

Play Our Part



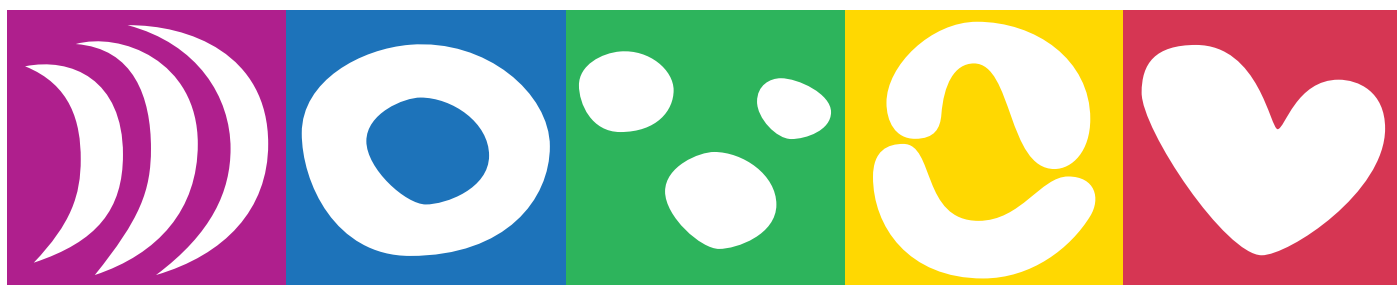
Photo Credits © Zach Wear/Unsplash

Building play-based learning capacity among teachers:

A Play Our Part guide on
ECE teacher professional
development



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.

Table of contents

- 3 The importance of teacher professional development for establishing LtP
- 4 Building Essential Foundations: Developing prerequisite teaching skills critical for LtP success
- 6 Making LtP Support Practical: Structured Planning and Facilitation Guidance for Efficient and Learning-focused LtP
- 8 Mobilizing School Ecosystems: Coordinating stakeholders and resources to enable effective implementation
- 10 Maximizing Professional Learning: Designing high-impact training activities that transform knowledge and attitudes



The importance of teacher professional development for establishing LtP

Strengthening teachers' professional capacity is a common strategy for improving educational quality. Effective Teacher Professional Development (TPD) encompasses a series of activities, from one-time workshops to continuous peer mentoring, designed to enhance teacher's pedagogical knowledge, shape beliefs about what will work in real classes, improve classroom practices, and in the long run, develop the efficiency needed to sustain high quality instruction.

Creating a supportive teaching environment is an important complement to building the capacity of individual teachers. This means cultivating school cultures that prioritize teacher-growth and welcome evidence-based instructional methods, alongside implementing systemic changes that support teachers in adopting and sustaining new practices within their school ecosystems.

This resource presents four years of insights from the PoP initiative on how to build the capacity of ECE teachers to effectively use LtP instructional methods. While not exhaustive, the insights selected for this resource were considered the most important to programs to achieve playful learning in PoP contexts and were strongly supported by evaluation data, teacher feedback, and program experience. We recommend considering our insights in relation to what makes sense in your unique context.

PoP classroom context

In PoP schools, classes were usually positive and contained physical movement, but many teachers had little to no formal training, and typical methods nonetheless relied on lecture and choral repetition. Few learners were given opportunities to participate actively, a challenge that worsened by a lack of learning materials and large class sizes, some classes with up to 100 learners. Within this context, PoP programs aimed to take important first steps towards more playful and child centered-methods.

Our guidance focuses on four key pillars for designing effective TPD interventions that strengthen Learning through Play implementation:

1. **Building Essential Foundations:** Developing prerequisite teaching skills critical for LtP success
2. **Making LtP Support Practical:** Structured Planning and Facilitation Guidance for Efficient and Learning-focused LtP
3. **Mobilizing School Ecosystems:** Coordinating stakeholders and resources to enable effective implementation
4. **Maximizing Professional Learning:** Designing high-impact training activities that transform knowledge and attitudes

1. Building Essential Foundations: Developing prerequisite teaching skills critical for LTP success

Before engaging teachers in TPD activities, identify the foundational teaching competencies that enable effective LTP implementation, and ensure the training program will strengthen these skills. PoP programs found lesson planning, class management strategies, and setting up classrooms with learning materials as valuable foundational skills for doing LTP. Consider how to embed training on these skills alongside LTP practices.

a. Help teachers plan efficiently by tailoring your LTP guidance to work alongside national curriculum frameworks

- Develop ECE-specific **planning templates** that help teachers organize relevant lesson components, such as play materials or group work, around the desired learning objectives. Using a week-long planning format instead of daily plans may reduce workload and improve lesson alignment across the week.
- Provide teachers LTP teaching guides and training on **how to use them alongside pre-existing manuals**. Practice switching between resources and provide clear visual links between new manuals and the existing curriculum. Quickly finding play ideas for a specific lesson while navigating numerous documents will greatly reduce the amount of time needed to plan.
- Deepen teacher familiarity with national learning standards to help them plan more effectively and highlight key competencies that can be easily developed through play. Many teachers may not have received training on these topics!

b. Prioritize first equipping teachers with classroom management strategies, particularly for large class sizes, to help them set up and maintain child-led activities. This could lead to later opportunities for building positive emotional climate and pro-social behaviors.

Identify periods of the day when teachers can incorporate different levels of free or guided play, and show how to develop routines to enforce them. National ECE curriculum often mandates a range of play opportunities throughout the day; some PoP classes therefore used morning and late afternoons for free play, with teachers posting visual schedules on class walls to help children understand what to expect and do during these periods.

Evidence Behind This Recommendation

Foundational teaching skills proved to be persistent enablers— or constraints— affecting LTP implementation in classrooms. Teachers consistently reported challenges in three key areas:

1. **Lesson Planning:** Many found play-based planning time-consuming, requiring considerable creativity for designing engaging activities and accompanying materials. Navigating multiple planning frameworks further complicated their work.
2. **Classroom Management:** Teachers struggled to facilitate increased student exploration, reporting difficulties with fighting over materials, ineffective small-group activities, and inability to address individual learning needs within large classes.
3. **Play Material Provision:** Despite support for creating learning materials, teachers faced an ongoing dilemma— either spend countless hours crafting sufficient materials or exclude some children from full participation in hands-on activities.

- Model and give hands-on practice in setting up and rotating small groups. Teachers will need to feel confident they can manage the behaviors in class during child-led activities. Set clear expectations on what the teacher should do and say while circulating the room during group work. Teachers may also need help in co-creating expectations with the class for how learners should act while working in groups.
- Identifying small, feasible opportunities for letting children lead some class management tasks can help in large classes where teachers can't oversee everything at once. This can also contribute to an engaging learning environment and may be extra useful in mixed-aged classes where older students can be guides.
- Embedding class management strategies within play activity demonstrations and sample lesson plans can help teachers acquire and better plan for class management strategies at the same time as building an understanding of playful learning.

c. Build the mindset that teachers can and should provide a variety of play materials to all children in order to foster active learning and physical exploration.



Photo Credits © Common Goal

- Show teachers how to set up corners or groups with child-accessible materials to promote specific kinds of activity or skills. They may need help finding ways to store the materials to keep their classes orderly. This also helps manage class behaviors since children will be more engaged and able to participate in the activity without teacher intervention.
- Ensure teachers provide enough materials for all children to participate and empower teachers to source their own play materials through a variety of approaches. One way to do this could be providing guides on how to build simple materials so teachers can craft the necessary items to implement their lesson plans. Headteachers may be able to supply manufactured goods that help teachers construct play materials, such as paper and colored markers. Teachers can also
- advocate for materials if communication channels are opened between schools and parents to help source locally-available materials from a teacher's 'wishlist'. Additionally, teachers can plan short activities for children to participate in making or collecting materials as part of class learning, such as each child putting three sticks into a bucket that will later be used for another activity.
- Despite your best efforts to help find new materials, teachers with large classes will probably still benefit from having more. Suggesting strategies to **reduce material needs** can help teachers think creatively. In some cases, small groups eliminate the need to provide an object for every child, and are an opportunity to teach social skills for sharing. In others, prompting children to pretend a pile of rocks are mangoes can be fun and stimulate learning.

2. Making LtP Support Practical: Structured planning and facilitation guidance for efficient and learning-focused LtP

While teachers typically embrace the concept of playful learning, many need support in designing play lessons, and facilitating play to actively support cognition and learning. Highlighting the practical lesson components that teachers can easily control, such as tasks for children, prompts to get them thinking, and reflective questions that conclude activities, will guide teachers to implement LtP more effectively and sustainably.

a. Help teachers design play experiences that intentionally develop early childhood competencies, align with key ECE learning principles, and are facilitated in ways that actively engage children in practicing and discussing those competencies.

- Start with learning goals, not activities. Before selecting playful activities, teachers should identify the specific ECE competencies they aim to develop. While many may want to jump straight into using playful methods, starting with clear objectives keeps the focus on what children will learn.
- Encourage teachers to prepare open-ended tasks or questions that prompt children to independently practice target ECE competencies and express their thinking. Preparing these prompts ahead of time equips teachers to effectively guide learning during the activity, especially when on-the-spot facilitation is challenging.
- Support age-appropriate lesson-design and facilitation by teaching how young children learn so teachers can choose and guide activities effectively. Teachers should design lessons knowing that high-quality ECE class interactions are concrete, connected to familiar learner experiences, and holistically engaging.
- Include fields in lesson planning templates for identifying target competencies, related activities, and guiding prompts. This will support the teacher to align classroom activities with learning goals.

Evidence Behind This Recommendation

Our implementation experience revealed that teachers were quickly convinced of the value of LtP and its concrete interactive elements. However, it was more challenging to capture the subtle aspects, such as how a teacher effectively facilitates interactions, asks inquiry questions, or links activities to specific skills in the national curriculum.

Findings suggest that having a variety of successful play activities focused on developing curricular skills—such as a series of games for identifying letters—could be key to improving learning.

However, gaps remained in facilitation skills and knowledge of open-ended prompts to get children thinking about the lesson content. Additionally, the high level of effort required to continuously create new activities and play materials proved difficult for teachers to sustain.

Prioritize practical, visual, and interactive training sessions in order to build the new instructional skills that will be necessary for teachers to implement LtP on their own.

- During training, modeling desired teaching behaviors and creating opportunities for peer observation can help teachers internalize LtP while developing critical and supportive observation skills. When possible, select facilitators with ECE experience who are play champions and who will provide strong visual models from which teachers can learn effective LtP techniques. Practicing with your facilitation team will strengthen their ability to exemplify LtP. Rehearsing the full training agenda in advance can also give the chance to check that all sessions are visually engaging with opportunities for critical input.
- Hands-on practice and subsequent reflection are crucial for changing teacher behaviors. This means intentionally setting out time during training for teachers to do LtP, interact with peers in small groups, and actively build their own skills. Structured reflection can help teachers set intentions for teaching with LtP, and start planning how they will adapt training activities to their own classes. Cap small group sizes to give teachers more chances to participate.

Selecting an activity and teacher-child interactions to teach specific skills

If intending to teach expressive vocabulary skills, a teacher might choose to play a 'mystery food' game in which the children try to guess an unknown food by asking questions about it. To make the activity concrete and support understanding, the teacher brings physical foods and allows children to see and touch them while making guesses. The teacher encourages children to use specific descriptive vocabulary and occasionally asks the children to retell everything they already know about the mystery food.

To build additional holistic skills in cognitive flexibility, the teacher follows up a right guess by asking children to think out loud about what they originally thought the food was, and what clue helped them change their minds.

b. Reuse and adapt activities instead of creating new ones

- Help teachers plan LtP more efficiently by exposing them to a range of new play activities, providing an activity booklet for future reference, and continually showing how a single activity can target multiple competencies. The materials used, questions asked, and tasks given to children are all possible components that can be adapted to target a new skill. For instance, teachers might be asked to adapt a scavenger hunt activity first for **literacy**, by having children find objects made of different materials (strengthening vocabulary), and then for **numeracy**, by finding **two** objects made of each plastic and wood (illustrating quantities).
- Likewise, multiple materials can be used for the same activity, making it easier for teachers to source them. Encourage teachers to find creative alternatives by asking questions such as:
 - Could you substitute the activity's materials with something you already have?
 - Could you have the learners make or find the materials as another useful learning activity?
 - Could the learners use their imagination so you don't have to find the exact material?



3. Mobilizing School Ecosystems: Coordinating stakeholders and resources to enable effective implementation

Creating an enabling environment at the school is crucial to teachers being able to implement LtP. As teachers develop their LtP skills, they will need ongoing instructional support as well as reliable channels for accessing new activities and materials. Coordination of actors can enhance the professional development environment while integrating LtP into those **local** frameworks. Consider engaging local and district education officials, head teachers, and school-based mentors as possible starting points.

a. Define and refine roles for supporting LtP

Training multiple actors together can help establish a common language, align the school around key LtP methods, gain endorsement of LtP, and help onboard the relevant actors to school-wide play resources or tools for LtP.

Introducing actors to the specific needs of LtP can support early identification of teaching resources, allocate more time to teacher planning, and shift expectations of what behaviors will look like from teachers and students engaging in LtP.

Prompting actors to make action statements about how they will play their part can help get real changes. Encourage commitments towards strong ECE-appropriate teaching and guardianship over school professional development. It may be especially important to seek commitments to give ECE teachers their own space for discussion so they can focus on age-appropriate practices. Often they are grouped with primary teachers and unable to discuss play practices relevant to ECE.

Evidence Behind This Recommendation

In many cases during the PoP project, school leaders and district educational officials proved **crucial** in validating new LtP methods or providing the necessary inputs for teachers to get started.

In other cases, head teachers proved to be strong impediments to playful learning. Sometimes this was due to push back on the methods themselves, or a lack of support to the school professional development environment.

PoP staff heavily stressed the importance of advocating with school leadership on the behalf of LtP, engaging actors together, and bringing school leaders into the professional development environment as a way of clearing the path for LtP. They were also shown to be key for connecting with parents and district level officials.



b. Foster supportive and growth-minded attitudes

Holding sessions on communication and how to coach can build skills for those who have little experience in **playing a supportive role** to teacher development. It may be helpful to frame class observation as a **tool for improving teaching**, rather than for ensuring compliance or worse, for punishment. Both teachers and leadership can benefit from a shift in perspective, bringing more support from leaders and a greater openness to learning from the teacher. Teachers may also benefit if they are doing peer-observations.

School visits where you work with teachers present an opportunity for inviting school leaders to join and observe how to facilitate professional development in a supportive and structured way. Such engagements

can be used to demonstrate how to use new tools, highlight examples of playful learning in real classroom settings, and facilitate teacher-leadership conversations that identify key bottlenecks for LtP to succeed at the school.

It is important to create safe spaces and protect both leaders and teachers from power dynamics. For teachers, this can mean giving anonymous spaces for them to share concerns openly. For leaders, this may mean training them on some LtP concepts **separately from teachers** so that they can be vulnerable in learning and comfortably ask questions about concepts they don't fully understand.

c. Provide structures and tools to boost the school's training environment

To reinforce accountability to LtP strategies, consider providing ECE-appropriate class observation tools that feature research-backed and play-friendly practices. They should foster child-centered and active learning, and can be integrated into school professional development or even district level inspection.

Teachers may have little experience structuring their own learning. Direct training on how to create agendas, hold meaningful pedagogical conversations, or set professional goals can empower teachers, but also consider giving more concrete tools, like sample peer-learning community agendas that include LtP prompts. Teachers may welcome tools for LtP self study, but make them visually engaging and illustrative.

4. Maximizing Professional Learning: Designing high-impact training activities that transform knowledge and attitudes

The PoP initiative has collected its best advice for how to get the most out of the TPD approaches which were used across our programs. We encourage combining multiple complementary approaches to provide the strongest possible support to teachers. However, the specific mix of activities and how often they occur should be tailored to what is feasible with available resources. The table below presents the key recommendations that PoP programs identified for successfully implementing different TPD approaches.

TPD Approach	Definition	PoP Recommendations
Workshops 	Direct engagements with teachers or other stakeholders for building LtP concepts, visualizing what strong LtP looks like, and practicing methods.	Demonstrate play in action to illustrate effective classroom play Engage teachers and other actors in play themselves so they experience it Give opportunities to practice planning and leading play activities Show teachers how to make play materials themselves Engage a range of stakeholders together to foster alignment between actors around what LtP is and how to implement it Promote reflection and prompt teachers to make commitments to what they will try in their classes. Follow up in later engagements.
Teacher materials 	Printed or digital resources that reiterate core program concepts or serve as reference points for use when the teacher is back at school.	Feature plenty of visuals and concrete examples Use simple and local language where text is needed Avoid complicated topics that require clarification since teachers may not have anyone on-hand to consult Make clear connections to existing frameworks and tools so as to make usage efficient and targeted for meeting local standards

TPD Approach	Definition	PoP Recommendations
Coaching or mentoring¹ 	1-on-1 professional development occurring at the school, which involves class observation, teacher reflection, coaching feedback, and an action plan for improvement	Allocate time with coaches building their soft skills and ability to establish supportive relationships with teachers Provide guides for what should happen during coaching (eg. Class observation, reflection, feedback, and action steps) Track and confirm when coaching engagements are taking place to ensure teachers are benefitting from the TPD approach Avoid asking coaches to evaluate teachers or collect monitoring data during coaching because it can damage their relationship with the teacher and undermine the activity's potential for professional growth
Teacher 'communities of practice'² or 'peer-learning communities' (CoPs or PLCs) 	Teacher-led professional development groups that occur at the school and are meant for addressing topics most important to teachers, practical problem solving, and creating a community of support.	Secure headteacher buy-in and make sure they give teachers permission and time to hold CoPs Encourage making and sharing play materials together in order to reduce the burden on individual teachers; head teachers can also help with storage and sharing of materials across the school

^{1,2} We refer to these as roughly equivalent TPD approaches, although some distinctions may be made.



Play Our Part



LEGO Foundation

