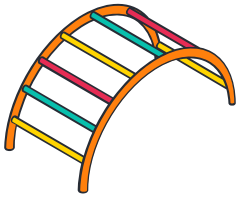




BRIDGE AND THE LEGO FOUNDATION WEBINAR



Meeting Highlights

26 APRIL 2022



SETTING THE SCENE

Facilitator, Patsy Pillay, kicked off the webinar by BRIDGE in partnership with The Lego Foundation, led by three organisations to address 'the practice of play in different contexts' by welcoming panelists and participants.

To highlight the value of play in early childhood development (ECD) Patsy quoted Fred Rogers **"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning, but for children, play is serious learning."**

With all the recognition of its importance locally and internationally, there is still little consensus on what is meant by play and specifically on how to support play as an effective teaching/learning tool to advance the education of young children. To explore the ongoing discussion on play, BRIDGE brought together the following organisations to talk through their understanding of what the play-based approach to teaching and learning, means to them, namely:

Caregiver learning through play (CLTP) consortium: A consortium comprising 4 organisations; HOPE worldwide South Africa, Save the Children South Africa, Ntataise Trust and Early Learning Resource Unit. This consortium is funded and also partners with the Lego Foundation with the goal to train and support 60 000 caregivers and ECD practitioners over 4 years.

PlayAfrica is the first interactive children's museum in Southern Africa and empowers children to think critically to better protect the democracy we enjoy today, and encourages all citizens and all visitors to ask questions, speak out against injustice, and identify innovative solutions for South Africa's new era.

Cotlands initiates and facilitates innovative, play-based early learning opportunities for young children. Children are provided access to a toy library and playgroup programmes aimed at improving school readiness. The programmes are designed to ignite potential through play by enhancing children's social-emotional development, as well as their cognitive skills which include creativity, critical thinking and problem solving.

Thandeka Rantsi, BRIDGE's ECD programme manager, expressed gratitude to The Lego Foundation for fostering the discourse around play, which the ECD sector will never tire of because play is how children learn in ECD.



BRIDGE, understands from collaborative work namely, the Project for Inclusive Early ChildCare Education (PIECCE) project that the Right to Play is:

- enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in 1995
- captured in the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996) and the South African National Curriculum Framework [NCF] (DBE, 2015).
- Endorsed in the South African Curriculum and Assessment Statement [CAPS] for Grade Rs (DBE, 2012).

Parenting Programmes in ECD Knowledge Product

The Lego Foundation and DGMT have supported BRIDGE with funding to produce a Knowledge Product (KP) on parenting programmes in ECD. The KP sums up meeting highlights from 2018 to 2021 that have included the topic of parenting. The KP was produced with the support of a working group from various organisations from the WC ECD CoP and is aimed at organisations that want to integrate parents into their interventions. It looks at four key areas, namely: programmes, research, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), state support systems, and centralised information and resources.



Snippet from the KP

To access the knowledge product click [here](#).



SHOWCASE

Carol Harrington - CLTP Consortium reflection on the Parenting Programmes in ECD Knowledge Product

Carol Harrington, business owner and manager from the Sound Future Group representing the CLTP consortium, gave a presentation on how the consortium has been using BRIDGE's Parenting Programmes in ECD Knowledge Product. One of the key challenges according to Carol has been the need to be flexible and adaptable, resulting in the consortium adopting a rapid learning approach.

By using the Knowledge Product (KP), the consortium has managed to make sense of the chaos and helped to focus on the categories of things where rapid improvement was needed. The KP was also useful in mining the commonality of experiences in parenting programmes documented, which was more evidence based than individual reporting to funders. The KP provided for a well researched and factual document which was not only talking about incidental learnings. The different levels of content spoke to the outcomes of the grant that the consortium has to deal with as it was both programmatic and systemic, making it a huge advocacy component which is useful to the consortium, Carol concluded.

PANEL DISCUSSION



Our panel of experts indulged us in how they facilitate and support different beneficiaries whether they are caregivers, ECD practitioners or children in learning through play. Opening up the panel discussion, facilitator Patsy asked panelists **what their play methodology looks like in practice?**

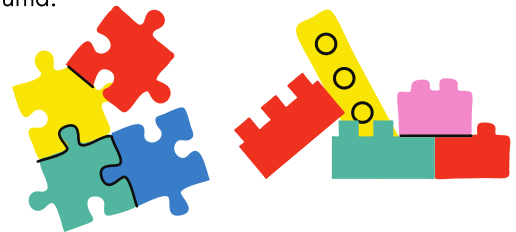
CLTP-Focus on parents/caregivers

Carol Harington, who specialises in curriculum development for the CLTP noted the approach as community based through face to face capacity building interventions, followed by parent and peer support groups and some messaging once parents have been recruited. This approach allows the consortium to target more caregivers with less money as the aim is to work at scale whilst identifying a suitable dosage that can convince caregivers that playful learning in the home is as important and to actually implement it with their children.

Secondly, it is to support ECD practitioners in speaking to parents about learning through play, this is very hard for practitioners to achieve because parents do not associate playing with learning. When speaking to caregivers it was understood that one could not get away from the topic of responsive care because caregivers cannot play if they are not responsive and they can't be responsive if they are distressed or in trauma.

The curriculum includes:

- elements of responsive care
- maintenance for the parents and adults in the family and
- touches base on brain development



It is practical, play-based and layered with emphasis on 'how to' activities. Instead of talking about stress and stress relief, the consortium uses games such as snakes and ladders rather than notes, which allows practising playful learning at the same time. With every single game included in the curriculum, the consortium explains how caregivers can do the same with their children. The games and activities are all linked to the Early Learning Development Areas (ELDAs) and the aims of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 0-4. Play facilitators in the consortium are community workers who are recruited from within the communities where the programme is being rolled out. They are trained to recruit people to a community meeting space.

The play-based intervention programme is a 2 hour session, and includes a check-in with introductions, icebreakers and energising coupled with one or two key activities. The first hour would be a story which models book sharing where parents and play facilitators unpack the value of responsive parenting, as well as how children play. The parents and play facilitators will then share experiences during reflection time, with a bit of dancing, singing and storytelling back and forth. The activities were specifically designed to mirror exactly what parents would need to go implement with children as homework.

Session 2, would be a Snap card game, which talks to the developmental parts and characteristics of play, for example, teaching parents how to play Snap and the mathematical value of it as a matching game for children. Parents are asked for some feedback and reflection on what they implemented and challenges they encountered.

Q. Is there specific training or teaching methodology that addresses how play is facilitated and how was that approached in this particular caregiver programme?

Carol - In the first three to four months of implementation, it was discovered that the facilitation skills required strengthening which made learning about the value of play even more difficult. This resulted in immediate mechanisms to address this issue and allow continuous learning to take place. The consortium used WhatsApp groups which almost operate like digital Communities of Practice (CoP) for play facilitators. While the training and the methodology are rapid, the depth of knowledge and learning came from the groups. Feedback was facilitated to deepen some of the specific parts where there was shallowness and to adapt some of the activities.

Teaching play facilitators how to facilitate playing Snap was one of the challenges and out of pure frustration, the consortium decided to do demos which were more effective than writing up manuals. 'Show-don't tell' modelling worked better because it also created a mentoring process.

Stanley Marara, Senior Project Manager at the CLTP consortium spoke of the challenges that the consortium faces as they implement caregiver learning through play:

- Recruitment: Caregivers had a problem with time slots to attend training as they could not attend in the afternoon which meant that in some cases the consortium could not have two sessions as originally planned. Other issues that came up were community advocacy at the local level and the need for incentives – the solution is to look into a certificate of participation/attendance to acknowledge what they are doing. Attrition was a major challenge.
- Lack of devices limits communication and messaging, which is affecting the ability to expand training beyond training hours.

Stanley also spoke about the highlights:

- Since the consortium started implementing the programme a number of parents are starting to show more interest, saying that they would love to continue attending sessions as they see the positive benefits in their lives and communities. The consortium is beginning to see the demand for awareness with parents saying that playful learning is beneficial to the development of children. Preliminary research based on post and pre-assessment has shown that there is some behaviour change, which is very encouraging.

Play Africa-Focus on ECD practitioners

Play Africa empowers and equips educators and practitioners, runs parent programmes to promote play at home and engages children directly in numerous ways.

Gretchen Wilson-Prangle (CEO of Play Africa) touched on Play Africa's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Seeds programme, which is one of the ways that the organisation is utilising and extending play. STEM Seeds is a knowledge product approach, focusing on teaching methods with the aim to boost the confidence of ECD practitioners to bring about playful learning into their classrooms, through child-led experiences in which children explore, discover, create, investigate and observe. It is about developing early stem skills through play in the lowest resource setting for ECD practitioners that may be intimidated about initiating play and introducing STEM skills by showing them how any room can turn into a dynamic early learning centre using basic and recycled materials.

Play Africa's method is really around empowering ECD educators to see what play is and fostering STEM skills like science, observation, technology skills, designing and making, investigating and how to transform any room into a STEM corner or classroom using basic containers, everyday natural and recycled materials. The programme is aligned to the NCF 0-4 and the CAPS curriculum, showing educators how they can incorporate play into their daily routines.

Zviko Kanyoka, Play Africa's Project Manager for Placemaking programmes, spoke about how the organisation was exploring learning through play through Placemaking. Placemaking is about getting the participation of communities and key stakeholders to become part of the transformation and development of their communities to reimagine what their public spaces could be like and making them beneficial to everyone. The programme has an element of centering children's participation to empower them to be active citizens in their communities.

The programme offers training to community leaders, education professionals and other professionals to make use of Play Africa's approach to get the participation of children in the development of their communities. Children achieve this through their own emotional landscape while empathising with other children in the community. They learn to identify social challenges within their communities and go on to ideate possible prototypes of solutions to those challenges. The process comes off as really structured because it goes through 6 design thinking steps that function as a form of guided play where each child gets to exercise their own agency and autonomy.

Training also incorporates playful learning for facilitators to ensure that they understand the importance of placemaking. Facilitators are often practitioners across the board, namely architects, educators, community leaders, aftercare workers and so forth. They are learning that children are capable of coming up with solutions for their communities and everyday spaces, that they as practitioners can be the drivers of that work, and that this doesn't always have to fall into the hands of city planners or policymakers. All this is made possible by the provision of materials and guides to support facilitators in engaging children in their communities and giving room to access resources that are readily available to them. An alternative way in which Play Africa is trying to get practitioners to understand the importance of play is through the observation of workshops when workshops are hosted in their communities or in schools with children.



Through feedback, PlayAfrica is learning that children are coming out of the workshop developing a new understanding of their own abilities. Both children and practitioners are learning from these engagements, for example, practitioners have observed how some of the children that seem quiet and disengaged become more active and energetic during the workshops. Community leaders are also learning more about children's experiences within their communities. More often without that engagement, there is a lot that gets lost in terms of how children experience spaces differently compared to adults and how their challenges are vastly different to those experienced by adults.

Other models used by Play Africa are the Ubuntu model of playful learning, called Project Zero, developed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This is a South African specific model of playful learning which really drives the work of Play Africa's programmes.

Q. Please talk about the concept of locally relevant, culturally sensitive products, 'ubuntu' and what it means in the practice of play?

The human centred design model embraces design thinking which Play Africa uses to approach any solution in any low resource area and context. In developing the STEM Seed KP, Play Africa partnered with 30 practitioners in low resourced ECD centres and asked questions about their current situation, what they needed, what they needed to bring playful learning and early STEM skills into their learning, co-creating the product and solutions that feel locally relevant.

Cotlands-Focus on children

Sinentlahla (Sne) Nompula, an ECD practitioner supporting children, spoke about play at Cotlands which is about how to equip children to be school ready. It is to help them become independent, so that they know what to do and how to conduct themselves. This is done mainly by letting the children lead and providing them with the support to learn through play. Facilitators need to draw out children's ideas on play. Learning through play is when children can link things happening around them, as a result expanding their knowledge and understanding and building and developing them physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially so that they are ready to face the world.

Cotlands takes parents through the Parents Caregiver Programme (PCP) to support them so that they are able to support their children at home, this is where caregivers, facilitators and parents come together to share ideas on how to assist children to be ready for big school. Cotlands helps them understand how to play with their children at home, by getting all of them together to share ideas on how to do this. Cotlands has a Toy Library, where parents and the community come or can join to borrow toys so they are able to continue where the centre left off at home. Parents only pay R10 for them to borrow toys from the toy library.

The second question posed to the panelists was **how do they know that there is change in their beneficiaries with learning through play within their contexts** (evidence-based)?

Sne - Cotlands uses assessments at key stages to see whether what they have been doing during the course of the week or quarterly was effective for children. These assessments are conducted using a rubric or score sheet to identify gaps and an intervention is sought to fill in those gaps, for example, if a child is unable to hold a pencil, play dough is used to enable them or train them to gain pencil grip.

Carol - The consortium has through its M&E framework been very clear on what the organisation is doing, and the main outcome is driving behaviour change in the caregiver to engage in responsive parenting through play.

To capture the performance, the consortium has designed what is known as KAP or *Knowledge Attitudes Practices and Behaviours* questionnaire, which is done pre and post the training interventions, followed up with sampling after a certain period, coupled with surveying and parent focus groups. This resulted in the decision that there is a need for more interesting instruments and doing rapid testing with a different methodology and what came up is causal link monitoring. The new methodology tries to link how challenges experienced by caregivers may be affecting behavioural change, one example is how caregivers have said the lack of confidence is affecting the lack of behavioural change. The consortium is cautiously hopeful that the tool will show proper results in time.

According to Sne, play is where the values of life are instilled, in a way that is fun, using games, toys and recycled material, so that children can understand. It is about educating children the best way they know how, which is by letting them leading on play for learning to occur.



PLENARY QUESTIONS

Q. Elizabeth Henning from UJ studies play with the aim of understanding the change in cognitive functions during play, and what constitutes imagination. 'How do you define imagination and what is imagination in other South African languages?'

Panellists and participants responses

Gretchen - The programme "I am a scientist" - which is a play-based experience with more than 1 400 children, helps children imagine what it is like to be a scientist in South Africa from anything like a wildlife veterinarian, astronomer, or water quality scientist. The scenarios are created in a playful environment where children use drawings as evidence of how they are imagining things. This cultivates a virtual world inviting children to think about who they are and what they can be by transforming their spaces into 'playscapes'. This is to help children identify their own resourcefulness and creativity.

Carol - The biggest challenge for the consortium is that it first needs to help caregivers and parents to value that they can dream and have imagination. Currently, this is done through book sharing for adults with a simple little story. Once parents recognise themselves in pictures of what children do, they can then begin to see that imagination is not something outside themselves. It is about looking at what is already there and recognising it. It is asking communities 'how can we bring it to you?'

Zviko - Imagination and creativity are closely related, with imagination being about tapping into your creativity. Play Africa has done this exercise multiple times with children by asking them to share what they think creativity is with interesting things coming up like 'creativity is everywhere'.

Nora Saneka - Imagination is more than thinking - it is about opening up many possibilities including emerging hypotheses or working theories. Imagination is about possibility, affordances, unfolding hidden joy of exploration and discovery, and ontology (being and becoming) not just epistemology (understanding) and disturbance, chaos instead of order and predictability.

Q. Pam Picken – Given the wealth, expertise and experience in play-based learning that exists in South Africa, how do we work collectively to get play-based learning on ECD firmly on government’s agenda, especially in the context of the function shift?

Patsy – How do we bring government on board, how do we advocate the value of ECD, especially looking at the different tiers of government? Making sure that the principles of play-based learning are on the table and that the sector does not suffer the consequences of a watered down version of the Grade R CAPs curriculum in South Africa?

Panelist and participants’ responses & recommendations

Gretchen – Play Africa aligned their Stem Seeds programme with both the NCF and CAPs curriculum to demonstrate that it is a practical tool that can be used to implement key learning development priorities with regard to playful teaching methodologies in South African classrooms, which is a priority identified by the DBE in critical skills to develop a changing world. In response to UNICEF’s prediction that only ‘25 % of children in South Africa have a safe place to play,’ Play Africa came up with 43 educational solutions that promote playful learning in various settings and capacities to show what playful learning looks like in practice. This models what playful learning looks like to policymakers who can potentially replicate these practices.

Sne – We should encourage parents and caregivers to take at least 2 hours to play with their children a day and in that way, the sector can then say it is making a difference, which might prompt the government to say parents need to dedicate 2 hours a day to play with their children. It is about the evidence and showing the positive of what is happening through play, Patsy added.

Stanley Marara– There is a desperate need for cooperation and sharing in the sector. The funding environment has created an environment of scarcity, meaning that NGOs, PBOs, FBOs, and CBOs have to compete and view each other with suspicion. Smaller organisations that do not have capacity are affected and feel like they are being left out and that is why the sector needs to enable more cooperation. There is also a need for different implementers to focus more on specific subjects rather than on multiple subjects because when an organisation tries to do everything, one finds that it does not do well in anything. Organisations need to complement one another by understanding what everyone is doing within the different focus areas in the sector, as to avoid duplication and to help each other.

Pat Moodley – One needs to change the mindset that play is confined only to ECD level but should feature prominently in the foundation, intermediate and senior phase. There is a need to re-engineer our training and support methodologies to factor individual and group play in Primary Schools. If play methodology is sustained not only in ECD but in the Primary School Phase, we could see young children more actively involved in learning through confidence, use of skills and competency. ECD is preparing the edifice with pillars of support in promoting play which should be reinforced in the early academic years preparing children for the global society.’

Nicholas Jaff – Bright Kid Foundation has developed a ‘Playtainer’ converted container specifically for children to play, for training to take place, and for storing toys in a safe environment anywhere when safe play areas are not available.’

Colleen Horswell-Daniels – Most parents’ perception of play is just children playing and not learning. I am happy to note that the idea of play is evolving and at my ECD site we provide our parents with information on the understanding of play and this does help as they then understand the learning process happening.





CHECK OUT

As part of her closing remarks, Patsy emphasised the need for valuable cooperation and that there are ways to advocate government, particularly DBE with suggestions around showcasing and modelling evidence and cooperation between the different partners. Thandeka closed off the session by highlighting the importance of how the sector can share and learn from each other. She spoke on the need to take the conversation on learning through play forward as it involves many other aspects. Thandeka thanked all the panelists and participants for their rich information and questions asked during the session.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT



The CoP is reminded of BRIDGE's knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE's Knowledge Hub. To view, follow this [link](#).