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Purposeful Play: Exploring Effective Educational Play-Based Approaches in Kindergarten Classrooms

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***Abstract*:** This study explored the play-based approaches utilized by kindergarten teachers and examined how these strategies foster children's literacy, numeracy, creativity, communication, problem-solving, and socio-emotional development. Recognizing play as a cornerstone of early childhood education, the research sought to highlight how purposeful play can be intentionally integrated into classroom instruction to support holistic child growth. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was employed to capture the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based approaches. This design was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of teachers' successes and challenges in utilizing purposeful play as a pedagogical tool. The study was conducted in elementary schools within the Southeast Butuan District, Butuan City, Caraga Region, Philippines, a locale characterized by diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts, including indigenous and Butuanon learners. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria requiring at least three years of experience in play-based instruction. Out of 20 identified teachers, eight met the criteria and provided rich, experience-based perspectives. Data were collected using a structured interview guide validated by experts in early childhood education and qualitative research. Ethical procedures were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Member checking was conducted to ensure the credibility and authenticity of the findings. Results revealed that kindergarten teachers employ a wide variety of educational play-based approaches intentionally designed to support specific developmental domains. Six major themes emerged: foundational skills development, creative and storytelling play, physical and kinesthetic play, constructive and puzzle play, rule-based number and cognitive games, and assorted play approaches. These practices collectively nurtured literacy readiness, numeracy awareness, motor development, creativity, communication, problem-solving, and socio-emotional growth. The most effective strategies balanced structured skill-building with open-ended, imaginative, and cognitive challenges, including constructive and creative play, rule-based cognitive games, foundational literacy tasks, interactive participation games, chance-based numeracy activities, and storytelling with puppetry. The study affirms that purposeful play is essential in kindergarten classrooms, providing meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences that holistically support children's growth and prepare them for lifelong learning.

Keywords: ***Cognitive development, Creativity, Early childhood education, Kindergarten, Literacy readiness***

INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning is widely recognized as a cornerstone of early childhood education, fostering the holistic development of young learners across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. It provides meaningful opportunities for exploration, creativity, and collaboration, making learning both enjoyable and authentic. When integrated into kindergarten classrooms, play-based approaches nurture literacy readiness, numeracy awareness, motor skills, communication, and socio-emotional growth, thereby laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning (Zosh et al., 2022).

Play-based learning is not limited to free play but involves intentional teaching moments where teachers guide and enrich children's experiences. Research highlights that dramatization, storytelling, constructive play, and rule-based games enhance creativity, problem-solving, and classroom engagement (Smith & Johnson, 2021; Brown et al., 2022). Garcia and Martinez (2024) further argue that interdisciplinary play, which integrates literacy, numeracy, and the arts, enriches deeper learning and supports diverse developmental needs. These studies affirm that purposeful play is a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting inclusion, creativity, and holistic child development.

for developing students' critical thinking and digital literacy

Research on play-based learning in the Philippine context remains limited. Many teachers struggle to balance mandated academic standards with developmentally appropriate play-based activities,

often due to insufficient training, limited facilities, and administrative pressures to prioritize academic performance (Omaga & Alieto, 2020; Wagner, 2024). This tension creates challenges in aligning play-based instruction with curriculum requirements, resulting in gaps between theory and practice. The lack of localized studies examining how Filipino teachers implement play-based approaches underscores the need for research that addresses contextual realities and provides strategies for overcoming these barriers.

This study sought to address these gaps by exploring the effective educational play-based approaches utilized by kindergarten teachers in Southeast Butuan District. By employing a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, the research captures teachers lived experiences, highlighting both successes and challenges in implementing purposeful play. The study aims to provide insights into how play-based strategies can be intentionally integrated into daily classroom routines to support learners' socio-emotional and cognitive development. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of localized literature on play-based learning and offers practical recommendations for strengthening early childhood education in the Philippine context

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Maria Montessori's Theory of Early Childhood Education. Vygotsky emphasized the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development, arguing that learning is inherently a social process. According to this theory, children acquire knowledge through interactions with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers and peers, within their cultural and social contexts. A core concept of this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance and support. Within this zone, learning is optimized through scaffolding, where an adult or more capable peer provides structured support to help the child move to higher levels of understanding.

Maria Montessori's educational philosophy complements Vygotsky's principles by emphasizing child-centered, hands-on, and experiential learning. Montessori posited that children learn best when they are free to explore and manipulate materials within a prepared environment tailored to their developmental needs. Learning through self-directed activities encourages independence, intrinsic motivation, and mastery of skills at the child's own pace. In Montessori classrooms, teachers act as guides or facilitators, observing learners and providing individualized support while allowing children to take ownership of their learning experiences.

The integration of Vygotsky and Montessori theories provides a comprehensive framework for this study. A play-based learning approach aligns with Vygotsky's principles of guided social interaction and scaffolding, as teachers actively support children's learning within their ZPD. Simultaneously, it reflects Montessori's emphasis on learner autonomy, hands-on exploration, and individualized pacing. Through guided and self-directed play, learners engage in meaningful socio-emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development. Collaborative play provides opportunities for social interactions and cultural tool use, while child-directed activities foster independence, curiosity, and creativity.

Hence, this dual-theoretical framework validates the use of play as a medium for holistic development, combining structured guidance with opportunities for exploration. It guided the study in examining how kindergarten teachers perceive and implement play-based approaches, how their practices reflect social, cultural, and developmental principles, and how they design interactive, learner-centered environments that enhance engagement, learning outcomes, and overall growth in young learners.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore how kindergarten teachers implement and experience play-based approaches in their classrooms. The design was chosen to capture the essence of teachers' lived experiences, particularly their successes and challenges in utilizing purposeful play as a pedagogical tool. By focusing on teachers' narratives, the study sought to uncover how play-based strategies contribute to children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and holistic development. The research was conducted in elementary schools within the Southeast Butuan District, Butuan City, Caraga Region, Philippines, a locale characterized by diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. This setting provided a rich backdrop for examining how play-based learning is applied across varied classroom environments, including those serving indigenous and Butuanon learners.

Data were collected using a structured interview guide composed of three parts: an introductory segment to establish rapport, core questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of play-based practices, and a concluding section that allowed participants to share additional reflections. The instrument was validated by three experts in early childhood education and qualitative research, ensuring clarity, relevance, and

alignment with the study's objectives. Reliability was further tested through a tryout with one participant who shared similar demographics to the target respondents. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured. Interviews were conducted at mutually convenient times, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim to preserve authenticity.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis, systematically identifying recurring codes, categories, and themes that reflected teachers' perspectives on purposeful play. This process illuminated the varied educational play-based approaches used in kindergarten classrooms and their perceived effectiveness. To strengthen credibility, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review transcripts and preliminary findings to confirm accuracy and ensure that their voices were authentically represented.

Sampling technique and Sample

The study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability method in which participants were deliberately selected based on their teaching experience. Only kindergarten teachers with at least three years of experience implementing play-based approaches were included. This ensured that participants possessed sufficient expertise and reflective insights into the effectiveness of play-based instruction.

The participants were kindergarten teachers from Southeast Butuan District under the Butuan City Division. Out of 20 schools, a total of 20 teachers were identified, with 8 meeting the inclusion criteria of having at least three years of experience in play-based instruction. These teachers provided rich, experience-based perspectives on the successes and challenges of purposeful play in kindergarten classrooms.

Results and Discussions

The Different Educational Play-Based Approaches (EPBA) In the Classrooms Utilized by the Kindergarten Teachers

Table 1 presents the different educational play-based approaches (EPBA) in the classrooms utilized by the participants.

Table 1

The thematic analysis of the different educational play-based approaches (EPBA) in the classrooms utilized by the participants

Participants	Code	Category	Themes
P1, P8	Tracing, coloring, counting, find me; Letter hunt, storytelling with puppets	Foundational & guided practice; Literacy-focused play	Foundational Skills Development
P2, P4	Kangaroo play, number hunt, clay dough, puzzle; Hopping, bring me, feed me, form me	Creative & constructive play; Physical & interactive play	Physical and Kinesthetic Play –
P3	Creative storytelling, puzzle, and physical play	Story-based & active play	Creative and Story Play
P5	Pick me, counting, kangaroo jump, find a match	Rule-based and number games	Rule-Based and Number Games
P6	Free play, guided play, games with rules, dramatic play, constructive play	Varied play approaches	Assorted Play Approaches
P7	Draw me a picture, puzzle, guessing game	Creative and cognitive play	Constructive and Puzzle Play

The results of the study reveal that kindergarten teachers employ a wide range of play-based learning approaches that collectively support the holistic development of young learners. Activities such as tracing, letter hunts, counting games, and sorting tasks demonstrate how teachers intentionally integrate play with early literacy and numeracy concepts. These practices not only nurture foundational academic readiness but also strengthen fine motor skills, symbol recognition, and problem-solving abilities essential for early school success. Creative storytelling play further emerged as a significant theme, with teachers using stories, dramatization, and imaginative scenarios to enhance children's communication skills, vocabulary development, and socio-emotional growth. These creative approaches allow learners to express ideas freely, build confidence, and engage more deeply with classroom concepts.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic benefits, the integration of physical and kinesthetic play shows how movement-based games and outdoor tasks contribute to children's gross motor development, self-regulation, and teamwork skills. Constructive and puzzle play, such as building blocks, assembling shapes, and solving puzzles, also supports logical reasoning, persistence, and creativity through hands-on exploration. Collectively, these practices reflect six emerging themes: foundational skills development, creative and storytelling play, physical and kinesthetic play, constructive and puzzle play, assorted play activities, and assorted play approaches. These themes demonstrate that teachers adopt a versatile and child-centered approach to learning, ensuring that instructional strategies cater to diverse learner needs.

The findings align closely with prior literature emphasizing the importance of varied play-based learning modalities in early childhood education. Smith and Johnson (2021) found that dramatization and interactive play make abstract concepts more understandable by enabling children to learn through meaningful experience. Similarly, Brown et al. (2022) emphasized that creative and dramatized play enhances collaboration, creativity, and classroom engagement. Garcia and Martinez (2024) further highlighted the value of interdisciplinary play that integrates literacy, numeracy, and the arts—reflecting the assorted and multifaceted play-based practices identified in this study. Taken together, these studies support the conclusion that diverse play-based approaches are essential to addressing the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of kindergarten learners.

The findings carry important implications for early childhood education. First, the variety of play-based strategies observed suggests that curriculum planners must continue strengthening developmentally appropriate, flexible, and interdisciplinary learning experiences that embed play across subject areas. This approach is supported by Garcia and Martinez (2024), who emphasize that integrating multiple disciplines through play enriches deeper learning. Second, the results underscore the need for sustained teacher professional development. Since teachers play a critical role in designing meaningful play experiences, training programs should focus on enhancing their competence in creating creative, kinesthetic, and constructive play activities. Brown et al. (2022) confirmed that teacher-led creative play greatly influences children's engagement and learning outcomes, indicating the necessity of equipping educators with updated skills and strategies.

The strong presence of storytelling and creative play highlights the importance of these strategies in cultivating communication and socio-emotional development. As Smith and Johnson (2021) argue, interactive play fosters emotional expression, empathy, and collaboration, which are vital components of holistic kindergarten education. Fourth, the emphasis on constructive, kinesthetic, and multi-sensory play suggests that schools should provide safe, accessible, and well-resourced learning environments that allow children to learn through movement, exploration, and hands-on activities. This is particularly important for diverse learners who benefit from tactile and experiential instruction. Fifth, assessment practices in kindergarten should reflect the developmental nature of learning by utilizing observation-based and performance-based assessments rather than traditional measures, aligning with global standards in early childhood education.

Finally, the findings call for stronger institutional support for play-based learning. Schools and educational systems must recognize that play is not merely recreational but a scientific, evidence-based approach to fostering cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional growth. Providing adequate materials, teacher support, and policy reinforcement can ensure that play-based approaches continue to thrive in kindergarten settings. By embracing these implications, policymakers, school leaders, and teachers can create more responsive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning environments for young children.

Table 2

The thematic analysis of the different types of play-based approaches that are most effective

Participant	Code	Category	Themes
P2, P3	Constructive play (blocks, clay), drawing, coloring, cutting	Hands-on constructive play; Creative expression	Constructive and Creative Play
P5, P6	Find a match; Sorting race (rule-based games)	Rule-based critical thinking games; Structured play	Rule-Based Cognitive Games
P1	Tracing	Foundational skills	Strengthening literacy and writing readiness

P4	"Form me" game (caps	Interactive play	Encouraging participation and observation skills
P5, P6	Find a match; Sorting race (rule-based games)	Rule-based critical thinking games; Structured play	Rule-Based Cognitive Games
P7	Guessing game (using dice)	Cognitive and chance-based play	Chance-Based Cognitive Play
P8	Storytelling with puppets	Story-based play	Storytelling and Imaginative Play

The data in Table 2 reveal that teachers employ a diverse set of play-based approaches depending on the developmental goals and needs of their learners. Foundational literacy skills, such as tracing activities, are widely used because they strengthen fine motor coordination, pencil grip, and writing readiness, allowing young children to acquire the basic foundations of early literacy. Constructive and creative play, including block building, clay manipulation, drawing, coloring, and cutting, was highlighted by several participants (P2, P3) as a powerful means of stimulating imagination, encouraging open-ended exploration, and enhancing both motor and cognitive skills. These hands-on activities not only promote creativity but also foster independence, curiosity, and problem-solving abilities.

Interactive and observation-focused games (P4), such as sorting races and matching games, were also found to be effective in encouraging participation, promoting teamwork, and sharpening children's focus and observation skills. Rule-based cognitive games (P5, P6), including matching, sequencing, and sorting activities, support logical reasoning, memory, decision-making, and executive functioning by requiring learners to organize information and follow structured rules. Chance-based games (P7), such as dice activities, introduce early mathematical concepts like counting, prediction, and probability in an enjoyable and engaging format, which strengthens numeracy awareness and sustained attention. Finally, teachers emphasized the significant value of storytelling and dramatic play (P8), noting that puppetry, narrative expression, and imaginative scenarios greatly enhance communication, comprehension, vocabulary development, and emotional expression.

The most effective play approaches are those that balance foundational skill-building, creativity, cognitive challenge, and expressive communication. These results affirm that play-based instruction in early childhood classrooms is diverse, purposeful, and aligned with children's developmental needs.

The findings of this study carry several important implications for early childhood education. First, the strong emphasis on foundational literacy play, such as tracing, supports the idea that early childhood curricula should intentionally integrate fine motor and pre-writing activities. Research by Garcia and Martinez (2024) reinforces that literacy readiness improves significantly when children engage in hands-on, multi-sensory activities that prepare them for writing and reading tasks. This suggests that schools must prioritize adequate materials and structured opportunities for fine motor development.

The prominence of constructive and creative play implies that teacher training programs should strengthen educators' competence in designing open-ended, exploratory learning experiences. Smith and Johnson (2021) found that creative and dramatized play environments improve children's imaginative thinking, vocabulary, and emotional expression. Given these benefits, professional development should incorporate modules on designing creative learning zones and integrating arts-based play in daily classroom routines.

The findings show that rule-based and chance-based games in building children's cognitive and executive functioning. Brown et al. (2022) emphasized that structured and semi-structured play fosters children's memory, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities. This indicates that curriculum planners should intentionally incorporate cognitive play (such as matching, sequencing, and prediction games) into daily schedules rather than treating them as supplementary activities. Providing a balance of structured and free play opportunities will support both academic and cognitive development.

The strong impact of storytelling and puppet-based dramatization supports the need to embed narrative and expressive communication activities in early learning programs. Studies such as Smith and Johnson (2021) highlight that storytelling enhances language development, comprehension, empathy, and emotional regulation. Schools should therefore provide appropriate literacy corners, puppetry materials, and teacher training on effective storytelling strategies aligned with language development goals.

The findings imply the importance of a balanced play-based curriculum that harmonizes literacy, creativity, cognitive challenge, and communication skills. This

aligns with Brown et al. (2022), who argue that young children thrive when learning environments provide varied opportunities for movement, imagination, structured thinking, and expressive communication. Policymakers must therefore reinforce institutional support for diverse play materials, flexible learning spaces, and age-appropriate classroom designs that value play not as leisure but as an essential pedagogical tool.

This affirms that the integration of multiple play-based approaches supports holistic child development. Educational leaders, curriculum developers, and teachers must work collaboratively to sustain environments where foundational skills, creativity, cognition, and communication grow together through purposeful play.

Conclusions

The findings of the study clearly demonstrate that kindergarten teachers utilize a rich variety of educational play-based approaches, each intentionally selected to support specific developmental domains in early childhood. The thematic analysis from Table 1 revealed that teachers integrate foundational skills activities, creative and storytelling play, physical and kinesthetic tasks, rule-based number games, constructive play, and assorted play approaches to meet the holistic needs of young learners. These practices collectively nurture children's literacy readiness, numeracy awareness, motor development, creativity, communication, problem-solving, and socio-emotional growth. Meanwhile, the results from Table 2 further emphasized that the most effective play approaches are those that balance structured skill-building with open-ended imaginative and cognitive challenges. Constructive and creative play, rule-based cognitive games, tracing and pre-writing tasks, interactive participation games, chance-based numeracy activities, and storytelling with puppets all emerged as powerful tools in strengthening children's academic preparation, executive functioning, and expressive communication. Taken together, the findings conclude that purposeful, varied, and developmentally appropriate play is not only beneficial but essential in kindergarten learning environments. Teachers deliberate use of diverse play strategies ensures that learning is meaningful, engaging, and responsive to each child's developmental needs, thereby affirming play-based instruction as a vital foundation for early childhood education.

It is recommended that kindergarten teachers continue to employ diverse play-based strategies that intentionally balance structured skill-building with imaginative and open-ended activities to support literacy, numeracy, creativity, communication, and socio-emotional growth. Students should be encouraged to actively participate in collaborative play, treating it as an opportunity to explore, express, and develop self-regulation and problem-solving skills. School principals are advised to provide adequate resources, training, and supportive environments that institutionalize play-based instruction as a core element of early childhood education. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative and longitudinal studies to further examine the effectiveness of specific play approaches, their cultural adaptability, and long-term impacts on children's academic and socio-emotional development

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