Strengthening Early Childhood Development in Rwanda through an Integrated Play-Based Approach: Lessons from the Inkingi y'Ejo (Pillars of Tomorrow) Project

Henriette Gwizamahoro
Right To Play International, Rwanda Country Office

Abstract

Early Childhood Development (ECD) provides the foundation for children's learning, wellbeing and lifelong development. Although Rwanda has expanded access to ECD services, quality remains uneven, particularly in community-based centres where caregivers may have limited access to professional development, learning resources and ongoing support. The **Inkingi y'Ejo (Pillars of Tomorrow)** project, implemented by Right To Play Rwanda, addresses these challenges through an integrated play-based approach combining caregiver capacity strengthening, supportive learning environments, parental and community engagement, and system-level collaboration. The project operates across 100 ECD centres in Kayonza, Ruhango and Rubavu Districts, reaching approximately 300 caregivers and more than 10,000 children.

Grounded in the **WHO/UNICEF Nurturing Care Framework**, the model combines training on Rwanda's Pre-primary Competence-Based Curriculum and play-based pedagogy with coaching, mentoring, classroom observation and Communities of Practice. A contextualized Games Manual supports intentional use of play across the curriculum, while monthly parenting sessions extend learning into the home. Collaboration with government institutions, District authorities and community structures supports alignment, ownership and sustainability. Evidence on guided play and responsive caregiving further informed the model (Skene et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2021).

The Midline evaluation using **IDELA in June 2026** showed substantial gains in children's school readiness. Overall IDELA scores increased from **26.5% to 54.5%**, exceeding the 42% annual target. Social-emotional development increased from **16.2% to 55.7%**, emergent numeracy from **21.3% to 54.8%**, and emergent literacy from **27.6% to 47.7%**. Caregiver competency in play-based learning increased from **31% to 56%**, while parental participation in four or more learning activities increased from **8% to 32.2%**. A total sample of 511participantd were sampled both at baseline and were the same people at midline including children, parents and caregivers.

Inkingi y'Ejo demonstrates the potential of an integrated play-based approach to strengthen ECD quality, caregiver practice, parental engagement and children's school readiness. However, persistent differences between school- and community-based centers highlight the need for targeted investment in infrastructure, learning resources and continuous professional support to achieve equitable and sustainable ECD quality at scale.