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Teaching Practices and Academic Readiness of Grade 6 Learners in Annex Public Schools: A Case Study from a Rural Philippine District

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Abstract

Academic readiness at the elementary level is a critical foundation for learners' successful transition to secondary education. In rural areas of the Philippines, particularly in annex public schools, instructional conditions and learner preparedness are shaped by contextual challenges such as limited resources, multigrade settings, and learner diversity. This study examined teaching practices and their relationship to the academic readiness of Grade 6 learners in Awayan Elementary School Annex, Aguineldo District, a rural public school in the Philippines. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and document analysis of lesson plans and learner outputs. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) teacher-directed instruction shaped by contextual constraints, (2) adaptive teaching strategies to support learner readiness, (3) uneven academic readiness across cognitive and non-cognitive domains, and (4) the role of teacher commitment in mitigating readiness gaps. Findings indicate that while teachers employ adaptive and context-responsive practices, persistent structural limitations affect learners' academic readiness. The study underscores the importance of strengthening instructional support and contextualized pedagogy in rural annex schools to enhance learner preparedness for secondary education.

Keywords: teaching practices, academic readiness, Grade 6 learners, annex schools, rural education, Philippines

Introduction

Early childhood education is widely recognized as a critical foundation for children's holistic development, particularly in the formation of social skills. This includes working together, understanding other people's feelings, talking to them, controlling your own behavior, and resolving conflicts so that students can have a real role in school and society. In kindergarten, social development is not just an extra benefit of learning; it is necessary for effective learning engagement, participation in class, and long-term academic adjustment. Longitudinal studies indicate that children's social competence in kindergarten is a significant predictor of subsequent educational achievement, employment stability, and overall well-being (Jones et al., 2015). Likewise, meta-analytic evidence substantiates that early social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions yield beneficial outcomes for both social behavior and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011).

These findings are closely related to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on a global scale. SDG 4 stresses the importance of inclusive and fair quality education and specifically mentions early childhood development and pre-primary education as important building blocks for lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, n.d.). SDG 4 emphasizes that quality education starts before formal academics and encompasses the cultivation of social, emotional, and behavioral skills essential for continuous learning.

The Kindergarten Education Law and the Omnibus Policy on Kindergarten Education (DepEd Order No. 47, s. 2016, as amended) make kindergarten education a part of the system in the Philippines. This policy clearly supports developmentally appropriate, play-based, and child-centered teaching to help students grow in all areas, including their social and emotional well-being (DepEd, 2016; DepEd, 2025). The MATATAG Agenda and the MATATAG Curriculum, which came out more recently, say that learner well-being, a positive school climate, and basic skills are still the most important things to focus on in basic education reform (DepEd, 2023; DepEd, 2024). These policy directions acknowledge that academic recovery and enhancement are unattainable without fortifying early childhood foundations, encompassing social development.

EDCOM II has made early childhood development and the foundational years even more important at the systems level. The Commission's final report and the National Education Plan stress that learning gaps and lack of interest in school often start in the early years and need to be fixed with consistent changes in the classroom that help both learning and the well-being of students (EDCOM II, 2026a; EDCOM II, 2026b). International partners, such as UNICEF and the World Bank, have confirmed these findings, emphasizing the necessity to enhance classroom quality, teacher competence, and socio-emotional support systems in early childhood education in the Philippines (UNICEF, 2026; World Bank, 2024).

Despite this strong policy alignment, a growing body of research suggests a persistent gap between policy intent and classroom realities. Kindergarten teachers frequently work in situations where they have to deal with large-sized classes, limited instructional time, diverse learner readiness, and increasing accountability pressures. These conditions may limit opportunities for continuous peer interaction, structured play, personalized scaffolding, and socio-emotional coaching methodologies recognized by research as essential for social development (Pianta et al., 2012; OECD, 2019). International literature has identified teacher-child interactions and emotionally supportive classroom environments as significant predictors of social competence; however, much of this evidence originates from extensive quantitative studies or intervention-based research (Denham et al., 2012; Mashburn et al., 2008).

In the Philippines, there is a significant deficiency of classroom-based qualitative research elucidating the influence of everyday instructional practices in kindergarten on learners' social development. Current research and national reports predominantly concentrate on access, governance, or learning outcomes, with insufficient emphasis on the micro-level instructional processes employed to teach, model, and practice social skills in authentic classroom settings. Furthermore, although DepEd and EDCOM II prioritize learner well-being and foundational development, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the implementation of these priorities by teachers within practical limitations.

This gap is important because knowing how things work in the classroom is important for putting policies into action. Without qualitative insights into teachers' instructional decisions, interactional strategies, and contextual challenges, reforms may remain aspirational rather than actionable. Consequently, there is a necessity for qualitative research that emphasizes teachers' lived experiences and classroom practices to reveal how early childhood education influences, either positively or negatively, kindergarten students' social development.

There are many important things about this study. First, it provides context-sensitive qualitative evidence regarding

early childhood instruction and social development in kindergarten classrooms, thereby filling a significant gap in Philippine early childhood education research. Second, it backs national and global education goals, especially SDG 4, MATATAG, and EDCOM II, by giving classroom-level information that can help with teacher training, school leadership, and early childhood policy implementation. Third, the results have useful implications for kindergarten teachers because they show how to teach kids to work together, be kind, control their emotions, and interact positively with their peers. Finally, the study lays the groundwork for subsequent research that may connect instructional methodologies, social development, and early academic achievements within the Philippine context.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study examines how early childhood instructional practices in kindergarten classrooms support the social development of learners. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What instructional routines and teaching strategies do kindergarten teachers employ to shape learners' social behaviors in the classroom?
2. What social development outcomes are observable among kindergarten learners within classroom interactions?
3. How do kindergarten teachers perceive the influence of their instructional practices on learners' social development?
4. What contextual and instructional factors facilitate or constrain the use of play-based and interactional activities that support peer relationships and pro- social behavior in kindergarten classrooms?

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design, incorporating naturalistic classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to attain a comprehensive understanding of instructional and social development processes in kindergarten classrooms. We chose a qualitative approach because it can help us understand what participants mean and how things work in the classroom that are hard to measure (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in public elementary school kindergarten classrooms in a rural context in one of the school districts in the Philippines. The learners typically represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds and varied school readiness levels. Participants included kindergarten teachers who are selected through purposive sampling based on teaching assignment and willingness to participate. A group of parents/guardians for focus group discussions to triangulate perceptions of children's social behaviors in school-home contexts were also considered in the study. Kindergarten learners were not interviewed directly; instead, their social development was examined through observation and adult accounts, consistent with ethical considerations for young children.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using three complementary methods. First, classroom observations where multiple non-participant observations per class were conducted to capture instructional routines, teacher-child interactions, peer dynamics, and social behaviors. Second, teacher semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' instructional goals, strategies for supporting social development, behavior support practices, and challenges encountered. Finally, parent/guardian focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore perceived changes in children's social behaviors, communication, and self-regulation, and how school practices might influence these behaviors.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Field notes and transcripts were read repeatedly, coded inductively, and organized into candidate themes. Themes were refined through iterative comparison across data sources from observation to interview to FGD and reviewed for coherence

and distinctiveness. An audit trail of coding decisions and theme definitions was maintained. The triangulation of methods was intended to support credibility and rigor.

Ethical Considerations

Administrative permission was secured from school authorities. Teachers and parents provided informed consent. Learner anonymity was protected by using pseudonyms and removing identifying details. Observation focused on routine instruction; no audio/video was collected without explicit permission.

Results

Findings highlight how early childhood instructional practices in kindergarten classrooms supported learners' social development.

Instructional Routines and Teaching Strategies Shaping Social Behavior

The results showed that kindergarten teachers always used predictable routines and clear teaching methods to shape how students acted in the classroom. Structured arrival procedures, circle time norms, clean-up duties, and transition cues were all part of the daily routine that set behavioral standards and encouraged orderly participation. Teachers also taught kids how to act in public by modeling, giving verbal reminders, and guiding practice. This included things like waiting for their turn, sharing materials, and using polite language when talking to others.

One of the participant's (P3) responses indicated, "Kapag pare-pareho ang routine, mas nagiging maayos ang kilos ng mga bata at alam nila kung kailan maghihintay." (When the routine is consistent, children behave better and know when to wait.). Another participant (P2) stated, "Pinapakita ko muna kung paano makipag-usap nang maayos bago ko sila pabayaang maglaro." (I show them first how to talk properly before letting them play.) These instructional routines and strategies provided a structured environment that guided learners toward appropriate social participation.

Observable Social Development Outcomes Among Kindergarten Learners

Classroom observations indicated various discernible social development outcomes among kindergarten students. During classroom activities, students showed that they were getting better at working together, taking turns, talking to each other, showing empathy, and controlling their own behavior. These behaviors were most apparent during collaborative tasks, communal play, and teacher-led discussions.

Participants noted that learners improved in articulating their needs verbally, sharing resources autonomously, and responding to the emotions of peers. One participant (P1) stated, "Mas marunong na silang magsabi ng gusto nila kaysa umiyak o magalit" (They are now more able to say what they want instead of crying or getting angry). Another participant (P6) remarked, "Nakikita ko na natututo silang maghintay at magbigay ng turn sa kaklase" (I can see that they are learning to wait and give turns to their classmates). These behaviors showed that the students were getting better at socializing in the classroom.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of Instructional Practices on Social Development

Participants believed that their teaching methods had a direct and important effect on the social development of their students. Teachers stressed that social behaviors did not arise spontaneously but were cultivated through consistent guidance, modeling, and reinforcement integrated into daily instruction.

The study found that teaching social skills directly and then reinforcing them during classroom interactions helped students work together better and control their emotions better. One participant (P5) said, "Hindi automatic ang pakikisama kasi kailangan talaga ituro at ulit-ulitin araw-araw." (Social skills are not automatic since they really need to be taught and repeated every day.) Another participant (P7) claimed, "Kapag consistent ka sa pagtuturo ng tamang kilos, ginagaya ng bata." (When you are consistent in teaching proper behavior, children imitate it.). These perceptions highlighted teachers' acknowledgment of their role as essential enablers of social learning.

Contextual and Instructional Factors Affecting Play-Based and Interactional Activities

Findings also showed that both enabling and limiting factors affected how play-based and interactive activities were put into action. Facilitating factors encompassed teacher awareness of play as a pedagogical strategy, the availability of educational resources, and classroom routines that designated time for collaborative activities. But teachers also said that big class sizes, not enough time to teach, and students who were at different levels of readiness all made play-based interactions less frequent and less deep.

In connection to the findings, P2 explained, “Gusto ko talagang magpa-play nang mas matagal kasi doon sila natututo makisama. “Pero kapag kulang ang oras at marami ang bata, kailangan ko muna silang i-redirect.” (I really want to allow longer play because that’s where they learn social skills. However, when time is limited and there are many children, I need to redirect them.). These contextual conditions shaped teachers’ instructional decisions and influenced opportunities for sustained peer interaction and prosocial behavior.

Generally, the findings indicate that early childhood instructional practices, particularly structured routines, explicit social guidance, and play-based activities, supported the social development of kindergarten learners. Observable social outcomes included improved cooperation, communication, empathy, and self-regulation. Teachers viewed their instructional practices as central to social development, although contextual constraints influenced the extent to which interactional and play-based activities could be fully implemented.

Discussion

The results show that the way teachers teach in kindergarten classrooms on a daily basis is a planned way to help students develop socially, especially in areas like cooperation, communication, empathy, taking turns, and self-control. These findings are in line with the larger global and national goal of providing quality early childhood education that goes beyond “pre-academics” and includes building the social and emotional skills that help kids learn well and take part in school in a meaningful way. This aligns with SDG 4, Target 4.2, which stresses the importance of giving all children access to high-quality early childhood development and pre-primary education as a basis for lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, n.d.). In the Philippines, the results support the Department of Education’s (DepEd) policy that kindergarten education should be developmentally appropriate, based on play, and support holistic development, including social and emotional growth (DepEd, 2016; DepEd, 2025). The findings further reinforce national reform directions that focus on foundational learning and the well-being of students. This is especially true for DepEd’s MATATAG agenda and the MATATAG Kindergarten Curriculum Guide, which put holistic development and positive learning experiences at the center of their goals (DepEd, 2023). At the systems level, the results also support EDCOM II’s focus on putting money into the early years and improving early childhood development as a key way to close the learning gaps that keep happening (EDCOM II, 2026a; EDCOM II, 2026b). UNICEF has also said that strong early foundations are needed to end the learning crisis (UNICEF, 2026).

On the other hand, the fact that teachers always use predictable routines and clear strategies shows that structured participation patterns, not chance, shape social development in kindergarten. Routines like arrivals, circle-time rules, transition cues, and classroom roles did more than just keep the day organized; they also helped students get ready to behave and learn how to interact with others. This corroborates classroom interaction literature that asserts children’s social competence is enhanced when classrooms offer stability, explicit expectations, and supportive adult guidance (Pianta et al., 2012). Recent research on the self-regulatory environment in kindergarten underscores the significance of predictable routines and transition management as classroom strategies that facilitate self-regulation, thereby enhancing children’s engagement in learning and peer interactions (Martin, 2024). These findings align with research that positions self-regulation as a fundamental readiness skill that facilitates children’s adaptation to school and their ongoing participation in classroom activities (Blair, 2014).

Teachers’ intentional use of modeling and guided practice, like teaching kids how to ask nicely or ask for a turn, shows that they are paying attention to how kids should act socially, not just what they should do. This is in line with DepEd’s kindergarten policy, which stresses the importance of creating supportive learning environments and using the right teaching methods to help the whole child grow (DepEd, 2016; DepEd, 2025). The data indicate that routines function as “practice spaces” for social learning, emphasizing that social competence is cultivated through repeated, structured opportunities to engage in prosocial behaviors.

Second, finding highlights observable social development outcomes particularly during group tasks, shared play, and teacher-facilitated conversations. These improved cooperation, turn-taking, verbal expression, empathy, and self-regulation among learners. These outcomes are meaningful because they represent competencies that enable participation in learning and reduce social barriers to engagement. It also aligns with evidence that early social

competence is strongly predictive of long-term educational and life outcomes (Jones et al., 2015). It also reinforces the notion that social development and learning are mutually reinforcing so that children who can regulate emotions, cooperate, and communicate are more likely to engage productively in classroom activities.

Participants notably articulated transitions from nonverbal emotional responses to verbal expression. This corroborates developmental research highlighting that children's capacity to articulate emotions and convey needs in socially acceptable manners is fundamental to socio-emotional competence and classroom adaptation (Denham et al., 2012). The results we saw are also in line with national and global goals. SDG 4.2 clearly states that early childhood development, including socio-emotional development, is an important part of being ready for school and doing well in school later (United Nations, n.d.). In the context of Philippine reforms, enhancing foundational capacities such as well-being and readiness aligns with EDCOM II's emphasis on foundational years and system alignment for the enhancement of early learning (EDCOM II, 2026a).

Thirdly, teachers believed that their actions had a direct impact on social development, which shows how important teachers are as agents of socialization in the classroom. Teachers did not characterize social skills as "automatic" traits; rather, they presented them as competencies necessitating explicit instruction, repetition, and reinforcement. This teacher's point of view is in line with research on social and emotional learning (SEL) that shows that structured, planned approaches to SEL can help students do better in school and behave better (Durlak et al., 2011). The finding also supports research on the quality of classroom processes that shows that the quality of interactions between teachers and students and the use of responsive practices are linked to the development of social skills in children (Hu et al., 2021).

In the same way, teachers' focus on consistency shows that they have a good understanding of how modeling and reinforcement work in the classroom. This aligns with recent studies on teachers' enhancement of children's social-emotional learning (SEL) skills in play-based kindergarten environments, where teacher guidance and interactive strategies are essential for cultivating social competencies (Larsen et al., 2025). The outcome corresponds with DepEd's kindergarten policy focus on the role of teachers in fostering environments that promote children's comprehensive development through suitable strategies and encouraging classroom interactions (DepEd, 2016).

The fourth finding makes it clear that activities that are based on play and interaction are a great way to help kids make friends and be nice to each other, but the depth and frequency of these activities depend on the classroom conditions. Teachers regarded play as the "space" in which children acquire pakikisama, sharing, and cooperation, aligning with early childhood research that indicates play, relationships, and the learning environment collaboratively foster children's social and emotional development (Kirk, 2018). This is very similar to DepEd's kindergarten policy and MATATAG Kindergarten Curriculum Guide, which stress play-based, child-centered methods that help children grow in all areas and have good learning experiences (DepEd, 2016).

Participants also noted that large class sizes, limited time, and different levels of readiness made instruction more directive and focused on getting things done. This aligns with global evidence indicating that structural and organizational factors influence classroom quality and teachers' ability to facilitate meaningful interactive learning (OECD, 2019). EDCOM II's policy direction to strengthen early childhood systems and improve enabling conditions directly addresses these limitations as systemic rather than solely teacher-level concerns (EDCOM II, 2026a; EDCOM II, 2026b). UNICEF's public response to EDCOM II also stresses the need to invest in early childhood foundations and build capacity to fix the learning crisis. This includes fixing problems that make it hard to have high-quality early learning experiences (UNICEF, 2026).

The results indicate that play-based learning serves as both an educational methodology and a social development framework; however, its efficacy is contingent upon time availability, conducive classroom environments, and instructional assistance. Strengthening teacher training in structured play facilitation, safeguarding time for play-based centers, and enhancing enabling conditions are in accordance with SDG 4.2 and national reforms that emphasize foundational learning and learner well-being (UNESCO, 2016; DepEd, 2023; EDCOM II, 2026a).

Conclusion and Implications

This study finds that early childhood teaching methods in kindergarten classrooms are very important for helping children grow socially. Structured routines, clear social rules, and teaching methods that use play were found to help kids learn important social skills like working together, talking to others, being kind, taking turns, and controlling their own behavior. Consistent classroom routines gave students emotional safety and clear behavioral

expectations, which made it easier for them to participate in classroom activities in a calm and cooperative way. These results confirm that social development in early childhood is not accidental but is deliberately fostered through daily instructional practices.

The research further illustrates that educators serve as central agents of social learning, as students' social behaviors are cultivated through consistent modeling, structured practice, and reinforcement integrated within instruction. Notable enhancements in verbal expression, emotional regulation, and peer interaction were particularly pronounced during group tasks and guided play, highlighting the significance of interaction-rich learning environments in fostering socio-emotional development. But the effectiveness of play-based and interactive activities was limited by factors like big class sizes, not enough time for instruction, and students being at different levels of readiness, which often forced teachers to use more direct teaching methods.

These results are very important for policy and practice. Strengthening kindergarten learners' social development requires not only the continued use of developmentally appropriate and play-based instruction, but also enabling classroom conditions that allow such practices to be sustained. According to SDG 4.2, DepEd's MATATAG agenda, and EDCOM II's recommendations, investments in early childhood education should focus on helping teachers improve their skills in social and emotional learning, protecting instructional time for play-based activities, and providing systemic support to lower structural barriers. Aligning classroom practices with national and global education priorities can enhance early childhood education's capacity to foster learners' comprehensive development and preparedness for lifelong learning.

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