American Journal of Arts and Human Science (AJAHS)

ISSN: 2832-451X (ONLINE)

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 4 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

American Journal of
Arts and Human Science (AJAHS)

Volume 5 Issue 4, Year 2026
ISSN: 2832-451X (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54536/ajahs.v5i4.8862
https://journals.e-palli.com/home/index.php/ajahs

Teachers' Practices of Play-Based Learning and Learners' Early Childhood Development

Margie P. Cusay[1*], Ninfa C. Osias[1]

Article Information

Received: November 01, 2025
Accepted: October 22, 2026
Published: November 02, 2026

Keywords

Early Childhood Development, Play-Based Learning Practices

ABSTRACT

Play-based learning has become an important pedagogical approach for promoting learners' engagement, inclusion, and holistic development during the early childhood year. The study examined the extent of teachers' practices of play-based learning and learners' early childhood development in select districts of Balingasag, Division of Misamis Oriental, during School Year 2024-2025. Specifically, the study aimed to find out the extent of teachers' practices of play-based learning, examine the learners' level of early childhood development, determine the significant relationship between the teachers' practices of play-based learning and the learners' early childhood development, and test the significant difference in the teachers' practices of play-based learning when grouped according to their profile. The study involved 150 Kindergarten teachers selected using the universal sampling technique. The study employed a descriptive-correlational research design and used a researcher-made questionnaire to gather data. The study utilized descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The findings revealed that most respondents have highly practiced structured play while their learners are highly advanced in physical domain. Overall, the data showed no significant relationship across variables. However, there was no significant difference in the teachers' practices of play-based learning when grouped according to their profile. In conclusion, the play-based learning serves as a critical pedagogical approach for fostering holistic child development. It is recommended that teachers' support may optimize play-based learning practices, with set of rules to follow for future research in early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Early childhood is a critical period of development characterized by rapid growth across multiple domains. This study examines seven developmental domains: physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral development. Play-based learning is an important pedagogical approach that can support children's holistic development by engaging them in meaningful and enjoyable activities (Manas, 2020). Its effective implementation requires teachers to design developmentally appropriate activities that align with children's needs and learning objectives. However, some educators may lack adequate training in play-based pedagogies, which can make it difficult to integrate play with specific learning objectives. This may lead to a limited understanding of play as merely a free, unstructured activity, thereby reducing its potential as an educational approach.

Play-based learning has been associated with the development of 21st-century skills, including collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and confidence, as well as social-emotional development (Parker & Thomsen, 2019), language development, and mathematics outcomes (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2020). Play-based learning has become a key tactic for encouraging learners' involvement, inclusivity, and the development of all-around abilities after preschool because it capitalizes on school-age children's natural curiosity. It also facilitates the frequently challenging transition from preschool to school. Policymakers, researchers, and educators have pushed the concept that learning through play is developmentally appropriate. Nevertheless, there is a lack of data and useful advice regarding the circumstances that promote success and the successful use of play-based learning in the official school setting.

Literacy skills for children in their early years are critical to their cognitive development and future success at primary, secondary, and higher education levels. Children acquire literacy skills early through listening and interacting through play-based activities both at home and school with their teachers, colleagues, and parents (Cheruiyot, 2024).

Despite the recognized benefits of play-based learning, there is a growing concern that standards-based accountability and mounting pressures from parents and state officials to meet academic benchmarks as early as kindergarten have led teachers to focus on more didactic approaches, such as direct instruction, rote memorization, and worksheets (Caven, 2022).

However, standards-based accountability and mounting pressures from parents and state officials to meet academic benchmarks as early as kindergarten have led teachers to focus on more didactic approaches, such as direct instruction, rote memorization, and worksheets

[1] PHINMA Cagayan de Oro College, Philippines
[*] Corresponding author's email: margie.cusay@deped.gov.ph

(Skene, *et al.*, 2022). While direct instruction can be beneficial in some areas, like phonics, a balance with play-based learning remains essential.

Understanding the range of types of play can help teachers, school leaders, and policymakers enhance the power of play in their classrooms. This shift may inadvertently neglect the holistic development of children, underscoring the need for research that examines the comprehensive impact of play-based learning across all seven domains.

With the discussions and literature presented above, this study proposes to investigate the practices of various play-based learning strategies on the holistic development of young children, specifically analyzing outcomes within the seven established domains. By systematically evaluating the relationship between play-based methodologies and developmental progress, this research seeks to provide empirical evidence to inform educational practices and policies, ultimately supporting the optimal growth and learning of children during their formative years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a review of the literature and related studies. It discusses major insights and substance to further support the study's present problem. Discussions on the extent of the teacher's practices of play-based learning strategies on the development of children in early childhood, based on the seven developmental domains, are tackled. Several studies are presented to give a more extensive view of the research problem under investigation.

Teachers' Practices of Play-based Learning

DepEd Order No. 47, s. 2016, Omnibus Policy on Kindergarten Education, declares that kindergarten is a play-based curriculum. Moreover, DepEd Order No. 47, s. 2022, on the Guidelines on the Utilization of the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs), reiterates that in Kinder, lessons should be taught through developmentally appropriate, and play-based activities. It emphasizes examples of structured (teacher-guided) vs. unstructured (child-initiated) play in literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills. It also requires schools to allot at least 60% of daily contact time for guided & free play in Kindergarten.

A play-based learning environment encourages talking, reading, thinking, and writing. Through this, the child sees literacy and numeracy as part of their everyday experience. The children see themselves as communicators, readers, writers, and thinkers. They make predictions and generalizations about their world, use patterns and symbols, and experiment to find out why things happen. They make connections between experiences, concepts, and processes (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2020).

Public schools are fantastic places for children to learn through play. Dedicated play spaces assist children to learn how to solve problems, persevere, compromise, and cooperate with others. Through play, they practice and apply the skills they are taught in the classroom. Schools recognize that play-based learning is an important part of a balanced educational approach that complements explicit teaching and instruction.

Play-based learning involves careful decisions and support from teachers, so the children grow to accept responsibility for their learning while still receiving purposeful guidance and feedback. It promotes important opportunities for the children to understand how to learn, develop critical thinking skills, adapt to change, and work independently as well as with others (Ernst & Reynolds, 2021).

Structured Play

According to Mauro (2024), structured play-based learning can positively contribute to children's development across several domains, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Its effectiveness may be enhanced by adopting a balanced approach that combines guided play with open-ended play experiences. Compared with free play alone, structured play may provide additional opportunities for children to develop essential skills and engage meaningfully with learning activities. Some studies also suggest that structured play-based learning may be more effective than traditional direct instruction in helping young children acquire academic content.

Patton, (2023) and Danniels, & Pyle, (2023) explore how structured play-based learning can be inclusive and cater to diverse needs, ensuring that play-based learning is accessible to all students in the classroom, making it possible to achieve positive academic outcomes. Structured play-based learning promotes not just cognitive skills but also social, emotional, and physical development through active engagement in play activities (Skene, *et al.*, 2022).

Free Play

Free play describes play that is child-directed, voluntary, and flexible. It often, but not always, involves pretend play where children adopt roles and enact sociodramatic scenes. Research finds that in classrooms where free play is most prevalent, teachers tend to intersperse didactic lessons with periods of free play in which they rarely intervene. Teachers typically use these periods of play to prepare for another lesson or attend to administrative tasks.

Free play in a kindergarten classroom is characterized by child-initiated activities that allow for creativity, exploration, and social interaction without direct adult intervention (Blessing, 2022). While the outcomes of free play are predominantly social, guided play can yield a broader range of academic outcomes. A recently published meta-analysis finds that, for children younger than eight, guided play was more effective for teaching academic content than direct instruction (Danniels, & Pyle, 2023). While a few key skills and knowledge areas, such as alphabet recognition and phonological awareness, benefit from direct instruction, research suggests that the most age-appropriate and effective method is a balanced

approach that embeds brief periods of direct instruction within a play-based learning environment (Managhan, 2020).

Guided Play

Guided play involves a blend of child-led exploration and teacher facilitation, aiming to achieve specific learning objectives while maintaining the intrinsic joy of play (Brightwheel, 2023). Guided play is structured to directly teach academic skills and concepts (Massey, 2023). Each item in the center is put there for an intended purpose. These play experiences are carefully thought out by the practitioner. Numbers or letters may be put in centers that are not typical, such as in the block center or the sensory table (Tang & Hang, 2023).

There are also materials the practitioner can set out that let learners explore with less of an intended academic purpose but to foster children's creativity and interest. Providing the writing area with various materials based on the children's needs, such as sandpaper letters for finger tracing, sand trays for writing letters, brushes, paints, and jumbo pencils (Rushton, 2021). Nonstandard materials can be put in the centers for learners to explore and learn from. Mowafi, Abumuhfouz, and Redifer (2019) proposed research on interactive play and learning based on the basic skills related to number learning. Further, Walsh and Campbell (2019) wrote a chapter on play pedagogies focusing on literacy that introduced learners to mobile devices. As stated earlier, researchers have written about play pedagogies.

The seven developmental domains of early childhood will be discussed in this study: physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and spiritual and moral. Developmental domains are specific areas of a child's developmental progress and growth. Each child develops at their own pace, and many factors, including age, genetics, and the environment, can affect how and when a child develops.

Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to the physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral growth of children from birth to around eight years old, a period recognized as the most critical stage of human development. During these early years, children's brains develop rapidly, forming neural connections that lay the foundation for learning, behavior, health, and well-being across the lifespan. Play-based and child-centered approaches are especially emphasized in early childhood education, as they support holistic development by allowing children to explore, interact, communicate, and regulate emotions in meaningful contexts (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, recent studies highlight that investment in early childhood development contribute not only to individual learning outcomes but also to broader social and economic benefits, making ECD a global priority in education and public policy (World Bank, 2023).

Physical

The physical domain covers physical growth and changes, like increases in height, weight, and muscular strength. It also includes milestones such as walking, crawling, or grasping finger food. Additionally, the physical domain consists of the development of motor skills, including gross and fine motor skills, and the development of the five senses (Brightwheel, 2023). Play-based learning can enhance children's gross motor skills, coordination, agility, and overall physical fitness through active engagement in various play activities. Different forms of play, like constructive play (building with blocks), exploratory play (sensory experiences), and physical play (running, jumping), contribute to different aspects of physical development.

Zhang *et al.* (2025) found that active play generally has a positive effect on children's fundamental movement skills. As Macdonald (2022, p. 8) states, 'experiences and interactions through play build brain architecture, allowing children to make and strengthen connections between what they know and what they experience in the world around them.' Play allows children to express their emotions, develop empathy, and build resilience. By engaging in play, children learn to cope with stress and bounce back from setbacks, which is essential for their overall emotional well-being.

Physical play can support the development of coordination, gross and fine motor skills, and balance, as well as improve overall physical health by promoting movement over sedentary activity (Durning *et al.*,2024). These findings suggest that play-based learning activities that involve movement can support the physical development of young learners, particularly their locomotor and object-control skills Zhang *et al.* (2025).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has advocated for the importance of play as a way of being more active in childhood and developing healthy lifestyle patterns for longer-term health gains. The Australian government (2023) also cites play and linked movement as a key reason for their current approach to early childhood education – one where play is a central approach.

Cognitive

Cognitive development in kindergarten children involves observing various milestones that reflect their learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Morin, 2022). Play-based learning significantly impacts children's cognitive development by promoting creativity, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and the ability to explore new ideas through engaging, open-ended play experiences, allowing them to actively construct knowledge and understanding of the world around them; studies by Alotaibi (2024) found that game-based learning had a significant positive effect on cognitive development among young children. These findings support the use of play-based learning practices as an effective approach to promoting the cognitive development of early childhood learners.

Studies show that engaging in pretend play and imaginative scenarios allows children to develop mental models, practice complex thinking, and explore different perspectives, contributing to cognitive flexibility and problem-solving abilities (Mauro, 2024). Providing children with open-ended materials and play situations encourages them to experiment, test hypotheses, and generate creative solutions, enhancing cognitive development through active exploration. Play-based learning is a child-centered approach to education that emphasizes the importance of play in children's development. It is an approach that supports children's natural curiosity and desire to learn through play. Several theories support play-based learning, including the constructivist theory and the social learning theory. The constructivist theory suggests that children construct their knowledge through their experiences and interactions with the environment. The social learning theory suggests that children learn through their interactions with others. Play-based learning has been shown to have several benefits on cognitive development, including the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (Sakib, 2022).

Through play, children can explore new concepts and ideas, which enhances their cognitive development and helps to create lifelong independent and motivated learners. The importance of play in children's cognitive development continues to be supported by recent research. Skene *et al.* (2022) found that guided play produced positive effects on early mathematics, shape knowledge, and task-switching skills, emphasizing the role of intentional teacher guidance in supporting children's learning. Similarly, Alotaibi (2024) reported a significant positive effect of game-based learning on cognitive development among young children.

Language

Language development in children involves observing various milestones that reflect their listening, speaking, and early literacy skills (Asha, 2024). Play-based learning significantly impacts children's language development by providing opportunities to practice speaking, expand vocabulary, and enhance communication skills through interactive play, particularly in activities like storytelling, role-playing, and imaginative play, which contribute to a deeper understanding of language and its nuances (My Teaching Cupboard, 2024). Play allows children to naturally incorporate new words into their conversations as they engage in imaginative scenarios, fostering vocabulary growth. Through play-based activities like pretend play and role-playing, children practice taking turns speaking, listening attentively, and expressing their ideas effectively. Storytelling during play helps children develop the ability to structure narratives, including sequencing events and using appropriate language. Playful activities like singing, rhyming games, and sound manipulation games can contribute to the development of phonological awareness, a crucial foundation for reading skills.

Pretend play and language acquisition have long been linked (Kizildere *et al.*, 2020; & Creaghe et. al., 2021), and many studies have demonstrated how both the complexity of pretend play and language skills develop concurrently (Quinn *et al.*, 2018; Paatsch *et al.*, 2024). This is because 'play, particularly pretend play, shares many conceptual similarities with language in that both are symbolic and rely on communication within social contexts' (Paatsch *et al.*, 2024, p. 25). Through play, children encounter new words and phrases and try these out for themselves, taking 'opportunities to use language to tell their story and engage in pretense' (Paatsch *et al.*, 2024, p. 25).

Social

Social development involves various behaviors and skills that indicate the ability to interact effectively with peers and adults. It is also the development of a child's ability to express their emotions effectively, follow rules and directions, form positive relationships with others, and build confidence (Morin, 2022). Play-based learning significantly impacts children's social development by fostering cooperation, empathy, conflict resolution skills, and the ability to navigate social situations through interactive play, allowing them to practice essential social skills like sharing, taking turns, and respecting others' perspectives within a safe and supportive environment; this is particularly important for building positive peer relationships and overall social competence (Mauro, 2024).

Children engaged in play-based learning demonstrate improved abilities to cooperate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts peacefully, which is crucial for positive social interactions. Play allows children to take on different roles and perspectives, promoting empathy and understanding of others' emotions. Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to practice self-regulation by managing their emotions and impulses during play scenarios. Children who participate in play-based learning often exhibit increased social competence, demonstrating appropriate social behaviors in various situations.

Role-playing games challenge kids to put themselves in someone else's shoes and see the world from a different point of view. As a result, they gain a greater awareness of other people's feelings and how their actions affect others. Social games may also require children to integrate the experiences of other kids from different cultural or economic backgrounds than themselves, which enhances traits like tolerance and openness (Waters-Davies, 2022).

Teachers play a vital role in supporting social development by providing structured play opportunities, guiding children through conflict resolution, and modeling positive social behaviors. Different types of play, like dramatic play, cooperative play, and imaginative play, contribute to various aspects of social development. Creating inclusive play spaces where all children feel welcomed and supported is essential for optimal social development (Shenfield, 2023).

Emotional

Emotional development involves emotion control and mature social skills. This can help children to control their emotions, thoughts, and actions so they can adapt to society. Arda Tuncdemir (2025) found that play provides a meaningful context for promoting young children's social-emotional development. The findings highlight the important role of teachers in intentionally integrating social-emotional learning into play-based experiences. This study emphasizes that play provides a crucial avenue for young children to process and understand their emotions through active engagement (Welding, 2022).

Nurturing the social and emotional development of children since their early years plays an important role for parents, teachers, and caregivers. Emerging social and emotional skills in the early childhood stage are more important than their social and emotional competence in later stages (Denham *et al.*, 2023). According to the findings of Tan and Dobbs-Oates (2023), there is a significant correlation between the social and emotional development of preschool children and their emergent literacy. These developments in the early childhood stage help with the establishment of their personality and personal character in the future (Zakaria *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the social and emotional development of children needs to be nurtured, particularly during the preschool years.

To promote the social and emotional development of preschool children, previous research has identified play-based learning as an important contributor to child development.

Vygotsky (1978) commented that "play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading line of development in the preschool years" (p. 6).

Play-based learning environments allow children to practice and develop important emotional skills like managing frustration, taking turns, and expressing emotions appropriately. Various forms of play, including pretend play, cooperative play, and imaginative play, contribute to different aspects of emotional development (San, Myint, & Oo, 2021).

Self-help

Self-help is the ability of a child to perform daily tasks independently, which is crucial for fostering autonomy and confidence (Sobrebiga & Medez, 2020). Play-based learning significantly impacts children's self-help development by providing them with opportunities to practice essential life skills like dressing themselves, feeding themselves, and toileting through engaging play activities, fostering independence, confidence, and overall self-efficacy; studies have shown that children engaged in play-based learning often demonstrate improved self-regulation and the ability to manage their own needs more effectively (Steele, 2024).

Play-based learning allows children to make choices and take initiative during activities, leading to a sense of control and autonomy in managing their personal needs. Through pretend play, children can practice and internalize self-help skills like brushing their teeth or putting on clothes, which aids in cognitive development and understanding of routines. Playing with peers in a self-help context encourages cooperation, turn-taking, and communication, contributing to positive social interactions and emotional regulation.

Moral

Moral Education is the source of that spiritual equilibrium on which everything else depends, and which may be compared to the physical equilibrium or sense of balance without which it is impossible to stand upright or to move into any other position. The child is a spiritual being; spiritual development, however, does not necessarily mean religious development, although it can and does to individual children and their families (Tang, 2022). Spiritual sensitivity is the child's ability to be spiritually aware of what is happening both outside and within him or herself, and the further ability to respond accordingly.

On the other hand, play is one of the strategies to develop children's capabilities. Yet, there is limited information about the relationship between play and spiritual sensitivity. The present study aimed to evaluate the effects of meaning-centered play on children's spiritual sensitivity (Fazlollahi *et al.*, 2022). Children have an innate capacity for spiritual experiences, and this capacity suggests that spirituality is an essential influence in a child's healthy development. Children seek out and recognize relationships between self and others and feel these relationships as an expression of an outward movement from the child's inner being. The necessity to protect spiritual uniqueness is supported by the 'signature phenomenon' of a child's spiritual sensitivity.

As a significant component in health, spirituality has received increasing attention in recent years; recently, spirituality in early childhood is increasingly recognized and acknowledged to be an important aspect of well-being and a more appropriate and relevant starting point for intervention (Grajczonek, 2021). However, there are only a few studies about how spirituality/spiritual sensitivity develops in a child.

Robert Coles performed one of the handful of comprehensive studies into spirituality development among children. He collected the data for his study by interviewing children from different countries and with different religious affiliations and found that despite variations among children respecting their cultural and religious backgrounds, most of them had similar concerns respecting spirituality and their ideals.

He attributed children's spirituality to their desire for knowing and reported that spirituality is linked with different aspects of children's life, particularly emotional and moral attitudes such as shamefulness and guilt. His study showed that the inner desire for spirituality originates from the curiosity about and the preoccupation with discovering the world, and hence, this desire is

manifested since early childhood. Finally, Coles concluded that spirituality promotes humanity in children, and thus, strategies are needed for its development (Zarei, *et al.*, 2020).

The related literature discussed above on the play-based learning strategies and the influence of seven developmental domains of early childhood discussed in this study – physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and spiritual and moral strengthened the concept of this study.

This study aimed to determine the extent of teachers' practices of play-based learning and learners' childhood development in select districts of Balingasag, Division of Misamis Oriental, during School Year 2024-2025

Specifically, this aimed to describe the teachers' profile, find the extent of the teachers' practices of play-based learning, examine the learners' early childhood development, determine the significant relationship between structured play, free play, and guided play, and test the learners' development based on the domains of Early Childhood Development (ECD).

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on learners' foundational theories that elucidate the significance of play in early childhood development. The Play-based theory of Sitorus, *et al.* (2025).

Play-based learning stems from the fact that several theorists suggest that learning through play facilitates young children's cognitive, social and emotional development. And that is true for the views of such educational theoreticians as Soules (2021), who focused on play as a key method. The theorist, Goldman (2020) proposed that play is one of the ways children develop knowledge and or gaining an understanding of reality. Play helps the children to perform activities that involves their neurons like remembering, paying attention, and solving problems (Soules, 2021). Another critic of 'play' was Bruya & Tang (2021) who said that the main way through which children learn is through play as this provides the child an opportunity to learn through interaction and therefore developed the social and emotional aspects of the child.

Collectively, these theories and contemporary findings provide a vigorous framework for understanding how play-based learning influences the seven domains of early childhood development, guiding the design and implementation of this study.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes the teachers' practices on play-based learning strategies for early childhood development, which emphasize the three play-based learning strategies which are commonly practiced by the teachers - structured play, free play, and guided play. It will also discuss the performance of the kindergarten learner's early childhood development - physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and spiritual and moral. The Early Childhood Developmental domains are according to the primary laws governing Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in the Philippines Republic Act No. RA 10410 ECCD Act of 2000).

Structured play in a kindergarten classroom involves teacher-guided activities designed to achieve specific learning outcomes while allowing children to engage in playful exploration (ODM Public School, 2024). Structured play, also referred to as play with a purpose, is a led, hands-on, activity with a precise learning objective as the focus. This type of play has many forms. It can be a physical or mental challenge that teaches a new skill. The goal of structured play is to have fun while teaching. Pyle *et al.* (2020) note that group games with clear rules promote collaboration, enhancing children's ability to work together.

Free play is child-initiated and child-directed. Children choose their activities and focus, enabling unconstrained freedom of expression and open-ended interactions with their environment. Play is initiated, sustained, and developed by children, free of adult influence, although this does mean that it focuses on ideas, content, and language that are already familiar and known to children. Some researchers question the extent to which free play is truly free, as children's choices about what, how, where, and with whom to play may be influenced by the play environment and its associated rules and boundaries (which are controlled by adults), and the choices of others about what to play. Gender, ethnicity, social class, and disability may also affect their patterns of participation (Blessing, 2022).

Guided play involves a blend of child-led exploration and teacher facilitation, aiming to achieve specific learning objectives while maintaining the intrinsic joy of play. It is child-centered and goal-directed. Guided play invites children's active engagement, free exploration, and direction of play, but also has clear learning goals so that play behaviors are limited in useful ways and distraction is reduced. Children's initiatives, reflections, choices, and creativity are important as a context for teachers to extend children's knowledge, understanding, and skills. Nicholson & Pyle (2020) highlight guided play's role in modeling conflict resolution strategies, such as turn-taking. Teachers are sensitive and responsive to children's interests and interactions while maintaining a focus on learning goals through deliberate, purposeful, and intentional teaching strategies. These might include commenting on discoveries, offering feedback, demonstrating the use of equipment, reinforcing specific vocabulary, or helping the child explore new strategies for problem-solving, within the context of the activities that children are constructing (Brightwheel, 2023).

The seven developmental domains of early childhood will be discussed in this study: physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and spiritual and moral. Developmental domains are specific areas of a child's developmental progress and growth. Each child develops at their own pace, and many factors, including

age, genetics, and the environment, can affect how and when a child develops.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the extent of the teacher's practices of play-based learning and learners' early childhood development in select districts of Balingasag, Division of Misamis Oriental, during School Year 2024-2025.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the extent of teachers' practices of play-based learning based on structured, free, and guided?
2. What is the level of learners' early childhood development, considering physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the teachers' practices of play-based learning and the learners' early childhood development?
4. Is there a significant difference in the teachers' practices of play-based learning when grouped according to their profile?

Scope and Limitations

This study focused on determining the extent of teachers' practices of play-based learning and learners' childhood development in select districts of Balingasag, Division of Misamis Oriental, during School Year 2024-2025. The respondents of the study were the 150 Kindergarten Teachers. The moderating variables were teachers' profiles, such as sex, age, teaching experience, highest educational attainment, and field of specialization. Further, the independent variables are also limited to the practices of play-based learning based on free, structured, and guided play. Moreover, the independent variables regarding learners' development, such as physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral domains, were also considered.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section discusses the methods and procedures used in the study: research design, respondents and sampling process, research instruments, scoring procedure, validity and reliability, data collection procedures, and statistical techniques that were employed for precise data analysis and interpretation.

Research Design

This study used a descriptive-correlational research design in data collection and analysis. Descriptive correlational research is typically employed when a researcher wishes to determine the traits of groups of people or discover connections between various variables. In a study using a descriptive correlational design, the researcher uses a single group and merely looks for a relationship between two variables. It explains why the descriptive correlational design is used in research and how important it is for examining the correlations between variables. In addition to collecting phenomena, descriptive research also focuses on data analysis in an organized manner that is inferential and useful for empirical research and comprehension. From the descriptive research, the facts and the findings are concluded under the population in question around the study. (Brodowics, 2024). Descriptive-correlational research focuses on describing and explaining, sometimes in a somewhat definite manner. Using descriptive-correlational research designs enables the researcher to investigate the impact of play-based learning on the development of children in early childhood according to the seven developmental domains.

Study Setting

This study was conducted in the selected districts of Balingasag namely: Balingasag Central District, Balingasag North District, and Balingasag South District for the School Year 2024-2025. The researcher chose the three districts of the municipality of Balingasag since it is her hometown, and it will be a convenient location to conduct the study.

Balingasag Central District is composed of thirteen schools. These are Balingasag Central School, Calacala Elementary School, Camuayan Elementary School, Cogon Elementary School, Dansuli Elementary School, Dumarait Elementary School, Lapu-Lapu Elementary School, Rosario Elementary School, San Francisco Elementary School, Talusan Elementary School, Waterfall Elementary School, Rosario National High School, and Balagnan Integrated School. It has a total enrollment of 5,607 from Kindergarten to Grade 12. It has also a total of 226 teachers and 29 non-teaching personnel. The district is headed by a Public Schools District Supervisor (Division Planning Office, 2024).

Balingasag North District is comprised of twelve schools. These are Kibalus Elementary School, Mandangoa Elementary School, Napaliran Elementary School, San Isidro Elementary School, Misamis Oriental National High School, San Isidro National High School, Balingasag Senior High School, Lantad Integrated School, Kibanban Integrated School, Quezon Integrated School, Calawag Integrated School, and Mambayaan Integrated School. It has a total enrollment of 6,010 from Kindergarten to Grade 12. It has also a total of 215 teachers and 24 non-teaching personnel. Balingasag North District is headed by Nieva E. Bitonga, the District In charge (Division Planning Office, 2024).

Balingasag South District is comprised of thirteen schools. These are Bagaay Elementary School, Baliwagan Central School, Binitinan Elementary School, Blanco Elementary School, Gumpot Elementary School, Hermano Elementary School, San Juan Elementary School, Sulo Elementary School, Upper Hermano Elementary School, Kinanao Pamalihi Elementary School, Baliwagan National High School, San Juan National High School, Linabu Integrated School, and Samay Integrated School. It has a total enrollment of 6,714 from Kindergarten

to Grade 12. It has also a total of 269 teachers and 32 non-teaching personnel. It is headed by a Public Schools District Supervisor (Division Planning Office, 2024).

Research Respondents

The respondents of the study were the one hundred fifty (150) Kindergarten teachers from the select district of Balingasag, Division of Misamis Oriental, for the School Year 2024-2025. These teachers were earnestly teaching Kindergarten learners in the Division mentioned. Further, the Kindergarten learners were involved as subjects of the study to obtain the data.

Sampling Technique

The researcher requested the data from the Division Planning Office for the actual number of teachers in the three districts of Balingasag Central, North, and South, teaching in Kindergarten. The total number of Kindergarten teachers is found in Table A. The total number of Kindergarten teachers of 150 and is manageable. The researcher decided to take all the Kindergarten teachers as the respondents of the study. The Universal Sampling Technique was used in this study since it involves all kindergarten teachers. Universal sampling is a research method where every member of a defined population meeting specific inclusion criteria is selected for a study. It is essentially a total enumeration or census, often used when the total population is small, specialized, and shares specific characteristics (Wisdom Library, 2026).

Research Instrument

The instrument used for data gathering is a researcher-made questionnaire composed on the following: Part I dealt with the respondent's profile, such as sex, age, teaching kindergarten, highest educational attainment, and field of specialization. Part II inquired on the teacher's practices of play-based learning based on structured play, free play, and guided play. The variables were pattern and modified from different sources/ studies found in the literature and related studies. It has ten indicators for each sub-variable, with the options. Part III elicited on learner's early childhood development considering physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral. The variables were based on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in the Philippines Republic Act No. RA 10410 ECCD Act of 2000. It has ten indicators for each sub-variable with the following options/ descriptions 5- Highly developed, 4- Developed, 3- Fairly developed, 2-Slightly developed, and 1- Not developed. This instrument was based on reading of relevant books, articles, journals, and electronic sources.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The validity and reliability of the researcher-made questionnaire on teachers' practices of play-based learning and learners' early childhood development are essential to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the data collected. The instrument underwent expert validation by three (3) experts in the fields of Kindergarten education, who are well-trained and knowledgeable, and have experience in kindergarten supervision, to establish content validity. It is to ensure that the items accurately represent the constructs of play-based learning and early childhood development. The experts' feedback was used to revise and refine the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The researcher asked experts' judgment as to the accuracy and appropriateness, and suitability of the instrument, to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument. These experts were the professors of PHINMA COC graduate studies.

After checking, the instrument was tried out to 30 kindergarten teachers in Lagonglong District who had the same characteristics as those of the final respondents, but they did not participate in the actual study. The result of the tryout test was good for there were no questions about the questionnaire. The pilot testing was conducted in May 2025. The pilot questionnaires were analyzed using the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's Alpha, for the internal consistency. The result was 0.80, which indicates that the instrument is good and ready for use.

Statistical Treatment

The data gathered in this study were coded and treated statistically. The study used descriptive and inferential statistics to determine the frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of variables. To determine and examine the level of teachers' practices of play-based learning strategies on the development of children in early childhood according to the seven developmental domains, Problem Nos. 1, 2, and 3, descriptive statistics were employed.

For Problem 4, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was employed to determine the significant relationship between the teachers' practices and for Problem 5, the T-test and F-test were utilized to test the significant difference between teachers' practices of play-based learning strategies when grouped according to profile.

Ethical Considerations

The study on teachers' practices on play-based learning and early childhood development adhered to strict ethical considerations to ensure the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from Kindergarten teachers' participants, and they were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by using codes instead of names and by securely storing all collected data. No personal or identifying information was disclosed in the final report. Respect was observed by ensuring that participants were treated with dignity, and their responses were not judged or used in any way that

could harm their professional reputation.

The researcher also sought ethical clearance from a relevant institutional ethics committee before data collection began. Furthermore, data was only used for academic purposes, and no form of coercion or deception will be employed

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion on teacher's practices of the play-based learning and learner's early childhood development in select districts of Balingasag, Division of Misamis Oriental, during School Year 2024-2025. The data are presented in tabular form following the problems stated earlier.

Results

Problem 1. What is the extent of teachers' practices of play-based learning based on structured, free, and guided?

Table 1 : Summary Distribution of the Teachers' Extent of Practices of Play-based Learning

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Structured Play	3.86	0.31	Highly Practiced
Free Play	3.30	0.43	Highly Practiced
Guided	3.81	0.37	Highly Practiced
Overall	3.66	0.37	Highly Practiced

Legend : 3.26-4.00 To A Great Extent/Highly Practiced 1.76-2.50 To a Little Extent/Slightly Practiced
2.51-3.25 To Some Extent/Practiced 1.00-1.75 Not at All/Never Practiced

Table 1 shows the summary distribution of the teachers' extent of practices based on Play-based Learning Strategies, with an overall mean of 3.66 (SD=0.37), interpreted as Highly Practiced. This means that teachers favor play activities that include clear instructional aims and teacher scaffolding while still valuing child initiative, practices that align play with curriculum objectives, and formative assessment. This implies a strong emphasis on structured and guided play where teachers intentionally arrange materials, pose challenges, and use observations to drive instruction, which supports targeted cognitive and language gains as well as social and self-regulation skills.

The variable Structured Play obtained the highest mean of 3.86 (SD=0.31), interpreted as Highly Practiced. This means that teachers most frequently implement play that is planned around specific learning goals, use materials targeted to those goals, and establish clear expectations and routines. This implies that teachers are purposefully using play as a vehicle for curriculum design, integrating academic skills into play, and assessing development through play observations. The implication for practice is that continuing professional development on designing high-quality structured play will likely strengthen teachers' capacity to translate playful activity into measurable developmental gains. As noted, classrooms emphasizing structured play often show high levels of on-task behavior, smoother transitions between activities, and easier alignment between play moments and assessment data for planning.

Such intentional structuring is associated in the literature with improved academic and executive-function outcomes because it combines engagement with clear learning targets and scaffolding (Skene *et al.*, 2022; Parker *et al.*, 2022; Toub *et al.*, 2020). The implication for practice is that continuing professional development on designing high-quality structured play (materials selection, task design, formative observation) will likely strengthen teachers' capacity to translate playful activity into measurable developmental gains (Skene *et al.*, 2022; Toub *et al.*, 2020; Li, 2024).

On the other hand, Free Play got the lowest mean of 3.30 (SD=0.43), interpreted as Highly Practiced. Though still to a great extent, this means that truly child-initiated, resource-rich, open-ended play is implemented less consistently than structured or guided forms. This implies that relative shortfall may reflect practical barriers such as limited time allocation for uninterrupted play, insufficient open-ended materials, or classroom logistics that make sustained free play difficult. As observed, lower emphasis on free play could limit opportunities for creativity, risk-taking, imagination, and certain aspects of self-regulation and social negotiation that flourish when children lead their own activity. However, some teachers do not leave their children to free play to avoid conflict with other children.

Research also proves that while guided and structured play can efficiently advance specific learning goals, free play uniquely fosters long-term self-regulation, creativity, and peer problem-solving, the outcomes that warrant protected time and resources in early childhood programs (Colliver *et al.*, 2022; Li, 2024; Blinkoff, 2023). Thus, the finding points to a practical recommendation preserve and strengthen opportunities for high-quality free play with adequate materials, uninterrupted blocks of time, and supportive environments alongside structured and guided approaches to achieve a balanced, holistic play pedagogy (Li, 2024; Colliver *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, the lower rating for free play points to possible constraints like time, space, class size, or materials, or a professional preference for more teacher-mediated formats that assure curriculum coverage and measurable learning outcomes (Li, 2024; Blinkoff, 2023). In short, teachers appear to be balancing child-centered play with instructional accountability, an approach that can maximize learning when teachers are skilled in scaffolding and observation (Parker *et al.*, 2022; Skene *et al.*, 2022; Li, 2024).

Problem 2. What is the level of learners' early childhood

development, considering physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral?

Table 2 shows the summary distribution of early childhood development based on the seven developmental domains,

Table 2 : Summary Distribution of the Level of Learner's Early Childhood Development

Variables	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Physical	4.81	0.37	Highly Advanced
Cognitive	4.73	0.42	Highly Advanced
Language	4.70	0.44	Highly Advanced
Social	4.70	0.44	Highly Advanced
Emotional	4.73	0.43	Highly Advanced
Self-help	4.68	0.45	Highly Advanced
Moral	4.73	0.43	Highly Advanced
Overall	4.73	0.43	Highly Advanced

Legend: 4.21-5.00 Highly Developed/Highly Advanced 1.81-2.60 Slightly Developed/Slightly Delayed
3.41-4.20 Developed/Advanced 1.00-1.80 Not Developed/Significant Delay in Overall 2.61-3.40 Fairly Developed/Average overall

with an overall mean of 4.73 (SD=0.43), interpreted as Highly Advanced. This means that learners demonstrate well-rounded growth in physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral domains, reflecting the effectiveness of teachers' play-based learning practices. This implies that the learning environment provides rich, developmentally appropriate experiences that support holistic development rather than focusing on isolated academic skills. As observed, learners appear physically confident, cognitively engaged, communicative, socially competent, emotionally regulated, independent in daily tasks, and morally aware.

These findings are consistent with recent literature emphasizing that play-based learning fosters integrated development by allowing children to learn through active engagement, social interaction, and meaningful experiences (Zosh *et al.*, 2022; Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2023; Pyle & Danniels, 2024). According to Shonkoff and Phillips (2022), early childhood development that equally addresses all domains builds a strong foundation for cognitive flexibility, emotional stability, and social adaptability. Similarly, McCoy *et al.* (2023) emphasize that holistic approaches in early education enhance children's readiness for formal schooling and strengthen their socio-emotional competence. Moreover, UNICEF (2022) suggests that supporting every domain of development ensures inclusivity, equity, and resilience in children, preparing them to thrive in diverse contexts. It implies that the children are not only developing skills but also demonstrating integrated growth, reflecting the effectiveness of the learning environment in meeting the holistic needs of young learners.

The variable, Physical domain, got the highest mean of 4.81 (SD = 0.37), interpreted as Highly Advanced Development. This means that learners are highly developed in motor coordination, balance, and physical independence. The children have mastered both fine and gross motor skills essential for self-care, active play, and classroom participation. indicating that learners demonstrate exceptional gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and physical confidence. This implies that classrooms provide frequent opportunities for active play, movement-based learning, and hands-on manipulation of materials, which are essential for physical competence in early childhood. As observed, learners appear energetic, coordinated, and capable of performing age-appropriate physical tasks with ease, which also supports engagement in other learning areas.

Research supports this finding, noting that play-based and movement-rich environments significantly enhance children's physical development while also contributing positively to cognitive and social outcomes (Adolph & Hoch, 2023; Logan *et al.*, 2021; Brussoni *et al.*, 2022). The study of Piek *et al.* (2023) shows that physical competence in early childhood is strongly linked to self-regulation and academic readiness, as children who can control and coordinate their bodies also show better focus and confidence in learning tasks. According to Stodden *et al.* (2022) further claim that early mastery of movement skills enhances motivation for active engagement in both structured and unstructured learning contexts. In addition, Logan *et al.* (2021) also found that children's fine motor development correlates with improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, emphasizing the interdependence of physical and cognitive growth. Thus, it implies that learners are benefiting from play-based and movement-rich classroom environments that encourage exploration, coordination, and healthful habits.

The variable, Self-help, obtained the lowest mean of 4.68 (SD=0.45), interpreted as Highly Advanced Development. This means that while learners are largely independent in daily living skills, self-help behaviors may develop more gradually due to varying levels of home support and opportunities for practice. This implies that consistent reinforcement of self-care routines both at school and at home is necessary to further strengthen independence. As noticed, some learners may still require reminders or minimal assistance with hygiene and routine-related tasks, which is developmentally appropriate for their age.

Literature highlights that self-help skills are shaped by

environmental consistency, adult modeling, and repeated opportunities for autonomy, reinforcing the importance of coordinated school–home partnerships (McClelland *et al.*, 2021; Diamond & Ling, 2022; Miller *et al.*, 2023). This result aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, where children benefit from scaffolding to achieve independence. Recent evidence by Brown and Lanigan (2022) suggests that fostering self-help skills in early childhood enhances autonomy, self-efficacy, and problem-solving abilities, preparing learners for school routines and responsibilities. Similarly, Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2023) emphasize that the promotion of self-help abilities through daily routines builds confidence and a sense of competence among young children. Moreover, Berk (2021) asserts that opportunities for independent action and choice during early learning foster intrinsic motivation and self-control. Therefore, it implies the need for continued encouragement of independence through structured routines and parental collaboration.

Problem 3. Is there a significant relationship between the teachers' practices of play-based learning and the learners' early childhood development?

Table 3 reveals the overall test of significant relationships between teachers' practices of play-based learning and the learners' level of development in the early childhood development domains. The overall mean of Structure play (r-value=0.143, p-value=0.307), Free play (r-value=0.141, p-value=0.297), and Guided play (r-value=0.174, p-value=0.159) shows no significant relationship. Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. This signifies that when early childhood development is viewed holistically, combining physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, self-help, and moral domains, the extent of teachers' play-based learning practices does not show a statistically significant overall association. This implies that play-based learning alone may not be sufficient to account for overall developmental outcomes; rather, it should be complemented by family support, health and nutrition, and inclusive learning environments to maximize holistic development. As observed that while play-based learning may strongly influence specific developmental domains, its cumulative effect across all domains may be diluted by other contributing factors such as home environment, parental involvement, learners' individual differences, and broader school contexts.

Table 3 : Result of the test on Relationship Between the Teachers' Practices of Play-based Learning and Learners' Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development Domains		**Play-based Learning Practices**			**Overall**
		Structured Play	Free Play	Guided Play	
Physical	r- value	0.155	0.023	0.179	0.119
	p-value	0.058	0.784	0.026	0.289
	Interpretation	NS	NS	S	NS
Cognitive	r- value	0.077	0.169	0.114	0.120
	p-value	0.349	0.185	0.166	0.233
	Interpretation	NS	NS	NS	NS
Language	r- value	0.191	0.160	0.232	0.194
	p-value	0.019	0.051	0.004	0.025
	Interpretation	S	NS	S	S
Social	r- value	0.232	0.277	0.211	0.240
	p-value	0.004	0.001	0.009	0.005
	Interpretation	S	S	S	S
Emotional	r- value	0.000	0.002	0.123	0.042
	p-value	0.999	0.979	0.135	0.704
	Interpretation	NS	NS	NS	NS
Self-help	r- value	0.316	0.208	0.338	0.287
	p-value	0.000	0.011	0.000	0.004
	Interpretation	S	S	S	S
Moral	r- value	0.030	0.148	0.024	0.067
	p-value	0.717	0.070	0.769	0.519
	Interpretation	NS	NS	NS	NS

Legend: S - Significant NS - Not Significant Significant at 0.05 level

Several studies support this finding by emphasizing that early childhood development is multidimensional and influenced by multiple interacting systems, not solely classroom instructional practices. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective, as reflected in recent empirical studies, highlights that children's development is shaped

by the combined effects of school, family, and community contexts (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Britto *et al.* (2019) and Black *et al.* (2019) stressed that while play-based and developmentally appropriate practices are essential, their impact on overall development is moderated by caregiving quality, socioeconomic conditions, and access to health and nutrition services. Furthermore, Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2020) noted that guided and structured play are most effective when embedded within a broader system of supportive learning conditions However, some variables have significant findings. The guided play has a significant relationship with children's physical development (r = 0.179, p = 0.028); thus, the decision is rejected. This means that when teachers intentionally scaffold play activities such as movement-based games, manipulative tasks, and motor challenges, children are more likely to develop gross and fine motor skills effectively. This implies that guided play provides an optimal balance between child autonomy and adult support, allowing teachers to structure physical tasks while maintaining playful engagement. As observed, children exposed to guided play may demonstrate better coordination, balance, and purposeful movement compared to those engaged solely in free or structured play.

Significant relationships were also found between play-based learning and language development, particularly in structured play (r = 0.191, p = 0.019) and guided play (r=0.232, p=0.004); thus, the decision is rejected. These results imply that intentional play contexts, such as role-playing, storytelling centers, and language-rich guided interactions, enhance vocabulary growth, expressive language, and communication skills. The findings further reveal that social development is significantly related to structured play (r = 0.232, p= 0.004) and guided play (r =0.211, p=0.009). This means that purposeful play environments promote cooperation, turn-taking, and peer interaction. Additionally, self-help skills showed consistently significant relationships across structured play (r = 0.316, p = 0.000), free play (r = 0.208, p = 0.011), and guided play (r = 0.338, p = 0.000); thus, the decision is rejected.

The significant influence of guided and structured play on physical, language, social, and self-help development is strongly supported by recent literature. Weisberg *et al.* (2019) emphasized that guided play promotes deeper learning by combining child-led exploration with intentional adult scaffolding, particularly in language and social development. Similarly, Zosh *et al.* (2019) found that guided play environments significantly enhance communication skills, cooperation, and self-regulation among young children. In terms of physical development, Pyle and Danniels (2019) reported that guided play activities improve motor coordination and task persistence, as teachers intentionally embed learning goals within playful movement tasks. Moreover, Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2020) highlighted that play-based learning, especially guided play, fosters independence and self-help skills by allowing children to practice decision-making and responsibility within supportive contexts.

Problem 4. Is there a significant difference in the teachers' extent of practices of play-based learning when grouped according to their profile?

Table 4 presents the test results of the difference in teachers' play-based learning practices when grouped according to their profile. The overall results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in teachers' play-based learning practices - structured play, free play, and guided play when grouped according to their profile variables, as all overall p-values are greater than the 0.05 level of significance (Structured Play: p = 0.369; Free Play: p = 0.449; Guided Play: p = 0.158). Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This finding means that when teachers' profiles are considered collectively, rather than individually, their sex, age, teaching experience, highest educational attainment, and field of specialization do

Table 4 : Difference in the Teachers' Play-based Learning When Grouped According to their Profile

Respondents Profile	Play-based Learning Practices								
	Structured Play			Free Play			Guided Play		
	t-value	p-value	Interpretation	t-value	p-value	Interpretation	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Sex	0.037	0.655	NS	0.001	0.989	NS	0.191	0.019	S
Age	0.109	0.182	NS	0.715	0.947	NS	0.392	0.696	NS
Teaching Experience	0.346	0.000	S	0.143	0.081	NS	0.226	0.005	S
Highest Educational Attainment	0.100	0.224	NS	0.101	0.219	NS	0.154	0.060	NS
Field of Specialization	0.421	0.784	NS	0.207	0.011	S	0.205	0.012	S
Overall	0.203	0.369	NS	0.233	0.449	NS	0.234	0.158	NS

Legend: S - Significant NS - Not Significant Significant at .05 level

not result in significant overall differences in how they implement play-based learning practices. This implies that play-based learning is generally practiced consistently among teachers regardless of their background, suggesting a shared understanding of its importance and a common instructional culture within early childhood classrooms. As observed, although certain profile variables showed significant differences in specific types of play-based practices (e.g., guided play or structured play), these effects were not strong enough to influence the overall level of play-based teaching.

Some studies prove this overall finding by emphasizing that play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate pedagogy widely adopted across diverse teacher characteristics, particularly in early childhood education systems that promote standardized curriculum frameworks. Research by Pyle *et al.* (2020) found that teachers tend to implement play-based approaches consistently when guided by national or institutional early learning standards, minimizing differences related to personal or professional profiles. Likewise, Jensen *et al.* (2019) reported that while teacher characteristics may influence instructional styles in specific contexts, overall play-based practices remain stable due to shared training, curriculum expectations, and professional norms. Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2020) further stressed that supportive school cultures and common professional learning experiences often outweigh individual teacher differences, leading to uniform implementation of learner-centered practices such as play-based learning. However, some variables show a significant difference in guided play practices when teachers are grouped according to sex (f=0.191, p=0.019), thus, the decision is rejected. This means that male and female teachers differ significantly in how they implement guided play strategies in early childhood classrooms. This implies that gender-related pedagogical approaches, comfort levels, or professional socialization may influence how teachers scaffold play-based activities. In practice, this may result in variations in the level of teacher guidance, questioning, and intentional facilitation during play sessions. As observed, such differences may manifest in the frequency and depth of teacher-child interactions during guided play, potentially affecting learners' engagement and developmental outcomes.

Additionally, teaching experience showed a significant difference in structured play practices (f=0.346, p=0.000) and guided play practices (f= 0.226, p=0.005); thus, the decision is rejected. This means that teachers with longer teaching experience tend to implement structured and guided play more effectively and consistently than less experienced teachers. Experienced teachers may possess stronger classroom management skills, a deeper understanding of developmental milestones, and greater confidence in embedding learning objectives within play activities. This implies that novice teachers may require additional mentoring and professional development to maximize the instructional value of play-based learning. As observed, classrooms led by more experienced teachers may demonstrate more purposeful play routines, clearer learning goals, and smoother transitions between play and instruction.

Moreover, the field of specialization has a significant difference to both free play (f = 0.207, p = 0.011) and guided play (f = 0.205, p = 0.012); thus, the decision is rejected. This means that teachers with backgrounds in early childhood education are more adept at designing and managing play-based learning activities suited to young learners. This finding supports the studies of Khalil *et al.* (2022) and Alsubaie *et al.* (2024), who found that specialized training in early childhood education promotes stronger alignment between play and learning outcomes.

The significant differences observed across sex and teaching experience are supported by recent studies emphasizing the role of teacher characteristics in play-based pedagogy. Pyle and Danniels (2019) reported that teachers' beliefs, confidence, and prior experiences significantly influence how they implement structured and guided play in early childhood settings. Similarly, McInnes *et al.* (2019) found that experienced teachers are more adept at scaffolding play, using intentional questioning, and aligning play activities with learning outcomes. In terms of sex-related differences, Sims and Hutchins (2020) noted that male and female teachers may differ in interaction styles and facilitation strategies during play-based activities, which can affect the nature of guided play experiences. Furthermore, Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2020) emphasized that effective guided play requires pedagogical skill developed over time, reinforcing the finding that teaching experience plays a critical role in the quality of play-based learning implementation. These studies collectively support the conclusion that both sex and teaching experience significantly influence teachers' play-based learning practices, particularly in structured and guided play.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that play-based learning is essential and effective instructional approach in promoting early childhood development. Teachers demonstrated meaningful implementation of structured play indicating a strong alignment with developmentally appropriate teaching practices. This confirms that play-based instruction is well established in early childhood classrooms and serves as a foundation for holistic learning. The study further concludes that physical domain of learner's early childhood development covers physical growth and changes, like increases in height, weight, and muscular strength. Additionally, it consists of the development of motor skills, including gross and fine motor skills, as well as the development of five senses. In this domain pupils can climb on and off furniture or playground equipment without assistance, indicating strength and coordination.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Teachers should be encouraged and supported by the school administration to pursue graduate courses related to their area of expertise. Additionally, teachers with a master's degree ought to be motivated to keep improving their professional knowledge and abilities through additional coursework, seminars, trainings, and professional development opportunities. Opportunities like mentorship, flexible scheduling, and access to pertinent professional development programs can help teachers advance their education and raise the standard of instruction in the classroom.

2. Teachers should adopt a more intentional facilitative role during free play through observation and timely scaffolding. This will allow children to explore their interests, express creativity, and develop independence, problem-solving skills, and self-regulation. Teachers should provide children with a variety of flexible and reusable materials, and regularly introduce new ones to promote creativity, imagination, exploration, and problem-solving through meaningful play experiences.

3. Teachers establish a strong and consistent partnerships with parents and caregivers to reinforce children's self-help skills beyond the classroom. They should encourage learners develop healthy personal hygiene habits, encourage them to brush their teeth on their own through consistent routines, appropriate supervision, and positive reinforcement.

4. School leaders are encouraged to institutionalize free play as an essential component of the early childhood curriculum by ensuring that daily schedules include protected and adequate time for child-initiated play. They should review and adjust timetables to prevent free play from being shortened or replaced by overly academic or teacher-directed activities.

5. Teachers in Kindergarten may conduct a study on Teachers' Practices of Play-Based Learning and Learners' Early Childhood Development in other places utilizing the same variables to validate result.

REFERENCES

Adolph, K. E., & Hoch, J. E. (2023). Motor development: Embodied, embedded, enculturated, and enabling. *Annual Review of Psychology, 74,* 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-030222-015501

Allee-Herndon, K. A., and Roberts, S. K. (2020). The Power of Purposeful Play in Primary Grades: adjusting Pedagogy for Children's Needs and Academic Gains. *J. Educ.* 201, 54–63.

Asha, (2024). Your Child's Communication: Kindergarten. *American Speech-Language-Hearing Association* https://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/kindergarten

Blinkoff, E. (2023). Investigating the contributions of active, playful learning to motivation and skill development. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 27*(4), 301–312.

Bruya, B., & Tang, Y. Y. (2021). Fluid attention in education: conceptual and neurobiological framework. *Frontiers in Psychology,* 12, 704443. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.704443

Blessing, A. (2022). The power of play in the kindergarten classroom: Transforming centers into places of engaged learning. In NAEYC (Ed.), *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8* (4th ed., pp. 281–285). National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Brightwheel (2023). *Learning Through Guided Play.* https://mybrightwheel.com/blog/guided-play

Brodowics, M. (2024). *Descriptive Correlational Design in Research.*

Brussoni, M., Olsen, L. L., Pike, I., & Sleet, D. A. (2022). Risky play and children's safety: Balancing priorities for optimal child development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19*(3), 1210–1223. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031210

Caven, M. (2022). Prioritizing Play: The Importance of Play-based Learning in Early Education. *Institute of Education of Sciences.* https://ies.ed.gov/learn/blog/prioritizing-play-importance-play-based- learning-early-education

Colliver, Y., [or Colliver, A.] (2022). Free play predicts self-regulation years later: Longitudinal evidence from early childhood. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology,* 214, Article 105276. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2021.105276

Cheruiyot, B. (2024). Effectiveness of Play-Based Learning Method in the Promotion of Early Literacy Skills Among Early Childhood Development Children. *East African Journal of Education Studies.* 7. 479-488. 10.37284/eajes.7.3.2178.

Creaghe, N., Quinn, S., & Kidd, E. (2021) Symbolic play provides a fertile context for language development. *Infancy 26*(6), 980–1010.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. (2023). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches.* Sage Publications.

Danniels, E., & Pyle, A. (2023). Inclusive play-based learning: Approaches from enacting kindergarten teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(7), 1169-1179.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Hyler, M. E. (2020). Preparing educators for the future: T eacher learning in an era of change. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *43*(1), 4–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2019.1709943

Denham, S. A., Bassett, H. H., & Zinsser, K. (2023). Early childhood teachers as socializers of young children's emotional competence. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 63*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.11.001

Diamond, A., & Ling, D. S. (2022). Conclusions about interventions, programs, and approaches for

improving executive functions that appear justified and those that do not. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, 54,* 101073. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcn.2022.101073

Durning, A., Baker, S., & Ramchandani, P. (eds). (2024) *Unlocking Research: Empowering Play in Primary Education.* London: Routledge.

Ernst, J. R., & Reynolds, A. J. (2021). Preschool instructional approaches and age 35, health and well-being. *Preventive Medicine Reports, 23,* Article 101498. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2021.101498

Fazlollahi, M., Ramezani, M., Asghari Nekah, S. M., Saki, A., & Feyzabadi, M. J. J. (2022). The effects of meaning-centered play on spiritual sensitivity of children: A randomized controlled trial. *International Journal of Community Based Nursing and Midwifery, 10*(1), 42–53. https://doi.org/10.30476/IJCBNM.2021.90120.1669

Goldman, L. R. (2020). *Child's play: Myth, mimesis and make-believe.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003084914

Grajczonek, J. (2021). *Spiritual development and religious education in the early years: A review of the literature.* Course Hero. https://www.coursehero.com/file/62274618/Final-Spiritual-Development-Religious-Education-in-the-Early-Years-A-Review-of-the-Literaturepdf/

Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2023). *Becoming brilliant: What science tells us about raising successful children* (Updated ed.). APA Publishing.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Zosh, J. M., Golinkoff, R. M., Gray, J. H., Robb, M. B., & Kaufman, J. (2020). Putting education in "educational" apps: Lessons from the science of learning. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 21*(1), 1–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100620924773

Jensen, H., Pyle, A., & Zosh, J. (2019). *White paper: Play facilitation: The science behind the art of engaging young children.* The LEGO Foundation. https://cms.learningthroughplay.com/media/ok2hjrbh/play-facilitation_the-science-behind-the-art-of-engaging-young-children.pdf

Kizildere, E., Atkan-Erciyes, A., Tahiroğlu, D. (2020) A multidimensional investigation of pretend play and language competence: Concurrent and longitudinal relations in preschoolers. *Cognitive Development 54:* 100870.

Li, X. (2024). A systematic literature review of playful learning in primary and early childhood education (2014–2023). *British Journal of Educational Studies, 72*(2), 210–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2416954

Logan, S. W., Webster, E. K., Getchell, N., Pfeiffer, K. A., & Robinson, L. E. (2021). Relationship between fundamental motor skill competence and physical activity during childhood and adolescence: A systematic review. *Kinesiology Review, 10*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1123/kr.2020-0056

Managhan, E. (2020). Effective practices to balance literacy instruction in early childhood. *Learning to Teach, 9*(1).

Manas, G. (2020). A study on childhood development in early stage. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies, 7*(59).

Massey, S. L. (2023). From the reading rug to the play center: Enhancing vocabulary and comprehensive language skills by connecting storybook reading and guided play. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 41*(2), 125-131. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-012-0524-y

Mauro, A. (2024). *The impact of play-based learning on early childhood development* [Master's thesis, SUNY College at Cortland]. Digital Commons @ Cortland. https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/theses

McClelland, M. M., Geldhof, G. J., Cameron, C. E., & Wanless, S. B. (2021). Development and self-regulation. *In Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance* (2nd ed., pp. 69–85). *Routledge.*

Miller, L. J., Coll, J. R., & Schoen, S. A. (2023). Sensory integration in early childhood: Implications for functional independence. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools & Early Intervention, 16*(1), 1–16.

Morin, A. (2022). *Developmental milestones for kindergartners.* https://www.understood.org/en/articles/developmental-milestones-for-typical-kindergartners

Mowafi, Y., Abumuhfouz, I., & Redifer, J. (2019). A play-based interactive learning approach for fostering counting and numbers learning skills for early childhood education using QR codes mobile technologies. In *International Conference on Mobile Web and Intelligent Information Systems* (pp. 16-26). Springer: Cham.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8* (4th ed.). NAEYC.

Nicholson, J., & Pyle, A. (2020). Dewey's pragmatism and play-based learning in ECE. *Journal of ECE Research, 20*(3), 347–360. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X211058974

ODM Public School, (2024). *Learning Through Play: How Structured Play Enhances Early Education.* https://www.odmps.org/updates/blog/learning-through-play-how-structured-play-enhances-early-education

Paatsch, L., Casey, S., & Green, A. (2024). *Learning through play in primary school: The why and the how for teachers and school leaders.* Routledge.

Patton, B. (2023). *Implementing play-based learning.* [Unpublished master's thesis] https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters/536/

Parker, R., [*et al.*] (2022). Learning through play at school: A framework for policy and practice. *Frontiers in Education,* 7, Article 751801. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.751801

Pyle, A., DeLuca, C., & Danniels, E. (2020). A scoping review of play-based pedagogies in kindergarten. *Review of Education, 8*(1), 141–175. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3197\

Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2024). Observing play: Balancing assessment and autonomy in early learning classrooms. *Early Child Development and Care, 193*(5), 655–668. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2022.2055476

Quinn, S., Donnelly, S., & Kidd, E. (2019). The relationship between symbolic play and language acquisition: A meta-analytic review. (apa.org) (accessed 24/9/24)

Republic Act No. 8980. (2000, December 5). *An act promulgating a comprehensive policy and a national system for early childhood care and development (ECCD), providing funds therefor and for other purposes.* https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2000/ra_8980_2000.html

Rushton, S. (2021). Global health security: Security for whom? Security from what? *Political Studies, 59*(4), 779-796. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00919.x

Sakib, N. (2022). The Effect of Play-Based Learning on the Cognitive Development of Kindergarten Students. 10. 40-58. *Cultural Communication Journal (CCJ) 10*(1) (2022) 40-58 http://doi.org/15.28490/ccj.01.2022.10.22

San, N. M. H., Myint, A. A., & Oo, C. Z. (2021). Using play to improve the social and emotional development of preschool children. *Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal, 10*(2), 16-35. https://doi.org/10.37134/saecj.vol10.2.2.2021

Shenfield, T. (2023). *The Importance of Play in Social Skills Development. Advance Psychology Service.* https://www.psy-ed.com/wpblog/play-and-social-skills-development/

Sitorus, R., & Siregar, K., & Sari, R. (2025). The Role of Play Based Learning in Early Childhood Development. *Educia Journal. 3*. 1-14. 10.71435/610424.

Skene, K., O'Farrelly, C., Byrne, E., *et al.* (2022). Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and well-being? *A systematic review. Child Development, 93*(5), e564–e582. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13730

Soules, M. (2021). Play Attention. New Explorations: *Studies in Culture and Communication, 2*(1)

Steele, S. J. (2024). Why Play? Exploring the Realities of Play-Based Learning in Kindergarten. *Honors Program Theses. 961*. https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt/961

Sobrebiga, P. J. T., & Medez, S. R. G. (2020). Parenting Styles and Self-Help Skills of Kindergarten Learners. *Philippine Social Science Journal, 3*(2), 71-72. https://doi.org/10.52006/main.v3i2.257

Stodden, D. F., Goodway, J. D., Langendorfer, S. J., & Roberton, M. A. (2022). Physical activity and motor competence in early childhood: Building foundations for future health and learning. *Frontiers in Public Health, 10*(1), 882–896.

Tan, M., & Dobbs-Oates, J. (2013). Relationship between emergent literacy and early social-emotional development in preschool children from low-income backgrounds. *Early Child Development and Care,183*(11), 1509–1530. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2012.729051

Tang, C. W., & Hang, H. M. (2023). A feature-based robust digital image watermarking scheme. *IEEE Transactions on Signal Processing, 51*(4), 950-959.

Tang, F. (2022). Nurturing children's spiritual development in early childhood context. *Foundation Stage Forum.* https://eyfs.info/articles.html/personal-social-and-emotional-development/nurturing-children%E2%80%99s-spiritual-development-in-early-childhood-context

Toub, T. S., Rajan, V., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2020). Guided play: A solution to the play versus learning dichotomy. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly,* 50, 179–191. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.12.015

UNICEF. (2022). *Play-based learning: An essential strategy for early childhood education.* UNICEF Early Learning Series.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: *The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.

Walsh, C., & Campbell, C. (2019). Introducing coding as a literacy on mobile devices in the early years. In *Mobile technologies in children's language and literacy.* Emerald Publishing Limited.

Waters-Davies, J. (ed) (2022). *Introduction to Play.* London: SAGE Publications.

Welding, A. (2022). *Social and Emotional Skills Develop Through Play- Based Learning.* Master's Theses & Capstone Projects. 469.https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters/469

Weisberg, D. S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2019). Guided play: Where curricular goals meet a playful pedagogy. *Mind, Brain, and Education, 10*(3), 142–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12124

World Health Organization (WHO) (2019). *To grow up healthy, children need to sit less and play more.* Available at: www.who.int/news/item/24-04- 2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more (accessed 20 September 2024).

Zakaria, M. Z., Yunus, F., & Mohamed, S. (2021). Drawing activities enhance preschoolers' socio-emotional development. *Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal, 10*(1), 18–27. https://doi.org/10.37134/saecj.vol10.1.2.2021

Zarei, N., Hoseini, A. S., Issa Zadeh, N., & Kazemnejad, A. (2020). The effect of prayer painting on spiritual life and anxiety in 7-11-year-old children with immunodeficiency. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*. 2020; 25:212–23

Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Whitebread, D. (2022). Learning through play: A review of the evidence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13(*3), 865213. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.865213

Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2019). The science of play: Using guided and structured play to support learning across domains. *Child Development Perspectives, 16*(3), 173–180.