

Using sport and play to achieve educational objectives¹

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Introduction

As the deadline for the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals nears, global discussions on education increasingly focus on the gains and challenges of the last decade. As noted in UNESCO's most recent EFA Global Monitoring Report (2012), while the advancements in primary school enrolment rates are significant, other EFA goals surrounding quality education and early childhood care and education have seen comparatively little progress. As a result of under-investment in education, teachers frequently enter training programmes with limited subject-specific knowledge. As such, teaching programmes often focus on further developing this knowledge rather than focusing on pedagogy or effective teaching techniques.

It is well established that sport and play have innately enjoyable and participatory qualities that, when tapped into effectively, have the power to enhance educational outcomes. In order to achieve these positive outcomes, programmes must be well designed, implemented and evaluated to ensure the best aspects of sport and play are used (Bailey et al., 2009; Stead and Neville, 2010; Crabbe, 2009). Although sport and play's ability to impact and address these challenges cannot be ascribed to all programmes and is broadly under-evaluated, growing research over the last decade highlights the positive contribution sport and play can make to the healthy cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children and youth (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2008; Ratey, 2008; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; Bailey, 2006; Trudeau and Shephard, 2008).

Acknowledging the work of the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP IWG), the Commonwealth

Secretariat, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) and many other partners globally, this article seeks to articulate how state and non-state actors can use sport and play to reach their educational objectives.

This paper will not reiterate this evidence in depth, but rather share Right To Play's experience working with governments and formal education institutions and with an emphasis on low-income countries.

A variety of benefits

Increased engagement, attendance and retention

A number of studies have shown that education through sport and play allows children and youth to better enjoy and engage with the learning process while enhancing social connectedness between participants. This creates an environment more conducive to open communication and encourages a love of learning (McCune, 1998; Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2008; Jeans, 2010; Kay, 2009; Crabbe, 2009; Colucci, 2012).

Evaluations of Right To Play programmes have found that student participation and levels of concentration have increased as a result of participation in sport and play. In an evaluation from Thailand, it was found that students in participating schools were actively involved 77 per cent of the time as compared to students in non-participating schools where that figure was 48 per cent (Thailand, RTP, 2008). Some teachers from the evaluation attributed the increase in effective class participation to an enthusiasm about the games through which the students were being taught, as well as the active learning methodologies employed by teachers. Increased motivation to participate in and attend school consistently emerges as a strong outcome for students involved in Right To Play activities, and is associated with long-term outcomes such as increased enrolment and retention in school. This was seen in an external study in rural Azerbaijan where school principals reported an increase in attendance up to 20 per cent, as well as by teachers in the Thailand evaluation. In Liberia, findings have confirmed that integration of Right To Play activities has increased school attendance and performance by giving children incentive to learn (Liberia, Comic Relief, 2011).²

Increased academic achievement

Additional evidence supports the idea that well-designed sport and play programmes can contribute to improved academic performance of students (Bailey et al., 2009; Stead and Neville,

Right To Play

Right To Play (www.righttoplay.com) is a global organisation that uses the transformative power of play to educate and empower children facing adversity. Through sport and play, Right To Play helps one million children weekly in more than 20 countries to build essential life skills and better futures, while driving lasting social change. Founded in 2000 by four-time Olympic gold medalist and social entrepreneur Johann Olav Koss, Right To Play is headquartered in Toronto, Canada and has national offices in Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as regional offices in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Right To Play's programmes are facilitated by more than 600 international staff and 13,500 volunteer coaches.



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Teachers in Benin take learning out of the classroom through play-based learning

2010). A literature review of studies examining the link between school-based physical education and play-based learning programmes and academic outcomes from 11 different countries revealed the following:

- Positive associations between general physical activity and academic performance in 79 per cent of the studies
- Positive associations between classroom or physical play-based learning activities and academic performance in 89 per cent of the studies
- Positive associations between extracurricular physical activity and academic performance in 100 per cent of the studies³

As highlighted by additional research, incorporating sport and play in teaching methodologies can enhance cognitive functioning in a variety of ways, ranging from enhancing neurological development and cerebral growth, to optimising one's mindset and improving alertness, attention and motivation by providing a break in cognitive tasks. (Ratey, 2008; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998; Bjorklund and Douglas Brown, 1998; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Although there is insufficient evidence to determine the exact catalyst for the change in each individual activity, evaluations of Right To Play programmes have also demonstrated that participants have stronger academic achievement than non-participants, including greater language and

numeracy skills. In Ghana, Benin and Mali,⁴ survey participants scored between nine and 23 per cent higher on cognitive, attitudinal and behaviour-related tests as compared with children in the same areas who were not engaged in Right To Play sport and play activities.

How are governments responding – and leading?

Recognising growing evidence in this area, some governments have made significant efforts to harness the potential of sport and play to reach their own educational objectives. Right To Play and local partners work with ministries of education to enhance the quality of the education through teacher training and curriculum development. To ensure the effective integration of learning through sport and play into the curriculum, teachers are trained in the *pedagogy of physical play* either through in-service or pre-service trainings. With coaching and support over time, teachers strengthen their capacity to apply these new approaches in their classrooms, either integrated into existing curricula or as complements to the existing school day structure.

The following cases describe how three governments have committed to and advanced the use of sport and play to help them attain their development objectives, specifically those related to education and childhood development.



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Children in Liberia participating in sport and play

Thailand

In 2010, the Thai Royal Ministry of Education developed a new basic education curriculum that introduced life skill education. Recognising the potential of sport and play-based programmes to contribute to the development of life skills, the Ministry of Education entered into partnership with Thaksin University, UNICEF, the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and Right to Play to conduct a formal review of the existing curriculum.

To achieve the objectives of the curriculum, the partnership focused on the integration of child-centred learning, where play is a central experiential learning technique. To help facilitate these goals, four Life Skills packages based on Right To Play's *Red Ball Child Play* resource and methodology were developed. Following development of these packages, the ministry and partners have engaged in the process of designing the Thailand Life Skills Framework and capacity-building for both teachers and the Education Service Area Office. Teachers are now taking advantage of teachable moments to cultivate life skills throughout the school day, and are using play to integrate learning for life skills alongside academic learning.

Benin

Following a national forum on education in 2007, the Republic of Benin's Ministry of Education undertook the development of an Early Childhood Education (ECE) programme based on the holistic development for children aged two and a half to five. During the curriculum development process, the ministry highlighted an absence of play-based learning – a widely recognised foundation of early childhood development – in the existing programme. To support these reforms in the curriculum, the ministry initiated a working group with Right To Play, ETFO, the National Institute for Research and Training in Education, and the Department of Preschool Education.

In partnership, the curriculum was adapted to integrate components of Right To Play's *Early Child Play* resource, teachers were trained in play-based learning and early childhood pedagogy, and planning for national curriculum implementation took place. Central Education Ministry directors have had their capacities reinforced to effectively implement the play-based early childhood curriculum.

Since 2009, in an effort to provide additional support towards research and monitoring and evaluation, the creation of an Early Childhood Research Center based in Benin, located at the National Institute for Training and Research in Education, has started being explored. A

website, complete with sport and play-based preschool education materials, has also been created to give support to teachers in the implementation of the new curriculum. Benin's ECE curriculum is on track to reaching over 3,000 teachers and 80,000 children nationwide.

Rwanda

In 2010, the Government of Rwanda held a two-day Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) forum bringing together a number of stakeholders from civil society and various ministries. Following this forum, the government made significant commitments to advancing the use of sport and play for various development objectives. These initiatives include, but are not limited to, the recent review of the national sport policy; a number of SDP forums and accompanying policy reforms at municipal and local levels; a national event to promote gender equality and draw awareness to gender-based violence (female sport competitions between ladies in parliament, senate and government vs. ladies in civil society organisations); and a formal review of Rwanda's education curriculum.

For years, Right To Play has worked with UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, the Rwandan Education Board and local partners to ensure holistic child development through the implementation of play-based learning programmes in school districts across Rwanda. Following the success of this approach, Right To Play's *Red Ball Child Play* and *Early Child Play* modules were formally validated by the Education Board. In 2011, the Ministry of Education decided to further align these resources with the national culture and existing education modules by formally including such approaches into the National Physical Education Curriculum. Since 2011, the training of trainers and teachers and the piloting of the new curriculum has been ongoing.

Methodology

In each example, governments and partners worked together to tailor existing Right To Play's materials to specific cognitive, physical, emotional and social development outcomes in children and youth. An important component of using sport and play effectively for learning is related to stimulating children's thinking around a learning outcome of the game they are about to play.

Right To Play's methodology, entitled 'Reflect-Connect-Apply', is based on the work of educationalists such as Freire, Brown, Piaget and others, all of which cumulatively support the concept of an educational process that is active, relevant, reflective, collaborative and applied.

Conclusions and selected recommendations

Evaluations of Right To Play programmes underscore the need for comprehensive and ongoing training for teachers. These evaluations suggest that teachers with training and support demonstrate a more collaborative teaching style. In Thailand, these trainees tested for their appropriate use of child-centred teaching scored 26 per cent higher than their counterparts (Thailand, RTP, 2008). Other studies have shown that teachers who received this training were also more likely (up to eight times in Thailand) to use inclusive teaching practices than non-participating teachers.

The following recommendations, while not exhaustive, are designed to support stakeholders interested in advancing sport and play for education. They build upon and reinforce existing recommendations made by sport and play stakeholders.

Setting the stage

- Conduct reviews of existing curricula to address specific gaps in learning and to tailor interventions to address these gaps
- Engage a number of stakeholders, including education authorities, parents and teachers, education specialists and academics to create a holistic approach to childhood development through sport and play
- Consider environmental conditions that help ensure that sport and play-based approaches are effective, including the provision of ongoing capacity-building and refresher training for teachers (particularly in the areas of inclusion, gender equality and child protection), the provision of safe environments and investments in infrastructure to create safe play spaces
- Ensure understanding and support of parents and communities. In many contexts, transmission-based or didactic approaches to education are the norm, and sport and play-based methods for learning are largely undervalued and unknown to many parents and adults working with children. Provide additional information and research in local languages
- Provide all schools, including centres for early childhood development, with infrastructure, sport facilities and equipment for active learning, including land titles where applicable

- Ensure safe places for active learning and recreation in schools. Develop specific guidelines and policies that align with international standards in child safeguarding (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) for education institutions
- Ensure adequate investments for education that promote learning through sport and play, including, but not limited to, resources for teacher training and ongoing mentorship and support, adaptation and delivery of curriculum and training materials, infrastructure and built-in pilot periods and phased implementation and scaling reforms

Design, development and delivery

- Consider both the integration of sport and physical play-based learning into existing curriculum and compulsory physical education periods
- Adapt existing curricula to achieve specific objectives through age appropriate sport and play activities (i.e. life skills development)
- Ensure cultural relevance of sport and play activities. This may require significant research, scoping and time by pedagogical experts in-country in order to identify and adapt traditional games and activities from different areas of the country
- Ensure ongoing coaching for teachers to support the application of new knowledge and skills. Training in the absence of ongoing support is not enough to ensure intended outcomes
- Ensure that physical education programmes incorporate the use of sport and play-based learning for holistic health (including sexual and reproductive health)



Kathryn McCracken/Right to Play

Rwandan teachers being trained in the pedagogy of physical play

- Ensure all training for educators includes how to adapt activities and create inclusive experiences
- Enforce requirements for quality physical education programmes in school timetables and adopt guidelines for length and age-appropriate activities. Provide opportunities for extra curricula sport and play programmes wherever possible
- Use interscholastic sport events to promote educational and health messages
- Invest in knowledge sharing and professional development in play-based learning and pedagogy for teachers

Monitoring and evaluation

- Ensure strong structures and frameworks are in place to measure outcomes and conduct research to improve sport and play-based education methodology
- Take steps to monitor training of teachers as well as teacher delivery and understanding of reforms
- Engage universities, particularly education and social science faculties, in research and monitoring and evaluation
- Support research and evaluation of existing practices, in particular those that support ongoing and in-depth research and evaluation and seek to understand which specific components of sport and play programmes are the most effective in targeting education challenges
- Ensure a cohesive approach to monitoring and evaluation, including clear roles and responsibilities, particularly during the initial planning phases

Endnotes

- 1 Adapted by kind permission from the Commonwealth Advisory Board on Sport (CABOS) annual report 2013.
- 2 Azerbaijan, Liberia and Thailand are not Commonwealth member countries.
- 3 US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010.
- 4 Benin and Mali are not Commonwealth member countries.

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