

## LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS' IMPLEMENTING PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN KINDERGARTEN CLASSES

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### Abstract

*This research explores the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. It examines (1) the benefits of play for learning, (2) teachers' roles in facilitating play-based learning, and (3) challenges in using play as a learning tool. A qualitative case study approach was used, involving three kindergarten teachers from a higher educational institution during the 2022-2023 academic year. Data collection included interviews and classroom observations. Findings reveal that play enhances cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Teachers serve as facilitators, role models, and advocates while engaging with parents. Challenges include classroom management issues, attitudinal barriers, and structural constraints. This study highlights the importance of teacher training, parental involvement, and policy support in optimizing play-based learning. Future research should explore strategies to address challenges and improve implementation.*

**Key Words:** *Play-based learning, early childhood education, preschool teachers, cognitive development, social-emotional growth, classroom management.*

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### Introduction

The phrase, often attributed to both Plato and Richard Lingard, a 17th-century professor of religion, states, "You may discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of discourse." This reflects what early childhood educators have known for decades—play is a crucial component of learning. Through play, children explore math and science, develop literacy and language skills, and engage in social problem-solving. Play allows children to experiment with different roles, fostering creativity and imagination.

Despite extensive research demonstrating that cooperative play enhances academic performance, behavior, and social skills (Gray, 2019; Hanline, Milton, & Phelps; Reynolds, Stagnitti, & Roskos & Christie, 2019), many school administrators, often lacking expertise in early childhood education, prioritize academic

skills over play. This has led to a significant reduction or even elimination of play in kindergarten classrooms, replacing it with structured academic activities.

Wohlwend (2019) observed that integrating play with literacy in a kindergarten classroom resulted in students who not only improved their literacy skills but also developed stronger social bonds. This success was partly due to the teacher receiving support from the school principal, allowing for a balanced literacy block that incorporated play. Children engaged in meaningful conversations, developing oral language skills crucial for their educational journey.

According to Wohlwend (2019), play is essential to a developmentally appropriate curriculum and aligns with modern core curriculum standards. Play enables children to explore new

technologies, use available resources creatively, and imagine their futures. However, the increasing focus on academic achievement has led to a shift away from play. Gray (2019) noted that between 1981 and 1997, children's free play time decreased by 25%, while school time increased by 18%. Today, preschools and kindergartens emphasize academics more than ever, with extended school days and reduced recess periods. This shift has been linked to rising social difficulties among children due to the diminished time for unstructured play.

In this research work, the researcher would like to understand the play-based implementation in the kindergarten classrooms. Particularly, the researcher would like to answer the following:

1. What do preschool teachers see as the benefits of play as a means to learning?
2. How do preschool teachers see their roles in promoting learning through play?
3. What do preschool teachers see as obstacles in using play as a means to learning?

This research explores the impact of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, examining its benefits, the role of teachers in its implementation, and the challenges they face. By understanding these aspects, educators and policymakers can better integrate play into early childhood education, ensuring holistic child development.

### Methods

This study employed a descriptive case study approach to explore the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. A case study design allowed for an in-depth investigation of teachers' experiences, challenges, and perspectives within a real-world educational setting.

Three kindergarten teachers from a higher educational institution were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that participants had relevant experience in play-based learning.

Parental consent was obtained for students under the teachers' supervision.

Qualitative methods were utilized, including semi-structured interviews, literature reviews, and classroom observations. Interviews provided in-depth insights into teachers' perspectives, while observations captured real-time implementation of play-based strategies.

Interview transcripts were verbatim transcribed and categorized into thematic matrices. Content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns. Findings were triangulated with other sources to ensure validity.

### Results

#### Benefits of Play-Based Learning

The study's findings confirm that play-based learning significantly contributes to children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Cognitively, children engaged in play-based learning demonstrate enhanced problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and creativity (Gray, 2019). Teachers reported that students who participated in structured and free play activities showed improved reasoning abilities, classification skills, and better recall of concepts taught in class. This aligns with research by Roskos and Christie (2019), which highlights the role of play in reinforcing abstract thinking and early literacy skills.

Socially, play provides opportunities for children to practice communication, cooperation, and negotiation skills. Teachers observed that students who engaged in role-playing activities, group games, and collaborative tasks developed stronger peer relationships and were more adept at resolving conflicts independently. This supports Hanline, Milton, and Phelps' (2019) findings that cooperative play fosters teamwork and empathy among young learners.

Emotionally, play-based learning helps children build self-regulation skills and articulate their emotions more effectively. Several teachers

noted that children who were initially hesitant to express themselves became more confident and self-assured when engaging in dramatic play or storytelling activities. These findings echo those of Wohlwend (2019), who emphasized the role of play in helping children process emotions and develop resilience.

From a physical standpoint, play-based activities enhance both gross and fine motor skills. Teachers reported that activities such as outdoor games, block-building, and art projects improved children's coordination, balance, and dexterity. These findings are consistent with Bodrova, Germeroth, and Leong's (2019) assertion that physical play strengthens motor development, which is essential for handwriting and other academic tasks.

#### Teachers' Roles in Play-Based Learning

The study found that teachers play a crucial role in facilitating play-based learning by acting as facilitators, role models, and advocates. Teachers structured classroom environments to encourage exploration and discovery, guiding students through meaningful play experiences. This finding aligns with Wohlwend (2019), who highlighted the importance of teacher-led play in enhancing literacy and social skills.

Additionally, teachers emphasized the significance of collaboration with parents to reinforce play-based learning at home. They provided parents with suggestions on incorporating play into daily routines, such as storytelling, board games, and imaginative play. Research by Reynolds, Stagnitti, and Roskos (2019) supports this approach, indicating that parental involvement in play positively influences a child's cognitive and emotional development.

#### Challenges in Implementing Play-Based Learning

Despite the numerous benefits, teachers identified several challenges in implementing play-based learning effectively:

**Classroom Management Issues** – Teachers reported difficulties in maintaining focus and equitable participation during active play sessions. Some students struggled with turn-taking and conflict resolution, requiring additional teacher intervention. These challenges are consistent with Hanline, Milton, and Phelps' (2019) findings, which suggest that effective classroom management strategies are essential for successful play-based learning.

**Attitudinal Barriers** – A major challenge is the perception that play is secondary to structured academic instruction. Some educators and parents viewed play as merely recreational rather than an integral part of learning. This finding supports Gray's (2019) argument that misconceptions about play often lead to its exclusion from early childhood curricula.

**Structural Constraints** – Rigid curricular requirements, time limitations, and inadequate resources hinder the integration of play-based learning. Teachers noted that standardized assessments and prescriptive teaching schedules left little room for unstructured play. Similar concerns were raised by Bodrova, Germeroth, and Leong (2019), who called for more flexible policies to accommodate play within early education frameworks.

#### Discussion

The study underscores the critical role of play-based learning in early childhood education. The cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits identified in this research reinforce existing studies (Gray, 2019; Roskos & Christie, 2019), demonstrating that play is not merely a leisure activity but a fundamental component of learning. These findings suggest that policymakers and educators should prioritize play as a pedagogical strategy rather than viewing it as secondary to academic instruction.

The identification of challenges—classroom management, attitudinal barriers, and structural constraints—highlights the need for systemic

changes. The perception of play as non-essential remains a significant obstacle. Research by Wohlwend (2019) suggests that teacher support and administrative backing are crucial for successful play integration. Therefore, shifting perspectives on play-based learning requires engagement at multiple levels, from educators and parents to policymakers.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can help optimize play-based learning in early childhood education:

**Teacher Training Programs** – Professional development should focus on equipping educators with effective strategies for managing play-based learning environments. This includes training in classroom management techniques, conflict resolution, and integrating play with academic content. Research by Reynolds, Stagnitti, and Roskos (2019) suggests that well-trained teachers are better able to balance structured instruction with play.

**Parental Awareness Campaigns** – Educators and policymakers should actively involve parents in discussions on the benefits of play-based learning. Providing workshops, informational materials, and interactive sessions can help shift parental perceptions, ensuring stronger home-school partnerships. Hanline, Milton, and Phelps (2019) advocate for increased parental engagement in play-based learning to maximize its benefits.

**Policy Adjustments** – Education policies should be revised to provide greater flexibility in early childhood curricula. Reducing rigid academic requirements in favor of more play-integrated learning models can enhance student engagement and holistic development. Bodrova, Germeroth, and Leong (2019) emphasize that policymakers must acknowledge play as a fundamental right of children and allocate appropriate resources for its implementation.

**Classroom Resource Enhancement** – Schools should invest in high-quality play materials, such as manipulative toys, sensory play stations, and outdoor play equipment. Providing diverse play opportunities ensures that children of varying learning styles and abilities can benefit. Research by Roskos and Christie (2019) indicates that well-resourced play environments significantly enhance cognitive and social development.

**Time Allocation for Play** – To counteract the reduction of playtime in schools, administrators should allocate dedicated play periods within the daily schedule. Gray (2019) suggests that increasing free play time can help improve children's emotional well-being and social competence. Schools that have implemented extended recess and structured play sessions report better student engagement and fewer behavioral issues.

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