

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Figure 1: The researcher facilitating children's storytelling

The Power of Indigenous Play Practices for Improving Early Grade Literacy Outcomes

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Executive Summary

This policy brief is based on research findings indicating that indigenous play practices help children,

- a) improve their literacy skills,
- b) enhance their agency of learning in the classroom, and
- c) connect them to their cultural and local contexts.

The research was done in the displacement settings in Oromia and Tigray regional states, where a multitude of people were displaced from their homes because of armed conflicts. It employed a mixed methodological approach in which quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were used. It used descriptive and quasi-experimental research designs.

Primary schools in which children from the IDP centers learn were selected, and 106 grade 2 children (60 from Oromia and 46 from Tigray) were considered from each IDP center as treatment groups (53 children) and control groups (53 children). The treatment was done for four months and involved the use of indigenous play practices in the classrooms to check the extent to which these play practices can improve children's literacy outcomes.

The results show that there is a significant difference ($P < 0.05$ in all variables) between the control group and the treatment group in all aspects of literacy, showing that the treatment has a significant effect on children's literacy development. These results indicate that indigenous play-based learning methods and activities are effective to enhance children's holistic literacy, which includes not only the reading and listening fluency but also knowledge about local values, norms, and skills for social integration and survival.

Accordingly, the research revealed the power of indigenous plays in helping children improve their literacy outcomes and supporting teachers in enhancing the effectiveness of classroom pedagogic practices. The indigenous play-practices have the power to heal children from the trauma in displacement situations, strengthen their interactions and social relationships with their teachers and each other, and help them escape or forget the challenges in the displacement conditions. Based on these findings, recommendations that support the implementation of policies for early-grade literacy development in fragile social contexts have been presented.

Context

This research focused on children, teachers, and parents in the contexts of displacement settings in Oromia and Tigray regional states, where a multitude of people were dislocated from their homes and local environments because of armed conflicts. Living in displacement contexts with poor and vulnerable families, the children have

multiple challenges that have hindered their learning outcomes. Above all, the economic, social, and psychological stresses that children are experiencing in the displacement situations have discouraged them from attending school regularly, focusing on their learning activities, and improving their learning outcomes. The families do not have stable livelihoods and cannot support their children to learn better. Therefore, displacement-related challenges prevent children from learning and performing as they did in their normal livelihood settings. In other words, the displacement situations have caused visible constraints to children's learning because of damage to schools, lack of shelter, food scarcity, and disorders in psychosocial statuses. Parents are not supporting their children's learning because they lack stable livelihoods.

Research Methodology

A mixed methodological approach that involved quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection was used. The research was based on descriptive and quasi-experimental designs to interconnect the quantitative and qualitative data and triangulate the findings. The population for this research was children living with their parents/caregivers in IDP centers in the two regions – Tigray and Oromia, and their parents and teachers. One IDP center was selected from each region. Primary schools in which children from the IDP centers learn were selected, and 106 grade 2 children (60 from Oromia and 46 from Tigray) were considered from each IDP center as treatment groups (53 children) and control groups (53 children). The children participated as sources of quantitative and qualitative data.

Teachers who were teaching literacy subjects for these early graders and randomly selected parents and teachers of the selected children were considered for participation in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

A pretreatment and post-treatment literacy assessment was conducted for grade 2 children (both treatment and control groups). The treatment was conducted for four



Figure 2. Teachers facilitating learning through play

months and involved using indigenous plays for teaching and learning literacy skills for grade 2 children who were boys and girls (8-10-year-olds) living with their displaced families in Oromia and Tigray IDP centers. During the treatment, the teachers guided the children to perform the different aspects of the indigenous play practices in the

classrooms. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations were also used to collect qualitative data from teachers, children, and their parents.

Key Findings

Children's Early Grade Literacy Status Improved after Treatment

The post-treatment EGRA outcome was computed for children in Oromia (treatment $n=30$ and control $n=30$) and in Tigray (treatment $n=23$ and control $n=23$). In both contexts, the treatment and control groups' literacy outcomes were compared. The differences between the two groups have been used as an indicator of children's improvements in literacy status. The following table compares the EGRA outcomes for the treatment and control groups in Oromia.

Table 1: Independent Sample T-test for Posttest Treatment ($n=30$) with Posttest Control Group ($n=30$) in Oromia

Variables Compared	Mean 1 (Intervention)	Mean 2 (Control)	Mean Difference	t	df	P values
Print Awareness	88.18	69.00	19.18	3.467	56	.001
Alphabet Knowledge	50.89	35.87	15.03	3.898	56	.000
Sound Awareness	44.21	31.57	12.65	3.354	56	.001
Final Sound Awareness	68.21	54.00	14.21	4.728	56	.000
Awareness of meaningful words	58.57	45.87	12.70	2.969	56	.004
Awareness of non-meaningful words	47.71	40.67	7.05	1.572	56	.122
Reading Comprehension	10.64	6.00	4.64	2.026	56	.047
Listening Comprehension	100.00	80.17	19.83	5.617	56	.000
Dictation	56.43	32.00	24.43	7.205	56	.000

Table 1 shows that the difference between the control group and the treatment group is significant in all aspects of literacy, showing that the treatment has a significant effect on children's literacy development. In all aspects of literacy except awareness of non-meaningful words, the difference between the control and treatment groups is significant ($P < 0.05$ in all variables except one), which indicates that the children who received the treatment performed better than the children who did not have exposure to the treatment. These results indicate that the treatment, which was the use of indigenous play practices for literacy development, helped the children improve their literacy outcomes. In other words, the analysis shows that indigenous play practices helped the children increase their literacy skills.

Similarly, data from the IDP contexts in Tigray show significant differences between the control group and treatment group in literacy outcomes. The data also show significant differences between the treatment and control groups in literacy outcomes. The following table presents a comparison between treatment and control groups in literacy outcomes.

Table 2: Independent Sample t-test for Posttest Treatment (n=23) with Posttest Control (n=23) in Tigray

Measure	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	P values
Print Awareness	Treatment	100.00%	0.00%	—	—	—
	Control	100.00%	0.00%			
Alphabet Knowledge	Treatment	74.13%	31.89%	2.225	44	0.026
	Control	41.05%	30.22%			
Final Sounds	Treatment	97.50%	8.47%	2.036	44	0.048
	Control	88.18%	20.62%			
Awareness of Familiar Words	Treatment	85.33%	194.03%	3.073	44	0.001
	Control	40.41%	30.89%			
Non-Familiar Word Reading	Treatment	66.50%	23.46%	2.51	44	0.012
	Control	28.73%	19.31%			
Reading Comprehension	Treatment	61.25%	118.47%	1.76	44	0.052
	Control	35.45%	27.56%			
Listening Comprehension	Treatment	81.67%	17.61%	-1.109	44	0.274
	Control	107.50%	112.76%			
Dictation	Treatment	51.71%	39.02%	0.604	44	0.549
	Control	44.64%	40.33%			

Table 2 presents that in most of the literacy components, the difference between the control group and the treatment group is significant. It is significant in alphabet knowledge ($P = 0.026$), final sounds ($P = 0.048$), awareness of familiar words ($P = 0.001$), non-familiar word reading ($P = 0.012$), and reading comprehension ($P = 0.052$). These results indicate that the treatment group performed better than the control group in these areas of literacy. However, the difference between the control and treatment groups in listening comprehension ($P = 0.274$) and dictation ($P = 0.549$) is not significant, indicating that the treatment group did not perform better than the control group in the mentioned areas of literacy. This is attributed to the common challenge of children's listening comprehension and writing skills in both displacement and non-displacement contexts.

The qualitative data also show that the indigenous play practices are helpful. The teachers reported that indigenous play practices helped them turn the lecture-based teaching into play-based learning in which children are central actors. By using the indigenous play practices, methods, and activities of literacy learning, the teachers

shifted their roles from lecturing to facilitating, guiding, and co-creating with children. Teaching through indigenous plays enabled the teachers to make the classroom engaging, child-centered, and helped them combine a child-centered approach with teacher scaffolding. It was also clear that the indigenous play practices provide children with the capacity to feel safe in their local spaces, regulate their emotions, rebuild trust, and adapt to unstable environments. By restoring play and joy into disrupted lives, the indigenous plays help children regain a sense of stability and become motivated to learn.

These results confirm that indigenous play practices such as storytelling, riddling, oral dramas, songs, manipulative plays, and indigenous games are powerful in helping children improve their literacy and solve the prevailing failures of early grade children in literacy outcomes. Indigenous plays help to contextual learning and make it meaningful in local contexts. These play practices help children improve their literacy skills through playing with sounds, letters, and words in the contexts they are familiar with. They motivate children and engage them in learning activities by fostering self-confidence, autonomy of activities, and child-friendly challenges. These activities provide children with the context in which they can choose their favorite play activities, direct themselves, and negotiate with each other. Such a context enables children to learn in the way they want to learn and develop self-motivation and confidence in themselves.

Why Indigenous Play Practices Help Children Improve Their Literacy Skills?

It is clear from the children's post intervention literacy outcomes and interviews with teachers, parents and children that indigenous play practices such as storytelling, riddling, folksongs, make-believe and imitative play practices and oral games are powerful to improve children's literacy outcomes in fragile contexts because they can help children get relief from tensions, overcome social challenges, create pleasure, develop their vocabulary power, recognize and manipulate individual sounds, understand written words for meaning and context, develop speaking and listening skills and connect them themselves to their local values.

This research implies that indigenous play-based early-grade literacy development activities are suitable for children's learning in fragile contexts and can help them remain connected to their normal ways of life, practices, and values. The indigenous play practices strengthen children's mental connections to their original places, help them forget their stressful situations, and relieve them from fear, trauma, and a sense of distress. Indigenous play practices such as storytelling, riddling, and folksongs are popular entertainment performances among early graders in Ethiopia, in particular, and Africa in general. In these play practices, children are fully engaged and deeply motivated to perform, entertain, and learn better.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the results discussed above, the following policy recommendations are forwarded.

Develop Indigenous Play-Based Literacy Learning Materials for Children

The Ministry of Education and regional education bureaus, in collaboration with partners, need to consider the following.

- Produce indigenous play-based literacy development material that helps children develop their literacy skills in their times and spaces.
- Validate and distribute the materials so that all primary school children have access to them.

Collect and Organize of Indigenous Play Practices

Universities and colleges of teacher education, in collaboration with community organizations, need to:

- Identify, collect, and develop indigenous play practices as literacy learning resources for children.
- Allocate human and financial resources for the identification, collection, organization, and development of these play practices is essential.

Integrate Indigenous Plays Practices into Curriculum of Preprimary and Primary Education

The Ministry of Education and the regional education bureaus should implement the following.

- Embed indigenous storytelling, riddles, songs, and games into primary literacy subjects of primary schools.
- Produce indigenous play-based teacher guides that help teachers link play activities to literacy competencies.

Integrate Indigenous Knowledge into Pre-service Teacher Training Programs

The Ministry of Education, regional education bureaus, and colleges of teacher education should consider the following.

- Train teacher educators to employ indigenous plays as teaching methods and activities
- Train early-grade teachers to have the capacity to facilitate indigenous play as a literacy tool.
- Encourage co-teaching with elders and community members to sustain indigenous play practices.

Implement Short-Term In-Service Capacity Development Training for Teachers

The regional education bureaus need to do the following.

- Develop a short-term training manual for using indigenous play-based literacy development
- Provide capacity development training for teachers in the utilization of the indigenous play practices for teaching literacy.

Implement Community Engagement for Children's Literacy Development

Pre-primary and primary schools need to implement the following.

- Partner with families and local leaders to co-create literacy-rich play environments.
- Establish “story corners” and play events in schools where children engage with oral play practices.

Monitor & Evaluate Literacy Gains

The Ministry of Education and the regional education bureaus should:

- Develop indicators for measuring literacy gains from indigenous play (e.g., vocabulary growth, narrative skills).
- Pilot programs in diverse regions to assess scalability.

Acknowledgements

This research was done with the financial and technical support of CODE. Therefore, we are highly grateful to CODE and its team. We are also grateful to Addis Ababa University for providing us with the time to conduct this research. We are also thankful to all participants in Oromia and Tigray (children, parents, and teachers) who tirelessly took part in the research as data sources and facilitators of treatment.

The views expressed in this work are those of the creators and do not necessarily represent those of CODE, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) or the Government of Canada. This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from Global Affairs Canada.

Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

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