All Work, All Play
Harnessing play-based learning in Ethiopia and Liberia to create lifelong learners

Lindsey Wang
The Luminos Fund
Play is a traditional activity of children. Yet in order to ensure we are giving children time to play and opportunities to gain from the physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits of play, we need to find innovative ways to use play to ensure that all children are learning and meeting their potential.

Seventeen years ago, the international development community made important commitments to the world’s children. While the records show remarkable gains to date, there are still millions of children and youth for whom Education for All (EFA) represents no more than a string of broken promises. They were supposed to enjoy expanded early childhood learning, but over 200 million children under the age of 5 are not receiving appropriate childcare, nurturing, or learning opportunities for their stage of development. They were guaranteed free and compulsory primary school, and life skills for youth, but UNESCO calculates that approximately 250 million children worldwide fail learn the basics, and 120 million are out-of-school children who don’t even get the chance to try.¹

The 2016 Global Monitoring Report reveals that only two-thirds of children in low-income countries make it to the final grade of primary school and only half complete it. At the lower secondary level, only one-third reach and complete the last grade. At the upper secondary level, only 14% complete school.² There is also an alarming rise in youth unemployment across the world and 156 million (or 38%) working youth are living in extreme or moderate poverty.³ In sum, as the 2016 Global Youth Development Index and Report⁴ reflects, today’s young people are not receiving the investment they need to build meaningful and productive lives for themselves. Moreover, the newly minted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not seem to offer any greater optimism, as early feedback indicates that the new commitments to universal access and lifelong learning might already be deemed unattainable.

We at the Luminos Fund believe that the promises made to the world’s children can indeed be redeemed and that play is both foundational and fundamental to learning. Therefore, we’re working to ensure all children—especially those affected by poverty, conflict, and discrimination—have the opportunity to learn through play. Through our Second Chance program, we have...
harnessed the power of play-based learning to enable over 100,000 previously out-of-school children in Ethiopia and Liberia to re-enter the mainstream school system. Following an intensive accelerated learning program, 75% of our students have gone on to complete primary school. If we want our children to be creative; have vibrant imaginations; be resilient; and have physical, emotional, cognitive, and social balance and strength, we as a global society need to think differently about how children learn.

The Role of Play in Learning

While a worldwide consensus that learning is important for healthy child development exists, much misunderstanding about the learning process itself remains. Many of today’s education systems have been built on the premise that learning is “serious work” and that teaching should primarily (and sometimes exclusively) focus on content mastery and the acquisition of an important, but discrete, set of academic skills. Under this paradigm, play is regarded as off-task behavior, more fit for recess, lunch, and extracurricular activities, and less fit for the classroom. As Nancy Carlsson-Paige reflects: . . . never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that we would have to defend children’s right to play. Play is the primary engine of human growth; it’s universal—as much as walking and talking. Play is the way children build ideas and how they make sense of their experience and feel safe. . . . But play is disappearing from classrooms. Even though we know play is learning for young kids, we are seeing it shoved aside to make room for academic instruction and “rigor.”

As Carlsson-Paige’s remarks suggest, this perspective tends to ignore accumulated evidence from neuroscience research and early childhood learning literature that clearly establishes play as both foundational and necessary for learning. Play nurtures the whole child—intellectually, emotionally, physically, socially, and academically. Play “provides avenues for children not only to explore their environment and build their personality but to also construct knowledge that is unique to them.” Play, therefore, is essential to, and not a distraction from, learning.
With play deprioritized as it is in most primary and secondary education systems, it is not surprising that millions of young learners feel increasingly dejected, disconnected, and disenfranchised from the learning process, and that their schools continue to struggle to make learning relevant to the outside world and productive for life and livelihood beyond the classroom.

The Luminos Fund’s Second Chance Program

“Our teacher is so good to us and allows us to play and learn at our own pace.” Nine-year-old Angel lives with her grandmother in Mango Town, Liberia, to help reduce the financial burden on her parents. While Angel had attended school for a short time, she was forced to drop out at the nursery level when the aunt who paid her school fees died from Ebola. When Luminos Second Chance classes became available in her village, Angel was able to re-enter school. “My brothers and sisters are not in school, so I’m glad to be in the class. I love reading and playing with my friends!”

To date, Luminos has helped over 100,000 children like Angel across Ethiopia and Liberia gain access to quality learning opportunities through the process of accelerated learning. Ethiopia has the second highest number of out-of-school children in Africa, and Liberia, at 62%, has the highest recorded rate of out-of-school primary-age children in the world—hence, both countries have been early priorities for us. The Luminos Second Chance program, an accelerated learning initiative, helps out-of-school children who have dropped out of or have never attended school catch up to their peers and re-enter the mainstream school system. The data on our work is compelling. Ninety-six percent of program graduates—including Angel, now 10 years old—go on to mainstream schooling in their communities, where our students outperform their government school counterparts. Over 4,000 facilitators and teachers have received professional development trainings in play-based methodologies, and over 12,000 teachers in the linked government schools have benefited from complementary capacity-building trainings in our pedagogy. A recent longitudinal study of Luminos’ first cohort of students found that 75% of the cohort went on to complete their primary school education.

To achieve these results, we take a holistic approach to the challenge of out-of-school children, working with the entire education ecosystem—from students and parents to local and national education officials—to dismantle systemic barriers to education. The three components of the Second Chance program are designed to engage stakeholders at all levels. First, students achieve basic literacy and numeracy in the space of 10 months through a participatory, child-centric, activity-oriented, feedback-driven, and—most importantly—play-based pedagogy and supporting learning methods. The accelerated curriculum is designed to adhere to the country’s national...
The Luminos Second Chance program enables out-of-school children to transition into mainstream school through a play-based, accelerated learning curriculum, parental engagement groups that mobilize community support for education, and capacity-building trainings in local government schools in our innovative pedagogy.
The Promise of Play
A series of evaluations conducted by the University of Sussex Centre for International Education—our lead evaluation partner—found that the play-based pedagogy not only caught students up to grade level, but also taught them to love learning and to carry that love into the next phase of their education. Sussex researchers concluded:

“The whole experience over the ten months appears to create learners who are not only reflexive but autonomous and resilient, having learnt how to learn. . . . Graduates are well set up to succeed in the contrasting classrooms and social environment of the [government school] when they integrate.”

“This school is so different from the one I went to where we learned only on a chalkboard. There weren't flashcards. No music or games to help us learn,” says Azaleche. When she was a child, Azaleche loved to go to school. Now in her early twenties, she inspires a new generation of students as a learning facilitator in Loka, Ethiopia, with the Luminos program. “I came here to work and grow. My favorite part of my day is when we sing the things I taught the kids earlier. When they sing, they have fun, and they learn. When they become successful and go to college, they will make us proud.”

Azaleche is one of thousands of community members who are seeing the effect of play-based learning inside and outside of the classroom. A Sussex evaluation of the Second Chance program in Ethiopia found that the program has fundamentally changed how students, parents, teachers, and government education officials think about and approach learning. So many of our students come from poor and illiterate families; these students are often quickly dismissed and assumed to be the least educable by teachers, principals, and education officials. By bringing children together in playful learning communities, our approach ensures that children with a range of different learning styles not only grasp the minimum learning competencies, but also develop productive and mutually supportive relationships and a positive mindset, heartset, and experience set toward learning. Sussex
researchers conclude that “the program in its training ha[s] been successful in getting teachers and students to re-conceptualize who can learn and why. The teachers seemed convinced that all children could and would learn what was necessary to succeed.” By deconstructing the stigma and barriers to education, play provides a more engaging, more inclusive learning environment for all children.

Conclusion
For too long, the discourse of global education has been divided into two, separate conversations. On the one side, the innovation conversation—new models of individualized instruction, adaptive learning. This is the conversation we hear in the Silicon Valleys, Silicon Savannahs, Silicon Wadis, etc. of the world. And on the other side, is the universalization conversation—the need to find a way to reach the 250 million children in the poorest corners of the world who still fail to learn to read and write.

We all want rich, stimulating, joyful learning for our own children. But so often as international education professionals, when we turn our minds to the daunting challenge of bringing education to the 250 million children in the world who still miss out on even the basics, our vision for what kind of education is possible narrows in the face of this massive challenge. In the search for universalization, we revert to the world of counting children in seats and teaching through worksheets and scripted instruction. In so doing, we fail at what we set out to do in the first place: to help children tackle the basics, and then grow to become lifelong learners.

The Luminos Second Chance program—which operates in some of the most resource-stressed communities around the world—proves this is a fundamentally false dichotomy. We believe some of the most breakthrough innovations in education can occur at the outer reaches of the formal education system. Indeed, true breakthroughs are most likely to come from the margins, the periphery of the global system, where there is both room to try new things and the imperative to do so. Through the power of play-based learning, we are proving that the two conversations of education innovation and education for the masses not only must but can become one.

Notes:
8 University of Sussex. (2016). Research into the Speed School curriculum and pedagogy in Ethiopia.
9 Ibid.
About The Luminos Fund
Luminos is one of three philanthropic organizations (alongside the End Fund and the Freedom Fund) incubated and spun-off by Legatum, a Dubai-based organization that focuses on solving global challenges that have received little attention. It does so by: first, testing ideas on a small level to prove they are credible and will make a difference to a significant number of people; and second, by launching organizations that can refine the approaches and scale them to create long-term systemic change.

As a standalone philanthropic fund and operating foundation, Luminos developed a theory of action to unlock the light within every child by introducing, scaling, and mainstreaming interventions that inspire children to lifelong learning by plugging them into the powerful current of playful learning. We believe in making defined and well-researched interventions, and we operate on a lean, efficient, collaborative, and ecosystem-empowering basis. In each of the countries we serve, we deliver our interventions through a network of locally operating implementation partners. This approach allows us the flexibility to engage as an agile change catalyst while also ensuring that our interventions not only make a difference for children, but also stimulate and support local capacity building, from teachers and partners to local communities and national governments.