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Play Our Part

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Early-Stage Program Learning to Improve Learning through Play Pedagogies

Advancing Learning through Play in Early Childhood Education

Who are we:

The **LEGO Foundation**-funded **Play Our Part (PoP)** initiative is a community of practice made up of three early childhood education (ECE) implementers - **VVOB - Education for Development**, **Plan International**, and **Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)** - working to strengthen Learning through Play (LtP) instruction and holistic learning in schools and centers. The initiative uses a multi-level approach, engaging schools, government institutions, and communities.

Engage in our Resource Package:

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), as PoP's Learning and Design Partner, authored this research package to consolidate implementation findings into credible recommendations and guidance for those implementing—or considering implementing—ECE and LtP programs. PoP implementing partners contributed findings and insights from their programs, with support from the LEGO Foundation. We invite you to explore these resources and join us in bringing the LtP vision to life.

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The value of early-stage program learning

Intentional and focused program learning is critical to improving education interventions. New approaches—such as integrating Learning through Play (LtP) in Sub-Saharan African contexts—should be tested and adjusted early in their development. This helps identify what works, what doesn't, and why. Early learning strengthens program design, improves implementation, and supports decisions about scaling. It also ensures resources are invested in approaches that are relevant, effective, and efficient.

The Play Our Part Community of Practice has worked to improve LtP quality in school and center based Early Childhood Education (ECE) systems across East and Southern Africa. Over four years, partners applied a phased approach to learning, using cost-effective Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) methods suited to each stage of program development. This resource shares practical lessons on how to approach MEL to support continuous program improvement.

What are the different stages of program learning?

Stage-based learning is an approach that tailors learning activities to match an intervention's maturity, ensuring that MEL efforts align with a program's stage. This approach helps maximize learning value while avoiding unnecessary investment in premature learning priorities or well-established program components that are already widely proven to be effective.

In the **early stages** of program learning, the focus is on understanding the problem, identifying users and a viable model. As an intervention matures and early stage learning validates the model's foundations, the priority shifts to demonstrating impact and ensuring consistent performance—otherwise known as program fidelity—is achieved at scale.

An overview of the steps involved in Program stage-based learning. Once program components have passed through a stage with positive insights, it's ready to proceed to the next stage.

Intervention's Maturity Level		OBJECTIVE	WHAT TO MEASURE
Less developed intervention ↓	**Ideate** 	**Draw insights** from the context and existing evidence, create a Theory of Change for the intervention, and prototype its components with potential target participants	Focus on **understanding the problem, reviewing relevant evidence, and gathering feedback on prototypes** to assess and strengthen their viability
	Refine 	Ensure, through real-life piloting, that the **first steps in the Theory of Change** are working as expected Iterate as needed	Focus on **early signs of success** such as changes in recipients' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior
	Prove 	Test that the intervention is causing **changes in the final outcomes of interest**	Focus on **rigorously measuring impact,** which typically requires comparison to a control group
	Adapt	**Further refine and adapt the intervention for a new context** like a new geography, implementer, or target recipients	Focus on ensuring the adapted model is **relevant, operates effectively in the new context** and is **ready for cost-effective scale-up**
More mature intervention ↓	**Scale** 	**Continue to verify that the intervention is operating effectively** as implementation reaches more participants	Focus on **implementation quality** of the model

We classify **early program learning** as the **Ideate** and **Refine** stages, where PoP programs worked through these stages in coordination. Early-stage program learning is most useful for implementers developing new or experimental program components with little prior evidence or where there is uncertainty over its early outcomes and feasibility. The following sections explore how applying early-stage learning lenses supports LtP program development, drawing on our experience to ensure the right questions are asked, and resources are optimally allocated for program iteration and improvement. For a broader overview of all stages, refer to IPA's Guide to Stage-Based Learning.

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Ideate stage

The Ideate stage is where implementers are still exploring how to solve a problem or testing a new idea. At this stage, program components are often in their earliest, most experimental form, with little to no prior evidence of effectiveness in the sector or specific context. The primary learning focus should be on testing the alignment between the identified challenge and the proposed solution.

Ideate stage learning is particularly useful for LtP programs when exploring key unknowns such as:

- Understanding contextual conditions that shape the problem, such as foundational teaching skills, opportunities within the curriculum to apply playful methods, and school leadership's expectations about how teachers should teach.
- How stakeholders respond to the methods, such as teachers' experience with new instructional practices, children's responses to new activities, and parents' opinions on what children are doing in classrooms.
- Assessing operational feasibility, including whether teachers have the time to engage in training, or to what extent the approach can be adapted to function when there are large class sizes

Examples of common Ideate stage Learning Methods are:

- **Literature Reviews:** Reviewing academic and implementation research helps assess a program's relevance and inform its design by identifying how similar solutions have been implemented and evaluated.
- **Needs Assessments:** A needs assessment helps identify key factors that may influence a new or existing program's success or failure, especially in new or less understood contexts.
- **User Research and Testing:** Engaging intended users on a small scale during development helps uncover needs, behaviors, pain points, and usability challenges, ensuring the intervention is practical and user-friendly.
- **Prototyping:** Developing agile, flexible versions of an intervention allows for rapid adjustments to test feasibility and functionality. This process provides evidence on whether an intervention is practical, contextually relevant, and, in some cases, scalable.

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User Testing for VSO's TMR Program: Designing an LtP EdTech App with Teachers in Rwanda

When tailoring their LtP coaching app for pre-primary teachers in Rwanda, VSO's Twigire mu Mikino Rwanda (TMR) program team undertook user testing before rolling out the app. By engaging teachers early in the design process, they gained critical insights into content priorities, usability, and accessibility needs. The key learnings from their user testing process were as follows:

- **Teachers were eager to use EdTech** – High engagement and module completion rates reinforced confidence in expanding the program.
- **Varying tech skills required additional support** – Observations led to the addition of user guides and more audio-visual instructions.
- **Early testing helped identify tech issues** – Small-scale trials allowed quick fixes before broader implementation.
- **Visual content was well received** – Teachers responded best to modules featuring images illustrating LtP concepts.
- **Teachers preferred collaborative learning** – Despite being designed for self-study, some teachers worked in pairs or groups, either out of choice (a preference and need to engage with the material together) or necessity due to only one device per school and the need to rotate access or use together.

  > This led VSO to provide a second or third device to schools with 4 or more teachers to facilitate individual learning where preferred and [led VSO to] develop a laptop version (additional to the original android) to leverage the distribution of laptops to all teachers by government.

By continually testing with small teacher groups and incorporating early feedback to refine the coaching application before scaling to 240 schools, VSO reduced risks, improved design, and strengthened confidence in their approach.

Early Testing of Outreach Activities to Raise Awareness of LtP in Zambia Communities

When VVOB's IT'S PLAY program set out to engage parents and communities on supporting LtP and ECE, they used a prototyping approach to test outreach strategies that could be scaled and adopted by Ministry of Education partners. Their program explored three possible community engagement methods—SMS/audio messages, public address (PA) systems, and radio.

Public address systems, delivered by a vehicle, emerged as the most promising approach, but further prototyping was needed to refine its design. VVOB tested key iterations, such as whether messages should be delivered while the vehicle was moving or stationary and whether live or recorded messages were more effective. The results showed that stopping the vehicle and combining live interactions with recorded messages generated the most engagement while reducing speaker fatigue.

An example of the iterations tested by VVOB while prototyping

Iteration Tried	Description	Observations
Vehicle Moving	Drove slowly through busy areas without stopping while playing messages.	Minimal interaction with people; little to no feedback received
Vehicle Stationary	Stopped in a busy area, played a one-minute message, and allowed time for people to approach and ask questions.	Generated the most useful feedback; people asked when and where they should go for ECE services.
Broadcast pre-recorded message	Played a pre-recorded studio message with music effects.	Not effective in capturing people's attention.
Deliver a Live Message	The government officer read the message aloud and engaged directly with people around the car.	Highly effective in attracting attention, but tiring for the speaker over time.
Optimal Combination Identified	The government officer interacted with people using the PA system while alternating with a recorded message to reduce fatigue. The car stopped at key locations to allow for engagement and questions.	Balanced engagement and sustainability, ensuring better interaction while preventing speaker exhaustion.

By prototyping different outreach models, VVOB gained valuable insights that helped refine the approach before widespread deployment. This ensured outreach design was practical, culturally relevant, and government-sensitive, that could ultimately be scaled should the approach be identified as impactful in the future.

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Refine stage

Once a program component has passed the Ideate stage—meaning it has been designed, tested, and iterated with a small group of recipients showing positive signs—it is ready for Refine stage learning. This phase is crucial when a program is in its early implementation stages, but its effects on early outcomes remain unclear.

Focusing on early outcomes - such as initial changes in knowledge attitudes and behaviors from a program's Theory of Change, is valuable to identify if a program is on the right track. Monitoring both early outcomes and implementation quality helps validate the extent to which the program is operating as intended, identify bottlenecks and make necessary refinements. Checking these signals at a small scale first ensures adjustments can be made before proceeding to a full impact evaluation or scaling the intervention further.

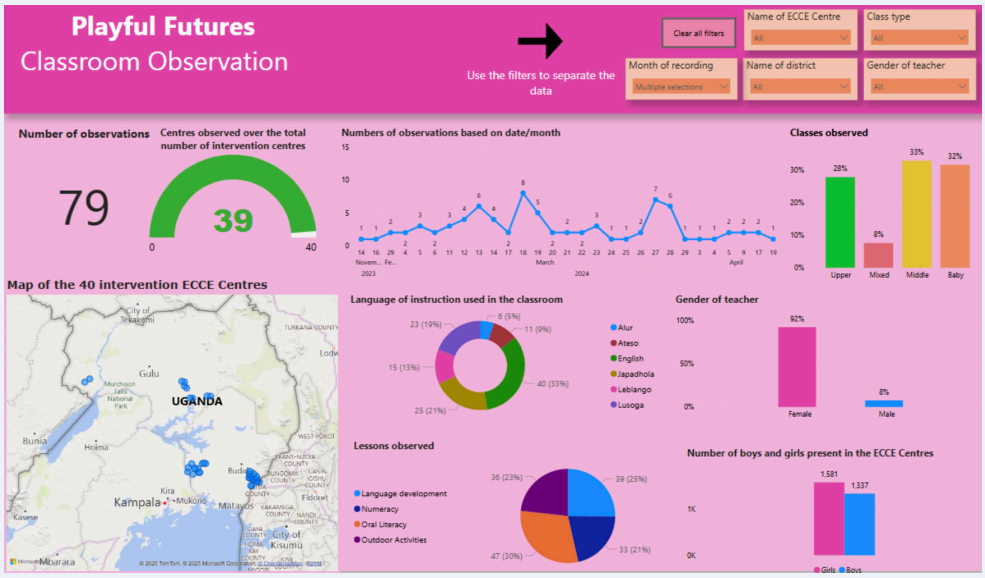
Refine stage learning can be particularly useful for LtP programs by:

- Checking whether teacher professional development (TPD) approaches are building the desired knowledge and skills among teachers.
- Understanding if school and community stakeholders are developing more positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of LtP instructional approaches.
- Assessing if new methods are leading to higher quality classroom environments, or if adjustments need to be made in order to better match theory to practice

Examples of common Refine-stage Learning Methods are:

- **Piloting:** Running the program on a small scale—such as in a limited number of schools or districts—helps assess an intervention's feasibility, practicality, and track early outcomes. It provides a test run to monitor and troubleshoot delivery, identify challenges to refine the intervention's design.
- **A/B Testing:** This is a comparative assessment that tests two different versions of an intervention to identity which appears to perform better on achieving early outcomes such as engagement or understanding to inform which method may be worth developing or implementing further.

Monitoring Teacher Practices & Strengthening Decision-Making in Plan's Playful Futures Program



Playful Future's visually engaging dashboard.

Plan's Playful Futures program in Uganda applied mixed-methods monitoring to track teacher practices and make data-driven program decisions. By combining structured observation tools with accessible data visualization, the team ensured continuous learning and adaptation.

To monitor whether teachers applied training concepts, Playful Futures adapted the LEGO ENGAGE tool to fit their TPD framework. Through multiple rounds of classroom observations across program sites, Playful Futures gained a clear picture of practice frequency and trends over time. Other monitoring methods were used, such as teacher surveys, mentor feedback, and parent engagement data. This was all visualized in a Power BI dashboard to help make the data accessible and support real-time interpretation and learning. The dashboard featured:

- **Clear, visual data displays** for easy interpretation.
- **Linked qualitative insights** to contextualize the numbers.
- **Interactive access for team members** to explore trends and discuss findings.

By embedding data interpretation into team meetings, Playful Futures fostered a collaborative culture where evidence informed decision-making was integrated. This enhanced the program's readiness to improve teacher support, adapt and have a more engaged team contributing to program iteration. Through proactive monitoring and accessible data visualization, Playful Futures ensured their LtP interventions remained responsive, effective, and grounded in real classroom experiences.

Where do programs go after the Refine stage?

This resource focuses on early-stage learning—the Ideate and Refine stages—but the program learning journey continues beyond them.

If credible evidence shows that early outcomes and outputs are holding, the intervention can advance to the **Prove stage**, where learning focuses on assessing effectiveness through rigorous evaluation. Investing in an impact evaluation— which is costly and time-intensive—is best justified after early-stage learning has refined delivery and addressed key bottlenecks. This ensures the evaluation measures the program's most promising, best quality and feasible version.

Once effectiveness is established, the next step is to Adapt the intervention to new contexts, such as different locations, implementers, or expanded operational settings beyond small-scale conditions. If the program operates successfully and is adapted to emerging needs, then it's ready to be scaled for broader implementation.

For more information on the Prove, Adapt or Scale stages, refer to IPA's Guide to Stage-Based Learning.

Tips for Embedding Early-stage Learning in Your LtP Program

Fostering an early-stage program learning culture requires deliberate efforts from both implementers and funders, particularly for organizations unfamiliar with or not yet integrating it into their programming. For guidance on building an enabling environment for iterative learning, see IPA's brief on leveraging iterative learning for program success.

Below are some tips to get you started in integrating early-stage learning into LtP program design, decision-making, and adaptation.

- **Prioritize learning efforts strategically by focusing on the most uncertain and crucial links in your Theory of Change.** Program stage-based learning serves as a cheat sheet for identifying key learning questions based on intervention maturity. Targeting early-stage learning to novel or untested components that have the greatest bearing on program quality or student outcomes ensures resources are directed where they can drive the greatest improvements.
- **Foster a learning mindset by engaging diverse stakeholders in interpreting findings.** Busy teams may struggle to find time to engage with data, so planning and investing time to internalize and act on insights is essential. Prioritizing the timely sharing of crucial findings—aligned with program implementation cycles and key decision-making points—improves the likelihood that data is effectively used to refine LtP interventions. Finally, cultivating a growth mindset involves encouraging the team to embrace both successes and failures as opportunities for learning and program improvement.
- **Funders can support this process by intentionally designing grants and reporting requirements to promote learning:** Funders can support learning-driven program iteration by incorporating flexibility into grant design and reporting requirements. This includes allowing space to test and iterate program designs, avoiding rigid project targets and reporting requirements, and integrating learning components such as reflection cycles and extended inception phases. Creating a supportive environment where implementers can openly discuss challenges ensures that insights are more likely to surface, driving continuous improvement.

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