The inadequacy of these materials creates room for boredom in the classroom especially when teaching is ongoing. From what was observed in the schools researchers visited it was evident that majority of the schools did not either have teaching and learning resources or they were not sufficient contributing to children not paying attention to lessons. Some of the children found it difficult to understand and ask or answer questions after the teachers asked them. For instance, a female headteacher from the Upper East region stated the difficulty in the absence of teaching and learning resources.

But this place we don't have materials. If you go to the private schools, Montessori, they have more materials to teach. But government schools don't have anything. If I had some play materials, I would share them, and we will be free because they are disturbing us. so this government school we don't have anything for the children. (**Teacher, Central region**)

Lack of TLMs to support and practice play-based activities and also no resource center, at times we come together as teacher trainees to learn together to see how we can practice when we go into the classroom to incorporate it but most of the time, we find it difficult doing it, because it is not all the time that we have the chance to meet the lecturers to help us understand the activities. (**female student trainee, Upper East Region**)

During a post lesson interaction, a teacher from the Upper East region explained the lack of teaching and learning materials as the prime weakness of the lesson because they were not available during the lesson delivery hence unable to assist learners to understand the lessons better. Quote from her response in support of this:

The weakness was because the teaching and learning materials were not available to assist them to be able to understand the lessons better.

A teacher from the Central region after lesson observation added to the weakness of lesson delivery as a result of the lack/inadequate teaching and learning materials. Below is what she added;

The weakness is the limited TLM. If we had the materials we needed, I would have asked them to come and demonstrate the mixture themselves.

For now, I am not using any of the play-based approach. This is because of inadequate TLR's and I am not in KG anymore that's why **(Primary 2 teacher, Central region)**

This issue was not absent at the pre-service level. The following quotes reveal this.

Also, the materials as we are saying; where to get materials to support becomes a problem so you the teacher sometimes you have to use your money, or you ask students to bring the things that we will use whether drama or role play. **(College tutor, Central region)**

Yes, the main issue is the lack of resources to teach trainee teachers the PBL. You know it requires a lot of resources to make the lesson engaging and we lack those resources currently. **(College tutor, Central region)**

“So the challenge is going to be a resource one, that is the resource we are not having. I think Ghana hasn't reached that extent in terms of that play-based learning. Yes, we haven't. We are just copying blindly from some people. We haven't reached there and if we are implementing this then I think we are supposed to copy everything. Let's use these preparatory schools as an example. I think if a parent wants his or her ward to excel much, sometimes if the school is lacking any material, you see the parent bringing it as a donation. So its the resource”. **(Male trainee teacher, Central region)**

6.1.5 Low/Inadequate number of ECE teachers

One of the notable obstacles observed during both lesson observations and interviews pertained to the imbalance and inadequate teacher allocation to ECE classrooms. In certain schools, the student-to-teacher ratio was relatively satisfactory, as some classrooms were fortunate to have two teachers, predominantly females. Conversely, other classrooms were burdened with a single teacher responsible for managing an overwhelming number of approximately 40 children. Astonishingly, an estimated 90% of students from the Upper East region experienced overcrowding in their classrooms, severely impeding the ability of teachers to effectively monitor and control the students' movements. This dire situation consequently posed a challenge for student teachers seeking enrollment opportunities. The scarcity of teaching staff not only hindered the provision of individualized attention to children within their respective classrooms but also contributed to a sluggish pace of learning for the students. They affirmed this by saying this

Also, there are over 50 children in the class which makes it difficult to manage the PBL and it requires extra teachers in each class which we lack at the moment. **(Headteacher, Central region)**

ECE trained teachers are very few. As at now we have four teachers in the KG classroom only one had knowledge in the approach because she had the chance to do Early Childhood course and she is the only one. Most teachers are not going into the field. **(Headteacher, Upper East region)**

It is like the whole thing is clumsy so if you do not have a background in early childhood, teaching here is a bit difficult. I did not do early childhood, but I am here so it's sometimes, it makes the teaching difficult. As for me I learnt social studies but someone who learnt early childhood at the tertiary level will be more knowledgeable in issues related to children than me. There are times when I go to workshops, and I do not understand what they are teaching. That is my own experience. I do not understand anything at the workshop because everything looks like new to me. In just a day I am supposed to learn all about early childhood, that is sometimes stressful. But I always do my best. It is the headmaster that put me in the KG class probably because I am good with handling children. **(KG teacher, Central region)**

6.1.6 Misconceptions about ECE

Some respondents had the misconception on the issue of enrolling in Early Child Education programs because of the amount of time they need to devote to it. Several misconceptions arose from the responses which included the amount of time associated to play activities in Early Child Education programs. Excerpts to buttress this finding:

Some students and even tutors also have that misconception that play based pedagogy is more or less for children to have fun, they don't see it to be meaningful and so the misconception sometimes makes them miss out the importance of actually using Child Learning Instruction to teach. **(College tutor, Upper East Region)**

Opportunities when you venture into an area like that, you will be limiting your chances. It means you cannot teach anywhere outside the nursery or kindergarten. You only go to sing and clap and there is no form of motivation for ECE teachers. **(College tutor, Upper East Region)**

The early grades you are only limited to play and you do not have other advantages like TVET and other things to learn skills as well. **(Male student trainee, Upper East region)**

One of the factors that influence my decision is that, childhood education is more or less a play and like we have some TVET Programs. **(Male student trainee, Upper East region)**

Certain misconceptions we have about the Early Childhood Education are opportunities for advancement in education. people have the believe that when you offer the Early

Childhood Education, mostly no matter how you pursue your education to the level, they will still bring you back to the Early Childhood level. Thus, bringing you back to the creche or the primary classes to teach because they see you to have advance knowledge in that one **(Male student trainee, Upper East region)**

There is also more work overload on the ECE teachers, they handle many subjects as compared to the junior high teachers **(Female student trainee, Upper East region)**

The excuses are that the lower class are so demanding, and people do not value such classes. Some thinks that the work in those classrooms are so demanding that it does not merit the salary they pay them. **(Female trainee, Upper East region)**

Early childhood demands a lot of patience and dedications. Personally, I would not get that patience to interact with the children for instance, you will be in class and some of them will be messing up urinating on themselves and other stuffs so I would not be patience enough to condone that. So, because of that I will opt for other programs other than early childhood education. **(Female trainee, Upper East region)**

However, a college tutor from the Upper East region explained that for some people it feels downgrading entering into early childhood education courses or programs. Interestingly, a teacher from the Central region expressed how teachers from the upper primary think they cannot teach lower primary because it demands a lot of talking. Below is what he said:

In fact, teachers from the upper primary say they can't teach in class one because the children talk too much. There is less talking in upper primary for the teacher. But here by the time you go to the house you will be having sore throat.

A female headteacher from the Upper East region added that; "They want to be put at the upper primary. Their reason is that handling kids at that level is not easy and they don't receive any incentive for that"

Another teacher from the Central region added that; "Especially young girls, when they come, they say they don't want early childhood because they don't want to change diapers. They like only lectures".

A male student trainee from the Upper East region added that;

One of the factors I would not opt for it is the multi-subject nature because it involves a lot of subjects unlike the Junior High where i can go and pursue only one course like science, technical and any other thing.

6.1.7 Limited time on the part of teachers

Some of the respondents expressed limited time as one of the limiting factors that do not allow for an easy completion of courses within a particular time frame. For instance, a college tutor from Upper East region mentioned that;

All that we do in class may not cover everything because of the time. The limiting factors is the calendar because it is short. It goes with the workload so that we able to meet the needs of the course outline. Looking at the academic calendar, we have a lot to do and the time is limited. Sometimes students come in and we have just about four weeks to cover so much. And so we are not able to actually do everything as expected

A Basic 1 teacher from the same region added that;

It is very difficult to adapt the standard-based kindergarten curriculum due to the following reasons; The timetable for learning by the municipal directorate is choking with at least five subjects to be taught daily. This does not make time for play based activities.

The vice principal from the college in the Central region explained that;

Well, the issue is that though we are talking about Play based issues it actually involves a lot of time. But with the system now which is the track system, the number of weeks that they are supposed to stay on campus is quite short. All these things are contributing to as to whether a teacher will really utilize all the activities provided in the curriculum in their lessons. Play based learning requires a longer period to carry out all the different aspects. So, with the lesson there will be a point that you will be unable to also finish the curriculum. So, in a situation where they think that content will consume more time, sometimes some of the tutors' rush through, and that's the challenge. Like I was saying right now, instead of almost 16 weeks they are spending seven weeks for a semester. These days, they don't even spend 12 weeks. So, if you have a course outline you have to quickly cut corners to finish

A male student trainee from the focus group discussion in the Upper East region added that;

There is some kind of limitation in the time that you can implement it for long. The time that the children will try to enjoy the play, that is the time it will be over for another period. So, I think time is the most important challenge we are facing.

A college tutor from the Upper East region explained that;

One of the factors is the time factor this semester is supposed to be 12 weeks, which of course itself is not long enough to cover what we are supposed to do. Time is actually a factor that militates against this whole B Ed program.

A kindergarten teacher from the Central region added that;

This prolongs the duration of the learning. So sometimes you have to use 30 minutes to finish the class but because of the fidgeting it may go to 45 minutes.

A college tutor in the Upper East region supported this assertion by saying;

Time is a challenge in the sense that time goes with the workload you are supposed to cover within a semester before they write exams. With this type of programme they go out for STS observation every semester. They come to write mid-semester exams and that could take a week. And all these activities are all important. When you now come back to class to make your lesson pass(successful), so you may be rushing, and other things are taken away. If all those things were quantified into the classroom activities, you do not have a problem. When the timetable is given by our affiliated universities, all these things are not considered. Sometimes they go outside the school campus for other important things

6.2 Addressing the identified challenges

Every challenge presents an opportunity for a solution. Following the identification of obstacles impeding the effectiveness of play-based learning, respondents proposed methods to curb these issues. Through their experiences and observations, they highlighted practical strategies and solutions that can enhance the implementation and impact of play-based learning.

6.2.1 Increase number of teachers in a class

Respondents at the in-service level recommended that authorities need to increase the number of teachers for each class to reduce teacher-to-student ratio in play-based learning environment. By increasing the number of teachers in a class, educators can provide more individualized attention to each child, facilitating a more interactive and engaging play-based learning experience. This strategy aims to address the challenge of poor class control during play activities while ensuring that every child receives adequate guidance and support during play sessions.

There should be enough teachers so that they will be able to control the learners” (**Upper East region Primary Teacher**).

We need more teachers. Bringing in more teachers will make teaching more effective. You can give exercises and you can mark them. While one teacher is teaching the other teacher can stand at the back to control the class (**Central region Primary 1 Teacher**).

6.2.2 Adequate time allocation for lesson delivery

During both the pre-service and in-service stages, respondents from the Northern sector passionately advocated for significant changes in the time allocated for lessons at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level. Their valuable insights and experiences led them to propose two potential solutions: increasing the time dedicated to lessons or reducing the number of activities. These suggestions aim to ensure that educators have ample time to meet the required teaching standards and provide quality education to their students. Excerpts in support of the findings;

The government and GTEC, they should look at it and see how they can increase the time for us” (**Upper East, COE Tutor**).

“Enough time should be created for practical activities in the classroom. To enable us to understand how to incorporate these play-based activities when we go into the classroom to teach” (**Upper East Trainee Teachers, Female**).

If the load on the timetable for lesson delivery is reduced, time can be made for the proper implementation of these challenges (**Upper East Primary 1 Teacher**)

6.2.3 Improve class management skills

Study participants underscored the critical importance of equipping teachers with strong class management skills to effectively navigate the dynamic nature of play-based learning environments. They emphasized that educators must cultivate strategies that foster a well-organized and controlled atmosphere, ensuring that play activities align with educational objectives. Improving class management skills emerged as a pivotal component in maximizing the educational benefits derived from play-based learning. Here are excerpts from in-service level teachers, sharing valuable strategies they can employ to enhance class management during play activities.

I will have to address this challenge myself. I will select them myself. I won't give the children the free will to select the roles they want to play. I am the one who knows what will be taught for the day so before the activity I will select the children and assign the roles to them. I will do that for them, that's all (**Central region, KG Teacher**).

I think by giving them a signal to help them concentrate (**Central region Primary 1 Teacher**).

6.2.4 Improved school environment

Creating a conducive school environment emerged as a key strategy to address challenges in play-based learning. Participants stressed the importance of a supportive atmosphere that encourages creativity, exploration, and collaboration. They proposed initiatives such as ensuring early grade classrooms are play-friendly which allows children move around freely to enhance the effectiveness of play-based learning.

The classrooms should be built in such a way that it can contain all students and spaces available for them to move around and then play when it comes to their play activities (**Upper East, Trainee Teachers, Male, R1**).

To address these challenges, if there is going to be a school establishment, there should be an agency which will be checking out that the structures there fit for early grade settings. Because if you see the schools that we've been visiting, sometimes you ask yourself, 'is this really a school?'. But you are assigned to them, so you go and play your role and leave. So, if schools are having such structure which suits early grade structures and policies, I think the play-based can fit in our system (**Central region Trainee Teacher Male, R2**)

6.2.5 Provision of more TLRs by students

Insufficient resources for play-based activities emerged as a significant obstacle in the execution of play-based learning, affecting both the northern and southern sectors, as well as participants at both in-service and pre-service levels. Adequate materials and tools contribute to a more enriching

and varied play environment, allowing children to explore diverse concepts through hands-on experiences. Respondents recommended an increase in the provision of teaching and learning materials to support play-based activities.

Ghana Education Service should provide the necessary teaching and learning materials to enable the teachers adapt the new standard-based curriculum and play based methodology **(Upper East, Primary Teacher)**.

“If the proper materials or the proper play tools are provided for the early grade children, I think they would actually be able to carry out the play activity very well and gain the education they need” **(Upper East, Trainee Teacher, Male)**.

In-service respondents indicated that while the government is expected to supply the necessary materials for play-based activities, such support has been inadequate. Consequently, they suggested that students, with assistance from their parents, could contribute these materials themselves. Additionally, they appealed to other educational organizations, including GTEC, to aid in providing the resources essential for facilitating play-based learning activities.

I would have asked them to bring their own items so that while I am doing it they will also be doing some then after that they will eat it. This would have ensured that the TLM's are more so they can all participate **(Central region, Primary 1 Teacher)**.

They should allow the children to buy the books themselves instead of depending on the government who is unable to provide the necessary books. So, they must open up to the parents that they cannot provide the books **(Central region, KG Teacher)**.

They can be addressed through the support of study universities and GTEC in providing materials **(Upper East region, COETutor)**.

6.2.6 Training on PBL for teachers

Some respondents recommended comprehensive training programs for teachers to enhance their understanding and implementation of play-based learning methodologies. These programs would equip educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively integrate play into the curriculum, aligning it with educational objectives. By providing targeted training, teachers can confidently implement play-based learning strategies, maximizing the educational benefits for young learners. Excerpt in support of the findings;

One way of addressing these challenges is to train adequate teachers. In the sense that, this play-based approach of learning has now been introduced into the curriculum. And not all the teachers have the requisite skills to implement it. So, for this approach to be more

effective, then they should train more teachers, give them the requisite training so that they can implement it as well as effectively (**Central region, Trainee Teacher, Male**).

One respondent put forth a suggestion that the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) should organize comprehensive training sessions for early grade teachers. These sessions would aim to equip educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement play-based activities in the classroom. By providing the requisite training, the NCCE can ensure that teachers are fully prepared to create engaging and educational play experiences for their students.

In addition, college tutors proposed an alternative method for teacher training. They recommended that trainee teachers take the initiative to enhance their own understanding of play-based learning by watching informative videos on digital platforms such as YouTube. This self-directed approach allows aspiring educators to access a wide range of resources and gain valuable insights into best practices for incorporating play in the classroom.

I think there should be proper education on the need to involve play-based activities in teaching and learning. This can be done by the NCCE (National Commission for Civic Education). I think there is a sector in the NCCE that have an educational aspect. So, they can seminars or symposiums on the need to involve play-based activities in our teaching and learning (**Central region, Trainee Teacher, Male**)

For me I told them they should go to YouTube and give them a link. Most of the activities are on YouTube. So, you watch a lot of them, and you see which one will fit your lesson (**Central, COE Tutor, R2**)

The exploration of strategies to address the challenges associated with play-based learning reveals a multifaceted approach aimed at optimizing the effectiveness of this educational methodology. Respondents' suggestions, ranging from increasing the number of teachers in a class to ensuring better school environment, highlights the importance of a holistic perspective. The emphasis on adequate time allocation, improved class management skills, and the provision of teaching and learning material aligns with the goal of creating an enriching atmosphere for play-based learning. When educators implement and refine these strategies, it is anticipated that the challenges identified in play-based learning will be mitigated, paving the way for a more impactful educational experience for children.

7.0 Enrolment and Attrition of teachers in the ECE area

This section provides insights into the perception of respondents on the factors that either motivate or deter trainee teachers from opting to enrol in the early childhood programme. It also reports on recommended strategies to improve enrolment in ECE.

7.1 Factors driving low-enrolment in ECE

When exploring the reasons behind individuals not enrolling in Early Childhood Education (ECE), several common factors emerge. These include prevalent misconceptions about the field, concerns regarding the demanding workload, and discouragement stemming from the experiences of those who have previously pursued ECE. Collectively, these factors create a significant influence, often leading potential candidates to opt for alternative educational paths instead of pursuing ECE.

6.1.1 Misconceptions about ECE

For majority of respondents, the primary factor deterring incoming trainee teachers from enrolling in ECE is the prevalence of misconceptions surrounding the field. These misconceptions encompass various aspects, including who qualifies to be an ECE teacher, the remuneration received from the job, and the stigmatization faced by ECE teachers. Disturbingly, respondents noted a widely held belief that individuals who pursue ECE programs are perceived as less intelligent.

There is a perception out there that teaching at the lower grade is meant for people who are not academically sound. So, this has reduced people's interest in pursuing such programme (**Upper Eastregion, Headteacher**).

Most people think that those offering early childhood education are academically weak and also when you come to the teaching field that's the idea they have about EC educators which is bad (**Central region, , KG 2Teacher**).

We are told that those pursuing Early Childhood Education are in one way or the other students with less intellectual abilities as compared to those doing the JHS education (**Upper East region, Trainee Teachers, Male**).

In addition to the aforementioned misconceptions, a prevailing belief exists that teaching ECE is more suitable for females rather than males. This gender bias presents a significant barrier to male representation in the field of ECE. Furthermore, some respondents suggested that older women are considered the most appropriate candidates to teach at the early childhood level due to the perception that they possess superior caregiving capabilities.

Especially with men, men do not like taking those classes thinking that those classes are for women (**Upper East region, Headteacher**).

ECE is a program for the old women (**Upper East region, Headteacher**).

The course is meant for the old women because when you finish you will be sent to handle kids (**Upper East region, College Tutor**).

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes, which indicate that ECE is primarily a female occupation, undermines diversity and inclusion in the field. It fails to recognize the unique skills, perspectives, and contributions that individuals of all genders can bring to early childhood education.

Respondents strongly asserted that ECE teachers are compensated at a lower rate compared to their counterparts in upper primary and Junior High School (JHS) settings. This misconception significantly discourages aspiring teachers from choosing the ECE program as their career path.

Compensation salary received by ECE teachers are lower compared to teachers in the elementary or secondary education, challenging work conditions lack of prestige in many societies, Early childhood education is not always as highly as regarded as teaching at higher grade levels (**Upper East region, Headteacher**).

Almost all respondents, both in pre-service and in-service, reported these misconceptions. The similarity in responses was evident not only within the pre-service and in-service cohorts but also across geographical regions, specifically in both the northern and southern sectors. This consistency highlights the widespread nature of these misconceptions and emphasizes the importance of implementing focused educational interventions to correct and mitigate these prevailing misunderstandings

7.1.2 Workload in ECE

Teaching children at the early childhood stage goes beyond just imparting knowledge through lecturing to the children. It also involves extra childcare activities such as changing of diapers, feeding, and playing. According to respondents at in-service level, this workload does not motivate trained ECE teachers to teach in early childhood classes. They also reported that working with children at the early childhood stage is very tedious and involves a lot of talking.

Especially young girls, when they come, they say they don't want early childhood because they don't want to change diapers. They like only lectures (**Central, , KG Teacher**).

In fact, teachers from the upper primary say they can't teach in class one because the children talk too much. There is less talking in upper primary for the teacher. But here by the time you go to the house you will be having sore throat (**Central region, P1 Teacher**).

They want to be put at the upper primary. Their reason is that handling kids at that level is not easy and they don't receive any incentive for that (**Upper East region, Headteacher**).

At the pre-service level, focus group discussions with some trainee teachers, especially the male respondents revealed that the demanding nature of teaching at the early childhood level is a significant factor discouraging them from enrolling in the ECE programme.

For instance, you will be in class and some of them will be messing up urinating on themselves and other stuffs so I would not be patience enough to condone that. So, because of that I will opt for other programs other than early childhood education (**Upper East region, Trainee Teachers, R2 - Males**).

One of the factors I would not opt for it is the multi-subject nature because it involves a lot of subjects unlike the Junior High where I can go and pursue only one course like science, technical and any other thing (**Upper East region, Trainee Teachers, R1-Male**).

Considering the misconception about Early Childhood Education and the perceived workload it entails, many trainee teachers, particularly males, showed a lack of interest in pursuing the program.

For me, I was I didn't choose early grade course, I choose JHS certification. But I saw my on my admission form that I was admitted as a student. For that period, I became worried because for me I don't like that early grade course. So, for the first time I became worried. But I don't have any other choice than to come (**Central region, Trainee Teachers, R4-Males,**).

7.1.3 Discouragement from predecessors

Several trainee teachers drew attention to the discouraging advice they received from former students in their colleges. These predecessors advised against choosing Early Childhood Education (ECE) and instead encouraged them to consider Upper Primary or Junior High School (JHS) programs. The rationale behind this guidance appeared to stem from perceived challenges associated with ECE, including misconceptions about the field and concerns about workload. Regrettably, these recommendations from past students have further contributed to the prevailing lack of interest among current trainees in pursuing ECE as their preferred educational specialization. Excerpts from respondents;

Like the teacher students, those who are already in the system to find out the information from them like what are some of the best courses to pursue in the teacher training education and you will see most of them will be saying upper primary or the JHS education but it is very rare for you to see someone to say go pursue early childhood education (**Upper East region, raineer Teachers, Male**).

...the person will be giving you some factors that would influence one from it, especially the patience, the motivation and the time to dedicate for all those children and they will say that it is not easy but taking the JHS as an example, we know the children are grown so

teaching them somethings they will grasp the contents sharp that one will reduce your time and your patience (**Upper East region, Trainee Teacher, Male**).

Headteachers at the in-service level also confirmed the notion that when trainee teachers are assigned to schools, they display a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for being placed in ECE classrooms as teachers. According to their observations and experiences, the trainee teachers exhibit a distinct disinterest in taking up teaching roles within ECE settings. This supports the earlier mentioned trend where both trainee teachers and their predecessors express reluctance towards choosing ECE.

The challenge here is that those who pursued such program when they come and you place them at the early grade level, they always reject it (**Upper East region, Headteacher**).

Most teacher trainees do not have interest in such courses (**Upper East region, Headteacher**).

The decision not to enroll in ECE is shaped by a combination of factors. Misconceptions, a perceived demanding workload, and discouragement from peers in ECE collectively influence individuals' choices. Understanding these reasons offers insights into potential barriers and challenges that need to be addressed to encourage broader participation in ECE programs.

7.2 Reasons for enrolling in ECE

Although most of the respondents stated that they did not opt for the Early Childhood Education (ECE) program, some individuals actively chose to pursue it, each motivated by distinct factors. Some expressed a profound passion for working with children, citing this as the primary driver for their decision. For others, ECE served as a strategic steppingstone to explore broader career prospects, while some participants revealed that ECE was their only choice due to various circumstances. Additionally, individuals highlighted a desire to challenge and correct misconceptions surrounding ECE, and a keen interest in the course content further contributed to their decision-making process.

7.2.1 Passion for children

The genuine passion for working with children emerged as a significant factor for motivating some individuals to enrol in ECE. These individuals viewed ECE as a rewarding opportunity to make a positive impact on children's lives and contribute to their educational journey. Notably, all individuals expressing this viewpoint were females, and these responses were observed both among those in pre-service training and those already in-service.

I love children and it has always been my dream to teach at the early grade that is why I did it. Also, I said to myself that before any child may be able to mention or write their names, it depends on you the early childhood educator or teacher to make that possible (**Central region, P2 Teacher**).

Learning starts from the bottom to the top. I wanted to understand the children and help them to develop and how to handle them (**Central region, KG Teacher**).

Okay, naturally I have the love for children, and I love to see children learn through play and I wanted to, learn more about them that is why I am offering this program (**Central region, Trainee Teachers Female**).

7.2.2 ECE as a stepping stone to explore other career prospects

For certain individuals, ECE represented not just a specific career choice but a strategic steppingstone toward exploring a broader spectrum of career prospects. These individuals saw the ECE programme as an opportunity to build a foundation of skills and knowledge that could later be applied to various educational professions such as lecturing.

I realized that when it comes to careers for early grade, there are many. So, for instance as I'm here doing early grade, later I can go and come and teach these people to go and teach the children (**Central region, Trainee Teachers Male**).

Greater life opportunity because my Role model, Mrs. Owire Georgina Oduro now a Professor at UCC and she also did Early grade education (**Central region, Trainee Teachers Female**).

7.2.3 ECE was the only choice

Some participants shared that their enrollment in the ECE program was not a result of a personal preference but rather a directive from authority figures. One respondent at the in-service level explained,

I did not pursue early childhood program, it was the headmaster that brought me here. In this profession you can't choose the class that you want. Where you will be placed is what you will do. I was brought here but I am doing what I can. I don't have a choice I am working under him so where he says I should go is where I will go. Besides, it is the same teaching, anywhere you go you should be able to teach the children (**Central region, KG Teacher**).

Another respondent at the pre-service level also said,

If you ask those in my class 90% will say that they're not for early grade. I will say the school gave it to us (**Central region, Trainee Teachers R2 Male**).

These responses portray that, external factors such as administrative decisions, played a decisive role in shaping the educational path of certain individuals, underscoring the limited choices available to them in the pursuit of their teaching careers.

7.2.4 Change of misconceptions

Another noteworthy reason for choosing ECE was a desire to challenge and correct prevailing misconceptions about the field. One respondent expressed a commitment to dispelling misconceptions and fostering a more accurate understanding of ECE. By enrolling in ECE, it was her goal to contribute to reshaping the perception that only older women are suitable to teach children during the early years.

Some people have the perception that teaching at kindergarten level is meant for old ladies, so I wanted to change that perception (**Upper East region, Trainee Teachers Teacher**)

7.2.5 Course content

One respondent found the content of the ECE program to be unexpectedly valuable, influencing their decision to continue enrolling in the course. The respondent shared that although she did not initially choose the course, she later recognized the programme's positive impact on their understanding of children and the potential benefits it holds for their future.

As for me I didn't choose this course, but I have realized, that the program has lots of positive results in the life ahead of us understanding children and knowing them better I have come to appreciate this programme a lot (**Central region, Trainee Teacher Female**).

The realization that the curriculum enhances the ability to understand and engage with children contributes to an increased appreciation for the ECE programme, showcasing how the course content becomes a compelling factor for enrolment.

7.3 Recommendations to encourage ECE enrolment

In exploring strategies to promote ECE enrolment, respondents provided valuable insights into effective measures. Emphasizing the crucial role of awareness creation, respondents highlighted the need for comprehensive understanding and acknowledgment of ECE's significance. Additionally, they underscored the importance of supporting ECE teachers through provision of Teaching and Learning Resources (TLRs), targeted training, and motivational incentives such as,

allowances, accommodation, and scholarships. They also highlighted the significance of self-motivation among prospective teachers as an integral component in encouraging enrolment in ECE programs.

7.3.1 Awareness Creation on ECE

Both pre-service and in-service respondents stressed the necessity of extensive awareness campaigns to provide education on the significance of Early Childhood Education (ECE). They advocated for targeted efforts to dismiss misconceptions, both among potential students and the broader community, underlining the importance of ensuring a collective understanding of the positive impact that quality early education can have on a child's development. Respondents suggested that sensitization activities can be done by Ghana Education Service, experts in ECE or past students who have pursued ECE. The following excerpts reflect the claims of respondents on awareness creation about ECE.

So, I think more education should be made on early childhood education and its importance to eradicate that stigmatization (**Central region, KG 2Teacher**).

If education is provided to us at the end they will know what is in the Early grades and they can clear off some misconceptions that are being posed about Early Grade so that they have the passion to come and pursue the Early Childhood Education programme work (**Upper East region, Trainee Teacher, Male**).

Awareness creation has to be done for people to become aware for those who have gone into those programs know that the early grade school is just the beginning and that they can equally teach in the tertiary education (**Upper East region, COE Tutor**).

I think the first step in clearing those misconceptions surrounding early childhood education is proper education. Most people out there think early childhood is for only females.

There could be interpersonal education as well. For instance, if someone is indecisive about the option to do, a friend could advise him or her to choose early childhood and convince them. Aside that there is no way to convince them because everyone is entitled to a choice. You can't force anyone to choose it. Besides it's not compulsory to choose early childhood it's only a matter of choice. So it is only through education that you can encourage people to choose it (**Central region, KG Teacher**).

One respondent suggested that these sensitization programs can be organized by Ghana Education Service through advertisement on national television since it has proven to be an effective medium for sharing relevant information with the general public.

They can advertise on TV. There could be education and awareness about early childhood. People here early childhood but they don't understand. So, if the education comes out it will help people understand that. The GES can do that; they can do more advertisements on early childhood just like they do when it's time for elections. Because a lot of people don't know about it (**Central region, KG Teacher**).

7.3.2 Provision of TLRs and Training on PBL for both in-service and pre-service teachers

Participants, particularly at the pre-service level highlighted the need for substantial support for ECE teachers as a crucial strategy. This support includes the provision of Teaching and Learning Resources (TLRs) and specialized training opportunities. By ensuring that ECE teachers have access to effective resources and ongoing professional development, respondents believe that the quality of education in early childhood settings can be enhanced, creating a more appealing environment for both educators and potential trainee teachers in ECE.

And then there should be training, more training and then there should be provision of TLMs. The training should be for both tutors and the students, teachers as well (**Central region, COE Tutor, R1**).

Materials should be provided so the teacher do not suffer to get materials to handle children (**Upper East region, Tutor COE,**).

Getting support from the Government by providing TLR's to schools (**Central region, Trainee Teacher Female**).

7.3.3 Support and Incentives for ECE teachers

In the pursuit of fostering a vibrant and dedicated community of Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers, respondents highlighted the crucial role of support mechanisms and incentives. Recognizing the significance of these factors, respondents strongly advocated for the implementation of various measures to encourage individuals to choose ECE as their career path. Among the proposed incentives, financial support emerged as a prominent suggestion. Respondents recommended the provision of allowances for in-service ECE teachers, acknowledging the value of recognizing their ongoing professional development and commitment to the field. Excerpts from respondents;

They should give them more motivation by adding them allowances because you know Early Grades is time consuming (**Upper East region, Trainee Teachers, R3 Males,**).

If some sort of incentives or maybe an allowance or something is put on top of their salaries could also attract others in joining the programme (**Upper East region, Trainee Teachers, R1 Male**).

I think they should provide more incentives like money, materials etc. to make the program more attractive to others to join the profession (**Central region, P2 Teacher**).

You can also give free admission to the particular teacher who will want to pursue early childhood education (**Upper East region Teacher**).

Respondents at the pre-service level in the northern sector passionately advocated for additional forms of support to empower Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers. These suggestions aimed to address specific challenges faced by ECE educators in the region and create an environment conducive to their professional growth and effectiveness.

One prominent recommendation put forth by respondents was the provision of accommodation near their workplaces for ECE teachers. Recognizing the geographical and logistical challenges in the northern sector, this measure would alleviate the burden of long and arduous commutes, ensuring that teachers can dedicate their energy and time to their students without the added stress of travel. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of accessible means of transportation for ECE teachers. Motorbikes or bicycles were suggested as practical solutions to facilitate easy and efficient transportation to schools in the region. By providing this mode of transportation, teachers could overcome transportation barriers, reach their schools promptly, and contribute to the consistency and quality of education delivery. Quotes from participants in support of this finding:

Early Grade teachers should be provided with most of the things for instance financially. Like they should be motivated with some things. For example, they can give them motorbikes or bicycles to motivate them so that they will have the passion for the work (**Upper East region, Trainee Teacher, R2 Males**).

Teachers should be given accommodation close to where he/she is teaching (**Upper East region, COE Tutor**).

One respondent at the in-service level argued that motivation of ECE teachers does not necessarily have to be tangible items. She believed that intangible means such as words of appreciation or a pat on the shoulder could be enough to motivation for ECE teachers.

They should motivate the teachers. When the GES officers come around, they can commend the work of teacher. Even if you rub someone's shoulder, you are motivating the person. It is like they are not seeing what we are doing (**Central region, KG Teacher**).

7.3.4 Self-Motivation

In as much as receiving external support is an essential means to motivate potential ECE teachers, some respondents at the in-service level acknowledged the crucial role of individual self-motivation in pursuing a career in ECE. They emphasized the need for aspiring educators to

cultivate a personal commitment and passion for working with young learners. Recognizing that intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in overcoming challenges and contributing to a fulfilling career in ECE. Below are excerpts to support their claim.

It depends on the teacher, if the teacher doesn't like children. It really depends on the passion of the individual aside that I can't think of any other way to motivate them to choose early childhood. **(Central region, P1 Teacher)**.

As for those upcoming teachers, they should have it in mind that as they coming to teach you can be placed in any class, so they need to accept whatever they have been given and give their best. So, they should have a personal motivation to enrol **(Central region, KG Teacher)**.

7.4 Strategies for placement of ECE trained teachers

The placement of ECE trained teachers plays a vital role in ensuring the provision of quality education and optimal development for young children. Respondents highlighted the importance of implementing effective strategies for the placement of ECE trained teachers to maximize their impact and create a supportive environment for both educators and learners. Here are several strategies that can be considered:

7.4.1 Posting based on teacher specialization

Educators expressed diverse perspectives on the crucial considerations for the posting or placement of ECE teachers. Many emphasized the paramount importance of ensuring the protection and well-being of learners. They stressed the need for measures that prevent any mishandling or harm to children entrusted to the care of ECE teachers. In addition, educators highlighted the significance of the Ghana Education Services (GES) placing the right teachers in the right classes. To do this would require assessing them, considering their language background. For some teachers they mentioned this should be carried out in partnership with the Headteachers. This strategic approach aims to maximize the effectiveness of teaching by aligning the skills, expertise, and teaching styles of educators with the specific needs and characteristics of each class of learners. By matching teachers to appropriate classes, both teachers and learners can thrive in an environment that fosters optimal learning experiences.

Teachers at the Early Grade should be posted to where their service is needed not where they want or where they wish to post them. Where really their service is needed so that they can really impact the knowledge they have acquired to their learners. **(Upper East region, Trainee Teacher)**

When it comes to placement of Early Grade teachers, they should assess them to see their knowledge level. Some people are there they only have the certificate, but they do not have

the technique. They do not have the qualities, they do not have the skills in teaching (**Upper East region, Trainee Teacher**)

Sometimes the required personnel are not sent when we send vacancy openings. There is a mismatch in the skills of the teachers. In our school P1 to P3 do not have trained ECE teachers which is a challenge. (**Central region, Headteacher**)

Some ECE teachers do not also get the chance to teach at the appropriate levels since they are posted to JHS instead of the basic level (**Upper East region, Headmaster**)

Teacher trainees should also study various Ghanaian languages and posted to their respective communities. Imagine an Ashanti person coming to an LE grid. The person doesn't understand Kasem, how will the person try to communicate with the learners? So, in terms of that, they need to also consider the specialties like the Ghanaian languages offered at the schools to teach appropriately (**Upper East region, Trainee Teacher Female**)

7.4.2 Better communication between stakeholders

Another technique mentioned by respondents was on the issue of better communication between individuals involved in the placement process. They mentioned that, if there is a better interaction among the bodies responsible for this activity, then there would not be the issue of teachers finding themselves in classes where they do not fit. They also added that teachers with ECE background placed in different different classes should be bold enough to communicate with persons they believe can help them be at the appropriate class.

Proper collaboration in terms of communication between the GES SISOs and the COEs to ensure that the appropriate teachers are brought for openings in the school. SISIOs are aware of this challenge (**Central region, Headteacher**)

The education sector should let teachers decide if they want to teach at the lower block from primary one to three. So, they should avail themselves for this kind of training. So, wherever you are posted to, you handle such a class (**Upper East region, Headteacher**)

A solution to this remedy is that I think they should be a collaboration between the assembly and the headteachers across every constituency. Looking at how things are going a headteacher may request for new teachers in his or her school without specification such as early grade teachers, junior high teachers or upper primary teachers. So, when you are requesting for teachers without being specific the district assembly can decide to send you any kind of teacher that they have, or they want or that is available. But if you specify the kind of teachers you lack in your school the district assembly can decide, no matter how long it will take them, they have to find the particular teacher you requested for. Because of they fail to do so and give you any teacher that they want, and you the headmaster end up putting the teacher in the wrong class teaching will not be effective, so it is a problem that can be addressed by the district assembly and the headteachers in the country or the constituencies (**Central region, Trainee Teacher Male**)

I think there should be proper engagement between head teachers and SISO, circuit supervisors. There should be proper engagement between them. The headmasters have to give valid information on the classes that lack specific teachers let's say math teachers or ICT teachers. So, there should be proper engagement between them so that they can send it to the right authority so they can also post the teachers. **(Central region, Trainee TeacherMale)**

7.4.3 Assessing Passion and Expertise in ECE

The educators' feedback underscores the need to prioritize student passion when selecting and placing teachers. Rather than solely considering the courses taken in senior high school, educational institutions should adopt an open system that allows students to choose their preferred areas of specialization. By enabling students to select their desired field of study, they are more likely to be motivated and dedicated, which ultimately enhances the quality of their education. Placing students in their chosen areas of passion fosters a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to improved learning outcomes. They also emphasize the importance of recruiting teachers with specific knowledge and experience in their respective fields. By placing teachers with the right qualifications and experience in the appropriate classes, the teaching process becomes more effective and rewarding for both educators and learners.

The programs offered at the tertiary institutions and how students are being selected and placed should be looked at. Students should be allowed to choose where their passion is. They shouldn't place the students according to the courses that are offered back at the senior high, but they should make it open so that when a student applies he or she is able to select where they want to be and they should be placed there. **(Upper East region, Trainee TeacherFemale)**

They are the one who recruit teachers so they should do a better job with the selection criteria. For instance, if they want to recruit a teacher for early childhood, they should make sure the person has knowledge in that field before recruiting him or her. Also, person who has never given birth and has no background in early childhood will find difficulty in teaching in the KG class. That person has no experience with caring for children so he or she may not have the patience required to teach in KG. But if such a person receives training, he or she may do a better job. So, if the heads in charge of placing teachers were doing the right thing by placing the right teachers in the rights classes, teaching would not be difficult. **(Central region, KG Teacher)**

In conclusion, prioritizing learner well-being and effective teacher placement are crucial considerations in the field of Early Childhood Education. By implementing measures to prevent mishandling of learners and placing the right teachers in the right classes, we can create a nurturing and conducive environment for both teachers and learners, fostering their growth, development, and educational success.

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This section presents the conclusions and recommendations that have emerged from the exploration of play-based learning in Ghana, its impact on education, innovative approaches, and the motivation of teachers to engage in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Through our research and analysis, we have gained valuable insights into the transformative power of play-based learning, the innovative practices being implemented, and the factors that drive teachers to pursue careers in ECE.

The conclusions drawn from this study shed light on the significant impact of play-based learning in Ghana. We have observed that this approach not only enhances children's cognitive and social development but also fosters a love for learning and a positive attitude towards education.

8.1 Key Conclusions

1. The implementation of interventions is revolutionizing classrooms, teaching pedagogies, and improving the overall quality and conditions of early learning in Ghana, benefiting both ECE and primary education.
2. The training provided by innovators has a significant impact on enhancing the gender and inclusive education competencies of teachers, resulting in the creation of child-friendly classrooms.
3. Education innovators are playing a crucial role in assisting teachers in creating a new culture of learning within the classroom. They are also supporting teachers in developing and utilizing locally produced teaching and learning materials.

8.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, we present a set of recommendations to further enhance play-based learning in Ghana. These recommendations include providing continued professional development opportunities for teachers especially at the pre-service level to deepen their understanding of play-based learning approaches. Additionally fostering partnerships and continuous collaboration between ECE innovators, non-state actors and government is crucial.

8.2.1 Continued Collaboration for Sustainability

To ensure the long-term sustainability and scalability of play-based learning interventions in Ghana, it is crucial to continue to foster collaboration with key stakeholders such as the Ghana Education Service (GES) and other government institutions. This collaboration will facilitate the alignment of policies, resource sharing, and collective support to effectively implement and expand play-based learning initiatives. Involving private school teachers in these collaborative efforts will bring diverse perspectives and contribute to the sustainability of play-based learning approaches.

8.2.2 Training and Support for Educators at COE level

The implications of our research underscore the importance of comprehensive training and ongoing support for educators in Ghana. It is crucial to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement play-based pedagogies. By focusing on innovative and child-centered teaching methods, colleges of education can prepare student teachers to become competent and innovative educators. This investment in teacher training will ultimately enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of children in Ghana.

8.2.3 Enhancements in Infrastructure, Training, and Curriculum

To improve teaching practices, enhance student engagement, and achieve better learning outcomes, it is essential to prioritize improvements in infrastructure, training, and curriculum development. Adequate infrastructure, including well-equipped classrooms and appropriate learning materials, are crucial for supporting play-based learning.

8.2.4 Scale Up of Interventions

Both the National Teaching Council (NTC) and the National Teaching Commission should consider scaling up these ECE innovations and content through their Teacher Professional Development portals.

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