

Play-Based Learning Implementation of Early Childhood Educators in IPED Schools: A Case Study

Lorena T. Ramirez¹, Revina O. Mendoza, Ph.D.²

¹lorena.ramirez@lccdo.edu.ph

²revina.mendoza@lccdo.edu.ph

Lourdes College, Inc., Cagayan De Oro City, Philippines

Abstract

Play is crucial in early childhood education as it supports the holistic development of children. This qualitative case study explored play-based learning (PBL) implementation in kindergarten classrooms in Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) schools in Bukidnon. The study was participated in by three (3) early childhood teachers who were currently teaching in kindergarten classrooms and three (3) school heads as the key informants of this study. Grounded in constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories, particularly those of Vygotsky and Froebel, the study examines how early childhood educators adapt and apply Play-Based Learning (PBL) strategies to promote holistic development in their learners. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and key informant interviews were utilized as data-gathering tools. Findings reveal that while educators value the developmental benefits of PBL—such as improvements in children’s social skills, creativity, emotional resilience, and collaborative behaviors—they face contextual challenges, including limited resources and insufficient training. Despite these hurdles, teachers demonstrated innovation in adapting PBL to suit their learners’ needs. The researcher believes that this study contributes valuable insights for policymakers, teacher education institutions, and stakeholders seeking to enhance culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate early childhood education in Indigenous communities. The researcher recommends that school administrators to facilitate capacity building such as organizing in-service training, mentoring, and study groups focused on enhancing teachers’ competence in both play-based strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy to not only enhance educational engagement but also preserve and transmit cultural heritage, reinforcing the importance of aligning pedagogy with the socio-cultural backgrounds of learning.

Keywords: Indigenous People’s Education, Play-Based Learning, Social Skills, Creativity, Collaborative Behavior

INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning in today’s generation gives an idea of how exploration, creativity, and fun inspire meaningful learning links to the natural relationship between play and development. Play is a powerful way for children to develop essential abilities supporting their holistic growth. They are not

only born ready to discover and explore the world, but children also learn this way (Wagner, 2024). Educators are considered the builders of a better tomorrow. The greatest role models in a student's life are their teachers (Bhattacharjee, 2021).

In today's constantly changing world, children need to acquire the skills necessary to prepare them to become resilient individuals and life-long learners. This will ensure that at a very young age they are guided in learning responsibility, critical thinking, good decision-making skills. Despite the growing number of studies recognizing the significance and benefits of holistic development in early childhood education, there still remains a bigger need for a further and wider understanding, especially in the implementation and effectiveness of such approaches within classroom settings.

While play-based learning has been a highlight in many studies focusing on its potential advantages in mainstream educational settings. There is an observable lack of in-depth research exploring its practical implementation within Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) schools. Much of the existing literature focuses on the theoretical benefits of play-based learning, often overlooking how this approach translates in culturally diverse and marginalized contexts.

THEORITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Lev Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Scaffolding theory serves as the foundation for this study. This theory emphasizes two fundamental concepts: scaffolding, a teaching strategy that offers specialized guidance within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to assist children in learning new skills, and the ZPD itself, which symbolizes the gap between a child's current abilities and their potential development with assistance from adults or knowledgeable others. When combined, these ideas highlight how crucial organized support and social contact are to learning (Brodie, 2024).

Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel, the father of kindergarten calls attention to the importance of children's learning and development in early years (Celinska, A. 2024). Froebel (1782 to 1852) made clear that play is a natural and vital activity for young children which serves as their way of exploring and making sense of the world around them (McArdle, J. 2024), adding that it serves as an avenue where children can express their inner thoughts, explore their surroundings, and grow physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Mayfield, 2019). He set the foundation for play-based learning, which has since developed into a major educational strategy. Froebel believed that play allows children to express themselves, learn about their environment, and grow on an intellectual, social, and emotional level. The studies of Brock et al. (2018) and Gowrie (2022), reinforce that through play, children develop foundational skills that support not only their academic progress but also their interpersonal and emotional competencies.

Similarly, Bubikova et.al (2019) emphasized that play supports character education, making it a holistic approach to child development. Various theories would also support the importance of meaningful play in a classroom in order to help a child reach its full potential. Play is important! Sociologists, psychologists, or pedagogues would prove the importance of play and there is sufficient evidence to show (Roiland, 2024).

Moreover, Acevedo (2022) mentioned in an article that public schools struggle with the implementation of play-based pedagogy practices to meet culturally diverse students' academic needs. It

is nevertheless valid that if teachers are unable to successfully support playful learning in the classroom, even the most carefully planned learning experience may fall short of the desired results.

Parker et al. (2022) points out that the process of successfully facilitating learning through play is complicated and requires a perfect combination of teacher-directed, student-led, and teacher-guided approaches.

Research Questions

This study explored the implementation of play-based learning in IPed schools. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. How do early childhood teachers in an IPed school describe the implementation of Play-Based Learning activities in their classroom?
2. What challenges and successes have early childhood teachers encountered in their implementation of PBL in an IPed school?

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. This study utilized a qualitative research approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of early childhood educators in implementing play-based learning in Pangantucan, Bukidnon. Qualitative research is particularly suited for this study because it allows for an exploration of the complex and context-specific factors that influence how play-based learning is practiced in early childhood education.

Trymata and Trymata (2023) defined a case study as a research method that involves a complete investigation of a specific occurrence to gain a deeper understanding of its complexities, dynamics, and context. Case studies give a better perception of a situation that involves a specific entity or set of circumstances (Raikar, 2023).

CASE STUDY

Constructivists believe that when knowledge is constructed, an individual must have learned through the process (Adigun et al., 2024a).

This design emphasizes an experiential approach in exploring early childhood educators' perceptions on implementing play-based learning. By focusing on the educators' personal and professional experiences, this study will look into how they adapt play-based methods in order to support the holistic growth of their learners.

By hearing the stories of the early childhood teachers, the case study design helped the researcher perceive the fullness of each teacher's experiences that may influence their implementation of play-based learning in their classrooms.

The multiple sources of evidence helped in getting a stronger result of the study. Unexpected information from the participants may arise, which will eventually aid in providing a clear picture of the implementation of play-based learning.

RESEARCH SETTING

This study was conducted in DepEd kindergarten classrooms of Pangantucan, Bukidnon, which has a population of Indigenous People (IP) students and where play-based learning is being utilized.

SAMPLE AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE

This qualitative case study utilized a purposive sampling technique in selecting the participants. Purposive sampling is used in choosing a specific group of individuals for studies. By focusing on experienced educators with sufficient knowledge, this study can achieve a better understanding of play-based learning implementation and its influence in the holistic development in young children.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In order to obtain a clear understanding of the teacher's experiences and the practical application of Play-based learning in the early childhood classrooms, a combination of in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions, Key Informant Interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were employed in order to provide a holistic view of the whole learning process. Furthermore, with the aid of thematic analysis, patterns will be identified, which will then be extracted into meaningful themes.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The primary data collection method was a one-on-one semi-structured interview with the teacher-participants and the Key Informants, which happened during their most convenient time. They were allowed to share their thoughts and personal experiences in the implementation of play-based learning in their classrooms. The interview was recorded in order to ensure accuracy. The contents of the interview were reviewed and extracted to themes that relate to the topic of this study. In the observation process, the researcher sat in the early childhood classrooms of the participants to observe how play-based learning actually took place. By observing interactions and the different types of play used by the teacher in the teaching process, the researcher believes that valuable insights will be observed. During the observation, the researcher will take down notes as well as request a lesson plan from the participant for documentation and further analysis. To complement the gathered data, the researcher also took photos with permission from the teacher-participant.

DATA ANALYSIS

One of most frequently used analyses in qualitative studies is thematic analysis. With the purpose of identifying patterns and themes within the collected data, thematic analysis was employed. As supported by Villegas (2025), Thematic analysis aids researchers in exploring important patterns and complex themes that are helpful in understanding perspectives, experiences, or social constructs.

In an article, Byrne, D., (2021) provides a hands-on example on how to apply thematic analysis in real-world research. Byrne shows how this structured method can help researchers dig into qualitative data to uncover meaningful themes, making sense of complex information in a way that's both organized and insightful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Using the hyper research software, the researcher was able to generate sufficient codes that helped in forming the categories and themes.

Research Question 1: *How do early childhood teachers in an IPED School describe the implementation of Play-Based Learning activities in their classrooms?*

Research question 1 is about the description of the implementation of PBL activities in the classroom setting. There are 2 themes in this question.

Theme 1. Enriched Learning through Student-Centered Exploration and Cultural Appreciation.

Using active strategies in implementing Play-Based Learning, this theme stresses how kindergarteners from the select IPED schools gained deeper engagement and meaningful experiences with their play-based learning activities as shared by the early childhood educators. The teacher-participants described Enriched Learning Through Student-Centered Exploration and Cultural Appreciation as involving increased participation, a student-centered approach, the encouragement of exploration, and the promotion of cultural appreciation.

Theme 2. Strengthened Pedagogical Process

The integration of play-based learning has significantly enhanced the pedagogical process of early childhood educators. The findings reveal that play-based learning significantly reduced disruptive behavior as well as there was a noticeable engagement among kindergarten learners.

Research Question 2: *What challenges and successes have early childhood teachers encountered in their implementation of PBL in an IPED school?*

This research question explores the different challenges and successes experienced by early childhood educators as they implement play-based learning (PBL) in their classrooms.

Theme 1: Improved Cognitive and Social Competence

By providing children with engaging activities, play-based learning stimulates thinking and encourages interaction which helped developed confidence in learners, improved their numeracy and literacy Skills, strengthened teacher-student relationship, as well as improved their motivations.

Theme 2: Inadequacy of Resources

Despite the positive outcomes of PBL, several challenges were identified. A recurring concern among educators was the lack of adequate training specific to play-based methodologies and the scarcity of appropriate tools limited the full potential of PBL in some classrooms.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Play-Based Learning implementation (PBL) in IPED schools greatly improved classroom experiences by increasing learner engagement, boosting confidence, and improving both cognitive and social competencies. Learners became more participative, exhibited fewer behavioral issues, and showed significant progress in literacy and numeracy. Teachers noted stronger student-teacher relationships and a greater sense of cultural identity, especially when indigenous games and native languages were incorporated. However, challenges such as insufficient teacher training and a lack of instructional materials limited the full implementation of PBL.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be inferred that the implementation of Play-Based Learning (PBL) in IPED schools has proven to be a powerful approach to enhancing student engagement, confidence, and overall development. By encouraging stronger social, cognitive, and cultural connections through Play-based learning created a more vibrant and inclusive classroom environment. Although challenges like limited training and resources posed barriers, the dedication and creativity of educators highlighted the vast potential of this approach. Strengthening systemic support and investing in teacher training and resources will be crucial to fully realize the benefits of PBL and ensure that indigenous learners continue to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In consonance with the findings of the study, the researcher recognized the following recommendations:

For Early Childhood Educators:

1. Strengthen culturally responsive play-based practices by integrating indigenous knowledge and traditions.
2. Engage in continuous professional development through trainings and peer learning.
3. Use reflective teaching practices to align activities with holistic student development.

For Stakeholders (Policy Makers, NGOs, Educational Advocates):

1. Invest in the creation of culturally relevant teaching materials and play-based kits.
2. Promote inclusive community involvement to sustain culturally integrated PBL.

For School Administrators:

1. Provide institutional support for PBL through resource allocation and flexible scheduling.
2. Facilitate capacity-building initiatives like trainings and mentoring.
3. Strengthen collaboration with the community by involving elders, parents, and artisans.

For Parents and Families:

1. Encourage active participation in classroom and cultural activities.
2. Provide cultural resources like stories and traditional items to enrich learning.
3. Support awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits of play-based learning.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study is designed to uphold the ethical standards of Justice, Respect for Persons, and Beneficence to safeguard and honor the rights of everyone involved, keeping with the principles cited by Amdur and Bankert (2010).

To ensure that each participant was treated fairly and equitably, the selection process was inclusive and unbiased. Every idea is valued, and no one will be unfairly excluded from contributing to this study.

To ensure the confidentiality of the data and that the rights of the participants are protected, consent will be obtained directly from them. Detailed information was provided stating the research's purpose, procedures as well its potential risks and benefits.

Aligned with Respect for Persons, each participant's autonomy is fully respected. Informed consent was obtained from everyone, along with a clear explanation of the purpose of this study, process, potential risks, and benefits. This way, participants could make informed decisions about their involvement, knowing they could opt out at any time without any pressure or consequence. All the data collected for the whole duration of the study remained confidential. Digital or physical documents were secured to maintain the privacy of the participants' answers.

Using the principle of Beneficence as a guide, this study prioritized well-being and privacy of all participants. Strict confidentiality measures were followed to protect their personal information, with physical and digital data stored securely. This approach minimized any risk of harm and ensures that participants' input is used solely to contribute to a better understanding of early childhood education.

Relevant institutions were tapped to seek ethical approval of the above-mentioned study.

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