



## Research in Management and Humanities

DWIJMH VOL. 5 NO. 2 (2026) ISSN: 2980-4817

Available online at [www.dwijmh.org](http://www.dwijmh.org)

Journal homepage: <http://www.dwijmh.org>

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# A phenomenological study on play-based learning in Kindergarten: Experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of teachers

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: March 15, 2026

Received in rev. form. April 25, 2026

Accepted: May 10, 2026

Published: June 10, 2026

**Keywords:** *Play-based learning, kindergarten teachers, challenges, experiences, Philippine Education, DepEd*

JEL Classification: I21

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the challenges and experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning. Using a descriptive phenomenological research design, data were collected from fifteen (15) kindergarten teachers of Paoay District through an open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns in the participants' experiences. The findings revealed that teachers generally perceive play-based learning as an effective and engaging instructional approach that enhances learners' participation, creativity, and social interaction. However, several challenges affect its implementation, including large class sizes, limited instructional materials, time constraints, and classroom management difficulties. Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated adaptability by improvising learning materials, organizing structured play activities, and applying classroom management strategies to sustain meaningful learning experiences. The study concludes that while teachers recognize the significant role of play-based learning in supporting young learners' development, strengthening institutional support, providing adequate resources, and offering continuous professional development opportunities are essential to improve its effective implementation in kindergarten classrooms.

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## Introduction

Play-based learning is widely recognized as a cornerstone of early childhood education, particularly in kindergarten, where young learners acquire foundational cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills. Developmental theorists and contemporary research emphasize that children learn most effectively through meaningful play experiences that are engaging and rooted in real-life contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). Through play, children explore their environment, express ideas, develop language, and learn to interact positively with others, making it an essential

pedagogical approach in early childhood classrooms.

In the Philippine educational context, the importance of play-based learning is institutionalized through Republic Act No. 10157, otherwise known as the Kindergarten Education Act of 2012, which mandates kindergarten as a compulsory and integral part of basic education. The Department of Education (DepEd) further reinforces this mandate through the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide, which identifies play as the primary medium for teaching and learning. According to DepEd (2016), play-based learning supports holistic child development and aligns with the goal of producing functionally literate, emotionally grounded, and socially responsible Filipino learners.

Despite strong policy support, implementing play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms presents significant challenges. In many schools, kindergarten teachers are required to balance developmentally appropriate play activities with academic expectations, assessment demands, and extensive documentation requirements. Large class sizes, limited classroom space, insufficient instructional materials, and time constraints further complicate the effective facilitation of play-based learning activities. These realities often create a gap between DepEd's curricular ideals and actual classroom practices (Department of Education, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Walsh et al., 2019; Dela Cruz & Bautista, 2021).

Several elements influence the successful implementation of play-based learning in the Philippine context. These include teachers' pedagogical knowledge and beliefs about play, availability of developmentally appropriate materials, classroom environment, administrative support, and parental understanding of play as a legitimate learning strategy. Teachers play a critical role in designing, facilitating, and assessing play-based activities; however, without adequate training and institutional support, they may struggle to maximize the educational value of play (Edwards, 2017; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Reyes & Villanueva, 2023).

Existing studies on play-based learning in early childhood education have consistently emphasized its importance in promoting children's holistic development, engagement, and meaningful learning experiences. For instance, studies by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2020) and Zosh et al. (2022) focused on the effectiveness of play in enhancing cognitive and social development, while Pyle et al. (2020) examined different types and structures of play-based pedagogy in classroom settings. Similarly, Wood (2020) and Flee (2021) discussed the role of teachers in facilitating play and the balance between guided instruction and child-initiated activities.

Although those studies provided substantial insights into the theoretical foundations and benefits of play-based learning, most focused primarily on its outcomes, instructional strategies, and general classroom practices. Limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers, particularly the specific challenges they encounter in classroom contexts, such as large class sizes, lack of materials, time constraints, and institutional pressures. Furthermore, previous research often lacks an in-depth phenomenological analysis of teachers' narratives, which captures how teachers interpret, adapt, and respond to these challenges in their day-to-day practice. In the Philippine context, while policies strongly advocate for play-based learning, there remains a gap in the literature on how policy expectations align with classroom realities from teachers' perspectives. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by

providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences of kindergarten teachers, focusing not only on what they do in implementing play-based learning but also on how they experience and navigate its complexities in actual teaching situations.

The motivation for this study stems from the need to document and understand the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers at the forefront of implementing play-based learning in DepEd-aligned schools. By exploring their challenges and coping strategies, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that may inform policy implementation, teacher professional development programs, and school-level support mechanisms. Ultimately, the study seeks to strengthen kindergarten education in the Philippines by ensuring that play-based learning remains meaningful, contextualized, and responsive to the needs of young Filipino learners.

## ***Review of related literature and studies***

This chapter presents a review of related literature and studies relevant to the challenges and experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning. The review synthesizes foreign and local literature and studies to establish the theoretical and empirical foundations of the present research. It also highlights gaps that the study seeks to address within the Philippine kindergarten education context.

### ***Play-Based learning in early childhood education***

Recent scholarship strongly reaffirms play-based learning as a developmentally appropriate and research-supported pedagogy in early childhood education. Zosh et al. (2018) conceptualized “playful learning” as experiences that are joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive. Expanding on this framework, Zosh et al. (2022) argued that playful learning strengthens executive functioning, problem-solving skills, language acquisition, and conceptual understanding by positioning children as active knowledge constructors. Rather than passively receiving information, children engaged in a play experiment, negotiated meaning, tested hypotheses, and reflected on outcomes. This active engagement fosters deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention of concepts.

Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2020) further emphasized that playful learning environments support the development of the “6 Cs” of 21st-century skills: collaboration, communication, content mastery, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence. These competencies are considered foundational for lifelong learning and adaptability. The authors highlighted that when play is intentionally designed and aligned with learning objectives, it does not diminish academic rigor; rather, it enhances it by promoting intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

Pyle et al. (2020) examined the continuum between free play and guided play, demonstrating that guided play—in which teachers embed curricular goals within child-initiated activities—leads to improved literacy and numeracy outcomes. Their findings show that academic learning can be meaningfully integrated into play contexts without sacrificing children’s autonomy. This research challenges the misconception that play and academic instruction are mutually exclusive. Instead, it proposes that effective play-based learning requires intentional teacher involvement, reflective planning, and purposeful scaffolding.

Additionally, Fler (2019) introduced the concept of “conceptual play worlds,” in which imagination and academic content intersect through structured, narrative-based experiences. This model illustrates that play-based pedagogy demands thoughtful preparation, theoretical grounding, and reflective practice from teachers. It highlights the cognitive complexity embedded in play scenarios when teachers intentionally extend children’s thinking through dialogue and co-participation.

Collectively, contemporary research positions play-based learning as a pedagogical approach grounded in cognitive science, developmental psychology, and educational theory. It underscores that high-quality play is intentional, structured around learning goals, and supported by skilled facilitation. These insights provide a strong theoretical foundation for examining how play-based learning is translated into real classroom contexts and how teachers navigate its practical implementation.

### ***Teachers’ roles and experiences in play-based learning***

Teachers play a central role in the successful implementation of play-based learning. The literature consistently identifies teachers as the central agents in the successful implementation of play-based learning. Leggett and Ford (2019) found that teachers’ beliefs about play significantly influence classroom practice. Educators who perceive play as academically valuable are more likely to integrate it meaningfully into instruction, whereas those who view it as supplementary may limit its use. This suggests that pedagogical orientation and professional identity shape how play-based approaches are enacted.

Barblett et al. (2019) emphasized that implementing play-based pedagogy requires specialized competencies, including observation skills, formative assessment literacy, and the ability to scaffold learning within dynamic play situations. Teachers must recognize “teachable moments” during play and extend children’s thinking through intentional questioning and feedback. Such expertise goes beyond classroom management and requires a deep understanding of child development and curriculum alignment.

Kim (2019) reported that in contexts with strong accountability measures, teachers often experience tension between play-based approaches and standardized assessment expectations. Without sufficient professional preparation, educators may feel pressured to prioritize worksheet-based instruction over exploratory learning. This tension highlights the need for continuous professional development that reinforces teachers’ confidence in play-based methodologies and equips them with strategies for documenting learning outcomes effectively.

More recent research by Nolan and Paatsch (2021) underscores the importance of collaborative professional learning communities in strengthening play-based practices. Their study revealed that teachers who engage in peer mentoring, reflective dialogue, and shared lesson planning demonstrate greater consistency in implementing guided play strategies. Professional collaboration fosters collective efficacy and reduces the sense of isolation teachers may experience when navigating curricular expectations.

Furthermore, sustained in-service training programs have been shown to improve teachers' ability to integrate assessment with play-based instruction (Pyle et al., 2020). When teachers are supported through workshops, coaching, and reflective supervision, they become more adept at aligning play experiences with learning standards. Overall, the literature affirms that teacher competence, beliefs, and professional support systems are critical determinants of successful implementation of play-based learning. These studies collectively demonstrate that teacher preparation, continuous professional development, and institutional support are essential elements in maximizing the effectiveness of play-based learning environments (Leggett & Ford, 2019; Pyle et al., 2020).

### ***Challenges in implementing play-based learning***

Despite strong theoretical and policy endorsement, the implementation of play-based learning remains complex. Walsh et al. (2019) found that structural constraints such as large class sizes and limited classroom space significantly restrict opportunities for individualized interaction and small-group facilitation. In overcrowded classrooms, managing multiple learning centers becomes challenging, reducing the depth of engagement possible within play activities.

Pyle et al. (2020) observed that time constraints and curriculum coverage pressures frequently lead teachers to shorten or fragment play sessions. When instructional time is tightly scheduled, sustained imaginative exploration may be replaced by brief, task-oriented activities. This shift limits opportunities for higher-order thinking, collaboration, and creativity to fully develop. Barblett et al. (2019) discussed the difficulty teachers encounter in documenting learning that occurs during play. Process-oriented learning outcomes—such as problem-solving, negotiation, and self-regulation—are often less visible than written outputs. Consequently, teachers may struggle to translate play experiences into measurable evidence required for reporting and accountability systems.

Recent findings by Wood (2020) also highlight the impact of societal expectations on play-based pedagogy. Parents and stakeholders may equate academic learning with visible products, such as worksheets and written tasks, leading teachers to justify or modify play activities to meet these expectations. This socio-cultural pressure can influence instructional decisions and contribute to internal conflict among educators.

Additionally, disparities in resource allocation remain a persistent concern. Studies indicate that insufficient instructional materials, limited manipulatives, and inadequate classroom infrastructure hinder the effective organization of stimulating play environments (OECD, 2020). Without adequate materials, teachers may need to improvise, increasing their workload and reducing instructional efficiency.

### ***Local studies on play-based learning in the Philippine context***

Within the Philippine educational system, play-based learning is officially recognized as the primary pedagogical approach in kindergarten under the Department of Education's curriculum guidelines (Department of Education, 2019). The curriculum emphasizes holistic development, experiential learning, and integration of socio-emotional growth with early literacy and numeracy competencies. These policy frameworks reflect global best practices and align with developmentally appropriate

However, emerging local studies indicate that translating policy into practice remains challenging. Dela Cruz and Bautista (2021) reported that kindergarten teachers encounter large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and heavy documentation demands. Although teachers recognize the value of play, they often feel compelled to produce written outputs to demonstrate learning progress.

Garcia and Santos (2022) highlighted that access to sustained professional development specific to play-based pedagogy remains inconsistent. Teachers who receive targeted training demonstrate greater confidence and creativity in integrating play with literacy and numeracy instruction. Conversely, those with limited exposure to specialized training may rely more heavily on traditional instructional strategies. Reyes and Villanueva (2023) identified parental perceptions as a recurring influence on classroom practice. Some parents perceive play as less academically rigorous compared to formal instruction, prompting teachers to clarify the educational value of play-based activities. This dynamic illustrates the socio-cultural dimension of implementation challenges within the Philippine context.

Recent discussions in Philippine early childhood scholarship (Santos & Navarro, 2024) emphasize the need for stronger institutional support systems, including resource provision, administrative alignment, and parent education initiatives. The literature suggests that effective implementation requires collaboration among teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and families to sustain developmentally appropriate practices.

Overall, the reviewed literature in the Philippine context demonstrates that while policy frameworks strongly endorse play-based learning, classroom realities are shaped by structural limitations, societal expectations, and disparities in professional development. There remains limited qualitative research that deeply explores how kindergarten teachers interpret, negotiate, and sustain play-based practices within these contextual constraints. This identified gap justifies the present study, which seeks to provide an in-depth exploration of teachers' challenges and lived experiences in implementing play-based learning. While recent Philippine studies document implementation barriers, limited qualitative research has deeply explored teachers' lived experiences navigating these systemic constraints. This gap supports the relevance of the present phenomenological study in examining the realities of play-based learning within DepEd-aligned kindergarten classrooms (Dela Cruz & Bautista, 2021; Reyes & Villanueva, 2023).

## ***Statement of the problem***

This study aimed to explore the challenges and experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning in their classrooms?
2. What challenges do kindergarten teachers encounter when using play-based learning as an instructional approach?

3. How do kindergarten teachers address or cope with the challenges they experience in implementing play-based learning?

## ***Methodology***

This chapter presents the research design, study locale, participants, sampling technique, data-gathering instrument and procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The methodology of this study is patterned after a descriptive phenomenological approach, similar to the structure and rigor of the referenced phenomenological research on school leadership challenges.

### ***Research design***

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the challenges and lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study, as it seeks to understand participants' firsthand experiences and the meanings, they attach to them within their real classroom contexts (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2016). This approach allowed the researcher to capture rich descriptions of how kindergarten teachers perceive, experience, and address the realities of implementing play-based learning in DepEd-aligned schools.

### ***Locale of the study***

The study was conducted in public elementary schools in the Paoay District, which offer kindergarten programs within the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte under the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines. These schools implement the DepEd Kindergarten Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes play-based learning as one of the modes of instruction. The locale was selected for its relevance to the study and the presence of kindergarten teachers directly engaged in play-based instructional practices.

### ***Participants and sampling***

The participants in the study were kindergarten teachers currently teaching in public elementary schools in the Paoay District. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the following criteria: (1) currently handling a kindergarten class, and (2) have direct experience in implementing play-based learning. The number of participants was determined based on data saturation, consistent with phenomenological research standards, to ensure depth rather than breadth of data (Van Manen, 2016).

### ***Data gathering instrument***

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed open-ended questionnaire designed to capture the challenges and lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning. The questionnaire was aligned with the research title and objectives and was structured to elicit rich, reflective, and descriptive responses consistent with a phenomenological approach. It was subjected to expert validation by specialists in early childhood education to ensure content validity, clarity, and relevance.

### ***Data gathering procedure***

Data collection was conducted using Google Forms. After securing permission from the concerned school authorities, the validated questionnaire was distributed electronically to the selected participants. Participants were given sufficient time to respond to the open-ended questions, allowing for reflection and detailed responses. Follow-up messages were sent as needed to clarify responses and ensure data completeness. This method provided flexibility and encouraged honest and thoughtful sharing of experiences.

### ***Data analysis tool***

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis. The process began with familiarization, where the researcher read and reread the responses to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Initial codes were generated by identifying significant statements related to teachers' challenges and experiences in implementing play-based learning. These codes were then grouped into emerging themes. The themes were reviewed, refined, defined, and named to accurately represent the participants' shared experiences. A narrative discussion was developed to connect the themes with the research questions and existing literature.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by assigning codes to participants and securely storing all data. The information gathered was used solely for academic purposes.

### ***Data presentation and analysis***

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from kindergarten teachers regarding their challenges and lived experiences in implementing play-based learning. The responses were collected through open-ended questionnaires distributed through Google Forms. A total of fifteen (15) kindergarten teachers participated in the study.

The collected responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2021). The researcher carefully read and reviewed the responses multiple times to identify significant statements and patterns. Similar responses were grouped and categorized into themes representing the participants' shared experiences.

From the analysis, six major themes emerged: positive perceptions of play-based learning; variety of play-based learning activities used by teachers; classroom management and learner behavior challenges; limited resources, time constraints, and large class sizes; teacher adaptability and coping strategies; and need for institutional support and professional development.

These themes represent the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers as they implement play-based learning in their classrooms.

***Problem 1: What are the experiences of kindergarten teachers in implementing play-based learning***

### Theme 1: Positive perceptions of play-based learning

| Responses                                    | Frequency (n=15) |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Play makes learning enjoyable and meaningful | 9                |
| Learners become more engaged and active      | 4                |
| Supports holistic development                | 2                |

**Note.** Data were collected via open-ended questions administered through Google Forms from 15 Kindergarten teachers in the Paoay District. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes based on common ideas expressed by the participants.

Many teachers expressed positive experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms. The participants described play-based learning as an effective instructional approach that promotes enjoyment, active participation, and meaningful learning among young children. Several teachers highlighted that children show greater enthusiasm and motivation when lessons are presented through play activities. Teacher 4 explained: *“My overall experience in implementing play-based learning in my kindergarten class has been very positive and rewarding. I have observed that children learn better when lessons are presented through play.”* Similarly, Teacher 9 emphasized learner engagement: *“Through play-based activities, my learners become more engaged, active, and interested in the learning process.”*

Other participants noted that play-based learning fosters a joyful classroom environment, encouraging children to participate more freely and develop their social and communication skills. Teacher 12 shared that children become more attentive and responsive when learning activities involve play.

These findings suggest that teachers strongly believe in the educational value of play-based learning. This perception supports Hirsh-Pasek et al.'s (2020) argument that playful learning enhances children's engagement, creativity, and critical thinking skills. When learners are emotionally and cognitively engaged, they are more likely to retain knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of concepts.

Furthermore, the teachers' responses also highlight the importance of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education. Play-based learning allows children to explore concepts through hands-on experiences rather than passive instruction, making learning more meaningful and effective. Overall, the responses indicate that kindergarten teachers recognize play-based learning as a valuable and effective pedagogical strategy that supports the holistic development of young learners.

### Theme 2: Variety of play-based learning activities used by teachers

| Type of Activity | Examples from Teachers               |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Sensory play     | Sand, clay, beads, sensory materials |

|                          |                             |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Dramatic or pretend play | Role-playing, storytelling  |
| Constructive play        | Building blocks, puzzles    |
| Music and movement       | Songs, dance activities     |
| Educational games        | Literacy and numeracy games |

**Note.** Data were collected via open-ended questions administered through Google Forms from 15 Kindergarten teachers in the Paoay District. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes based on common ideas expressed by the participants.

The responses also revealed that teachers use a wide variety of play-based activities to facilitate learning in kindergarten classrooms. These activities include sensory play, dramatic play, constructive play, music and movement, and educational games.

For example, Teacher 6 described using manipulative and constructive play activities: “Activities involving hands-on materials such as building blocks, stringing beads, assembling puzzles, and modeling with clay help develop fine motor skills.” Similarly, Teacher 7 reported using various manipulatives: “Building blocks, Legos, sand and clay, clay dough, beads, alphabet blocks, and puzzles.”

Other teachers emphasized the use of dramatic and imaginative play, which allows children to develop language and social interaction skills. Teacher 4 shared that role-playing and storytelling activities help learners express their ideas and collaborate with peers. Music and movement activities were also commonly mentioned. Teacher 8 reported using music and art stations, which allow children to explore creativity and self-expression.

These responses indicate that teachers integrate play-based learning across different subject areas, including literacy, numeracy, and social development. For instance, Teacher 10 explained that math games and storytelling are used to teach counting and language skills.

The use of diverse play activities aligns with the concept of guided play, in which teachers intentionally design play experiences to support learning objectives (Pyle et al., 2020). By incorporating different types of play, teachers can address multiple domains of child development, including cognitive, physical, emotional, and social growth. Thus, the data demonstrate that kindergarten teachers actively use a range of play-based strategies to support children's learning.

**Problem 2: What challenges do kindergarten teachers encounter when using play-based learning as an instructional approach?**

### Theme 3: Classroom management and learner behavior challenges

| Challenge                                      | Frequency (n=15) |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Classroom management difficulties              | 6                |
| Learners become overly excited during play     | 4                |
| Difficulty maintaining attention or discipline | 3                |
| Safety concerns                                | 2                |

**Note.** Data were collected via open-ended questions administered through Google Forms from 15 Kindergarten teachers in the Paoay District. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes based on common ideas

While teachers value play-based learning, several participants reported challenges related to classroom management and learner behavior. Play activities often generate excitement among children, which can sometimes lead to noise, distraction, or difficulty maintaining order in the classroom. Teacher 5 explained: *“Classroom management is challenging since they are really enjoying it and it is hard to pacify them and set them in a quiet mode.”* Similarly, Teacher 11 noted that play-based learning can become chaotic at times: *“Using play-based learning in class is a bit chaotic, but that is just part of the enjoyment or fun of the kids.”*

Some teachers also raised concerns regarding safety and supervision during play activities. Teacher 7 mentioned that certain materials can be dangerous if learners are not closely supervised. These challenges indicate that effective implementation of play-based learning requires strong classroom management strategies and clear behavioral expectations. Teachers must establish rules and routines to ensure that play remains productive and aligned with learning objectives.

Despite these difficulties, many teachers acknowledged that such challenges are manageable with proper planning and supervision. The responses highlight the need for teachers to develop skills in guiding children's behavior while maintaining a playful learning environment. This finding supports the literature of Barblett et al. (2019), which emphasizes that play-based learning requires intentional facilitation and classroom management skills from teachers.

#### **Theme 4: Limited resources, time constraints, and large class sizes**

| <b>Structural Challenge</b>     | <b>Frequency</b> |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Limited materials and resources | 10               |
| Large class sizes               | 7                |
| Time constraints                | 8                |

**Note.** Data were collected via open-ended questions administered through Google Forms from 15 Kindergarten teachers in the Paoay District. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes based on common ideas expressed by the participants.

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the responses was the lack of resources and structural constraints affecting the implementation of play-based learning.

Many teachers reported that the limited availability of materials makes it difficult to conduct diverse play activities. Teacher 8 simply stated: *“Limited resources.”* Similarly, Teacher 10 explained: *“Limited time and lack of resources are among the challenges in implementing play-based learning.”*

Large class sizes were also identified as a major challenge. Teachers explained that managing many learners simultaneously can make it difficult to monitor play activities and provide individualized support. Teacher 3 noted: *“A large class size makes it challenging to supervise many children at once.”*

Time constraints also affect the implementation of play-based learning. Some teachers mentioned that

the school schedule and curriculum requirements limit the time available for play activities. Teacher 11 explained: *“Play-based learning consumes a lot of time, and teachers sometimes struggle to prepare materials.”*

These findings reflect the structural challenges described in previous studies. According to Walsh et al. (2019) and OECD (2020), overcrowded classrooms and insufficient learning materials often hinder the effective implementation of play-based learning. Therefore, addressing these structural issues is essential for improving the quality of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms.

***Problem 3: How do kindergarten teachers address or cope with the challenges they experience in implementing play-based learning?***

**Theme 5: Teacher adaptability and coping strategies**

| Strategy                        | Examples                                 |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Careful planning                | Aligning play activities with objectives |
| Establishing rules and routines | Clear instructions for learners          |
| Using improvised materials      | Recycled or locally available resources  |
| Small group activities          | Rotating stations                        |
| Flexible activity design        | Simplifying games                        |

**Note.** Data were collected via open-ended questions administered through Google Forms from 15 Kindergarten teachers in the Paoay District. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes based on common ideas expressed by the participants.

Despite the challenges encountered, teachers demonstrated adaptability and resilience by implementing a range of strategies to sustain play-based learning in their classrooms.

One common strategy mentioned by several teachers was careful planning of activities. Teachers emphasized the importance of aligning play activities with learning objectives to ensure meaningful learning outcomes. Teacher 1 stated: *“I use careful planning and clear structuring of activities to ensure that play remains purposeful and aligned with learning objectives.”*

Another strategy used by teachers is the use of improvised or recycled materials when resources are limited. Teacher 5 explained: *“I use available or recycled materials when resources are limited.”*

Teachers also reported organizing learners into small groups or rotating learning stations to manage large class sizes effectively. Teacher 10 described setting up different classroom areas for specific activities to encourage exploration and creativity.

These strategies demonstrate teachers’ commitment to maintaining play-based learning despite the challenges they encounter. Their ability to adapt and innovate highlights the professional competence and dedication of kindergarten teachers. The responses support the findings of Leggett and Ford (2019), who emphasized that teachers play a crucial role in shaping meaningful play experiences for young learners.

### Theme 6: Need for institutional support and professional development

| Recommendation               | Number of Teachers |
|------------------------------|--------------------|
| More teacher training        | 8                  |
| More instructional materials | 7                  |
| Improved classroom space     | 3                  |
| Parental involvement         | 2                  |

**Note.** Data were collected via open-ended questions administered through Google Forms from 15 Kindergarten teachers in the Paoay District. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes based on common ideas expressed by the participants.

The final theme that emerged from the data highlights the need for stronger institutional support to improve the implementation of play-based learning.

Many teachers recommended continuous professional development to strengthen their knowledge and skills in facilitating play-based instruction. Teacher 7 stated: “*Teachers should receive regular professional development on play-based learning strategies.*” Similarly, Teacher 2 recommended that schools provide more training and support for teachers.

Participants also suggested providing adequate instructional materials and improving classroom environments to support play activities. Teacher 12 recommended larger classroom spaces to accommodate indoor play activities, while Teacher 8 emphasized the importance of parental involvement in supporting play-based learning.

These recommendations highlight the importance of collaboration among teachers, school administrators, and parents in supporting the effective implementation of play-based learning.

The findings are consistent with the literature of Reyes and Villanueva (2023), which emphasizes that the successful implementation of play-based learning requires systemic support from educational institutions and communities.

## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that kindergarten teachers generally view play-based learning as an effective and meaningful approach in facilitating young children’s development and engagement in the classroom. Participants consistently described play as an essential component of early childhood education, enabling learners to explore, discover, and interact with their environment naturally and enjoyably. Teachers observed that when lessons are delivered through play-based activities, children tend to show greater enthusiasm, participation, and motivation to learn. These observations are supported by studies which emphasize that play enhances children’s active engagement and meaningful learning experiences (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Zosh et al., 2022). Furthermore, play-based learning has been identified as a key approach in promoting holistic development among young learners, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth (Fleer, 2021; Walsh et al., 2019).

Despite recognizing the benefits of play-based learning, the teachers also reported several challenges in

implementing this approach consistently in their classrooms. One of the most commonly mentioned difficulties involved classroom management during play activities. Young learners are naturally energetic and curious, and when engaged in play, they may become overly excited or distracted. As a result, teachers often need to exert extra effort to maintain order and ensure that activities remain purposeful and aligned with learning objectives. Managing learner behavior while simultaneously facilitating meaningful play experiences requires patience, effective classroom management strategies, and clear instructional guidance from the teacher, as emphasized in studies highlighting the need for structured facilitation in play-based environments (Fleer, 2021; Wood, 2020). Furthermore, research indicates that teachers play a crucial role in balancing child-initiated play and guided instruction to maintain productive learning conditions (Pyle et al., 2020; Leggett & Ford, 2019).

Another significant challenge identified in the study concerns limitations in instructional resources and classroom conditions. Several participants reported that the lack of adequate learning materials, manipulatives, and play equipment sometimes restricts the variety of activities they can provide for learners. In addition, large class sizes make it difficult for teachers to closely monitor each learner's participation and ensure that play activities are safe, organized, and beneficial for all children. Time constraints also present a challenge, particularly when teachers must balance play-based learning with other curriculum requirements and assessment tasks. These findings are supported by studies indicating that limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient time can hinder the effective implementation of play-based learning (Walsh et al., 2019; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Furthermore, research suggests that adequate materials, classroom space, and instructional time are essential components in creating effective play-based learning environments (Zoch et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2020).

Despite these constraints, participants' responses revealed that kindergarten teachers demonstrate remarkable adaptability and creativity in implementing play-based learning strategies. Many teachers shared that they improvise instructional materials using locally available or recycled resources, such as cardboard, bottle caps, paper cutouts, and other inexpensive materials. Others reported organizing learners into small groups or learning stations to better manage classroom activities and maximize learner participation. These strategies illustrate the teachers' dedication to maintaining engaging learning environments even when resources are limited. Similar findings have been reported in studies highlighting teachers' creativity and flexibility in sustaining play-based learning despite contextual limitations (Rogers & Evans, 2021; Leggett & Ford, 2019). Furthermore, research emphasizes that teacher adaptability is crucial to ensuring meaningful learning experiences in resource-constrained environments (Wood, 2020; Fleer, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings emphasized the importance of institutional and community support in strengthening the implementation of play-based learning. Teachers expressed a need for additional training, professional development programs, and administrative support to enhance their skills in facilitating play-based instruction. Some participants also noted that parental understanding of play-based learning can influence how this approach is perceived and supported at home. When parents recognize the educational value of play, they become more supportive of classroom practices that integrate play as a learning strategy. These findings are supported by studies emphasizing the role of

professional development and institutional support in improving teachers' implementation of play-based pedagogy (Wood, 2020; Pyle et al., 2020). Additionally, research highlights the importance of parental involvement and awareness in reinforcing play-based learning both in school and at home (Zosh et al., 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020).

Overall, the study's findings highlight the complex realities kindergarten teachers face as they attempt to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. While teachers strongly believe in the benefits of play for young learners, they must also navigate practical challenges related to classroom management, resources, and institutional support. Nevertheless, the dedication and resourcefulness demonstrated by the participants reflect their commitment to providing meaningful learning experiences for their learners. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that, while play-based learning offers significant developmental benefits, its implementation is often shaped by contextual constraints in classroom and school environments (Pyle et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2019). Furthermore, research highlights that teachers' commitment, adaptability, and professional judgment play a crucial role in sustaining effective play-based learning practices despite existing challenges (Wood, 2020; Fleer, 2021).

Based on the findings of this study, its primary contribution to existing theories and discussions on play-based learning lies in offering contextualized, experience-based insights from kindergarten teachers, particularly in actual classroom settings where policy expectations and practical realities intersect. While existing literature has extensively discussed the benefits and theoretical foundations of play-based learning, this study contributes by highlighting how teachers actively interpret, adapt, and implement these principles despite constraints such as limited resources, large class sizes, and time pressures. It reinforces sociocultural and constructivist perspectives that view teachers as active agents in mediating learning experiences, not merely implementers of curriculum. Moreover, the study contributes to the discourse by emphasizing that effective play-based learning depends not only on pedagogical knowledge but also on environmental and institutional factors. In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest that educational policies promoting play-based learning must be accompanied by adequate support systems, including instructional materials, manageable class sizes, and continuous professional development programs. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen school-level and community engagement initiatives to enhance parental understanding of play as a legitimate learning strategy. These implications call for a more holistic and responsive approach in policy implementation to ensure that the goals of play-based learning are realistically achievable in diverse classroom contexts.

## ***Conclusion***

Based on the study's findings, kindergarten teachers recognize the significant role of play-based learning in supporting the holistic development of young learners. Teachers generally perceive play as an effective instructional approach that enhances learner engagement, promotes active participation, and supports the development of various skills such as communication, creativity, and social interaction.

Teachers' positive attitudes toward play-based learning indicate they value developmentally appropriate teaching strategies aligned with the principles of early childhood education.

However, the study also revealed that the successful implementation of play-based learning is influenced by several practical challenges teachers face in their classrooms. Issues such as large class sizes, limited learning materials, insufficient classroom space, and time constraints can affect the extent to which play-based activities can be effectively carried out. These challenges demonstrate that while educational policies encourage play-based learning, the realities of classroom environments sometimes limit its full implementation.

Despite these difficulties, kindergarten teachers continue to demonstrate resilience and creativity in adapting their teaching practices to sustain play-based learning experiences for their learners. Through the improvisation of materials, careful planning of activities, and flexible classroom management strategies, teachers strive to ensure that play remains an integral part of the learning process. Their efforts highlight the dedication of educators in creating meaningful and engaging learning environments for young children.

The study, therefore, concludes that strengthening the implementation of play-based learning requires collaborative efforts among teachers, school administrators, and the Department of Education. Providing adequate instructional resources, offering continuous professional development opportunities, and raising parents' awareness of the value of play-based learning can significantly enhance its effectiveness in kindergarten classrooms. When these forms of support are present, teachers are better equipped to implement play-based learning in ways that maximize its benefits for young learners.

Ultimately, the participants' experiences demonstrate that play-based learning remains a vital and effective approach in early childhood education. With proper support and resources, kindergarten teachers can continue to harness the power of play to foster meaningful learning experiences and support the overall development of young children.

**Authors' contributions:** Conceptualization, research methodology, data gathering, and data analysis were all done by the author.

**Ethical review statement:** The research was submitted to the Ethics and Review Board and granted permission to proceed. It has no human-sensitive issues.

**Funding statement:** The study is funded by the author.

**Conflict of interest statement:** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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