



OPEN ACCESS

International Journal of Early Childhood, Special and Inclusive Education

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026 |
<https://www.azalpub.com/index.php/IJECSIE>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Article Info

Received:02/5/2026
Accepted:4-/25/2026
Published:6/18/2026

PLAY-BASED INCLUSION IN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF GAME-BASED TEACHING PRACTICES IN RURAL PHILIPPINE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

¹ **Arnica Rosete Reyes**

Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines
 Cabecera 25 Elementary School
 Correspondence: arnica.reyes@deped.gov.ph

² **Ulysses B. Daquioag**

Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines
 Department of Education
 Correspondence: ulysses.daquioag@deped.gov.ph

Abstract

Play-based learning has emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach in early childhood education, particularly in fostering inclusive and engaging classroom environments. This study explores the implementation of game-based teaching practices in promoting inclusive education among kindergarten learners in a rural Philippine context. Specifically, it examines the lived experiences of teachers in integrating play-based strategies to accommodate diverse learner needs, including varying abilities, developmental levels, and socio-cultural backgrounds. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to capture the depth of teachers' experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving kindergarten teachers from Cabecera 25 Elementary School in the City of Ilagan, Isabela. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized to identify recurring patterns and generate meaningful themes. Findings revealed four major themes: (1) play as a medium for inclusive participation, (2) game-based differentiation for diverse learners, (3) socio-emotional development through collaborative play, and (4) structural and resource-related challenges in implementing play-based pedagogy. Teachers utilized games to foster engagement, participation, and interaction, allowing learners of varying abilities to actively contribute to classroom activities. However, challenges such as limited materials, insufficient training, and time constraints were identified. The study highlights the critical role of play-based pedagogy in achieving inclusive early childhood education. It recommends strengthening teacher training, enhancing resource provision, and reinforcing policy support for play-based learning. The findings contribute to the advancement of inclusive education aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4, emphasizing equitable and quality education for all learners.

Keywords: *play-based learning, inclusive education, kindergarten, game-based pedagogy, Philippines*

*Corresponding author: arnica.reyes@deped.gov.ph

Introduction

Inclusive education in early childhood has gained increasing attention as educators recognize the importance of providing equitable learning opportunities for all children, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or developmental differences. In kindergarten settings, where learners are at a critical stage of cognitive, social, and emotional development, inclusive practices must be developmentally appropriate, engaging, and responsive. One of the most effective approaches in this regard is play-based learning, which aligns with children's natural ways of exploring, understanding, and interacting with the world.

Play-based pedagogy integrates games, interactive activities, and experiential learning into the teaching process, allowing children to learn through active participation. In inclusive classrooms, this approach becomes particularly valuable as it provides multiple entry points for learners with diverse needs. Children who may struggle with traditional instruction often thrive in play-based environments where learning is flexible, collaborative, and enjoyable.

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education promotes developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in kindergarten education, emphasizing play as a central component of learning. However, in rural settings, the implementation of play-based inclusive education is often challenged by limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient teacher training.

Despite these challenges, teachers continue to innovate and adapt their practices to ensure that all learners are included. However, there remains a gap in understanding how game-based teaching practices are experienced and implemented in rural early childhood classrooms. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in Cabecera 25 Elementary School, focusing on how play-based strategies support inclusive education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three key theoretical perspectives:

Play-Based Learning Theory (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978)

Play is a fundamental mechanism for learning in early childhood. Piaget emphasized play as a process of cognitive development, while Vygotsky highlighted its role in social interaction and language development.

Inclusive Education Theory

Inclusive education promotes equitable participation and learning opportunities for all learners, emphasizing the removal of barriers to learning.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2010)

This framework emphasizes the importance of connecting learning to learners' cultural and social contexts, making instruction more meaningful and inclusive.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers implementing play-based inclusive pedagogy in real classroom contexts. The phenomenological approach was particularly appropriate as it enabled the exploration of teachers' personal meanings, perceptions, and reflections regarding their use of game-based strategies to support diverse learners. The research was conducted at Cabecera 25 Elementary School, a rural public school in the City of Ilagan, Isabela, Philippines, where contextual factors such as limited resources and diverse learner needs shape instructional practices. Participants were purposively selected and consisted of kindergarten teachers who had direct experience in integrating play-based teaching strategies within inclusive classroom settings, ensuring the relevance and richness of the data collected. Multiple data collection methods were employed to enhance depth and triangulation, including semi-structured interviews that elicited detailed narratives of teaching experiences, classroom observations that captured actual pedagogical practices and learner engagement, and document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials to examine the alignment between planned and implemented instruction. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, involving systematic processes of familiarization, initial coding, categorization, and the development of overarching themes that reflect recurring patterns in the data.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, established qualitative criteria were strictly observed, including credibility through member checking and prolonged engagement with participants, dependability through the maintenance of a clear and systematic audit trail, confirmability through the triangulation of multiple data sources, and transferability through the provision of thick, contextualized descriptions that allow readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

Results/Findings

Theme 1: Play as a Medium for Inclusive Participation

Teachers consistently highlighted play as a powerful and inclusive medium that encourages active participation among all kindergarten learners, regardless of their abilities, personalities, or developmental levels. In contrast to traditional teacher-centered instruction, play-based activities created a safe, non-threatening, and enjoyable learning environment where learners felt free to express themselves without fear of failure or judgment.

Play allowed children, especially those who were shy, hesitant, or struggling academically, to engage in learning in ways that were natural and meaningful to them. Teachers observed that through games, learners became more motivated, attentive, and willing to participate. The interactive and dynamic nature of play reduced anxiety and increased learners' confidence, making inclusion more attainable in everyday classroom practices.

Responses:

"Kapag laro, lahat gusto sumali kahit mahiyain."

(When it is a game, everyone wants to participate, even shy learners.)

"Mas active sila kapag may laro kaysa lecture."

(They are more active during games than during lectures.)

"Yung tahimik na bata, nagsasalita at nakikilahok kapag may laro."

(The quiet child starts to speak and participate when there is a game.)

"Hindi sila natatakot magkamali kasi parang nag-eeenjoy lang sila."

(They are not afraid to make mistakes because they feel like they are just enjoying.)

"Napapansin ko na kahit yung nahihirapan, sumasabay kapag may laro."

(I notice that even those who struggle are able to keep up during games.)

The findings demonstrate that play serves as an effective equalizer in inclusive classrooms by minimizing barriers to participation. Through play, learners engage in learning experiences that are less rigid and more accommodating of individual differences. This supports the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize participation, engagement, and accessibility for all learners.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivist view that learning occurs through interaction and meaningful engagement. Play-based environments create opportunities for learners to actively construct knowledge while interacting with peers. Moreover, the reduction of performance pressure in play contexts allows learners to take risks and explore learning without fear, which is essential in inclusive settings.

Theme 2: Game-Based Differentiation for Diverse Learners

Teachers emphasized that game-based activities naturally lend themselves to differentiated instruction. By modifying game mechanics, rules, materials, and expected outputs, teachers were able to cater to the diverse abilities and developmental levels of learners. Differentiation was embedded in the design of the games, allowing learners to participate at their own level of readiness.

Teachers described how they created multiple versions of a game, adjusted levels of difficulty, and provided varying degrees of support to ensure that all learners could meaningfully engage. This flexibility allowed teachers to simultaneously address the needs of fast learners, average learners, and those requiring additional support within the same activity.

Responses:

“Iba-iba ang mechanics depende sa level ng bata.”

(The mechanics vary depending on the child’s level.)

“May easy at challenging version ng laro.”

(There are easy and challenging versions of the game.)

“Yung iba may guide, yung iba kaya na mag-isa.”

(Some are given guidance, while others can do it independently.)

“Pinapadali ko muna sa iba tapos unti-unting pinapahirap.”

(I simplify it first for some, then gradually increase the difficulty.)

“Kahit iba-iba ang level nila, lahat nakakasali sa laro.”

(Even if their levels are different, everyone can participate in the game.)

These findings affirm that game-based learning provides a natural platform for differentiation, making it highly compatible with inclusive education. Unlike traditional instruction, which often requires separate activities for different learners, games can be easily modified within a single framework to accommodate varying needs.

This aligns with differentiated instruction theory, which emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching strategies to meet learners’ readiness, interests, and profiles. In this context, teachers demonstrated pedagogical competence by designing flexible learning experiences that ensured equitable participation. Furthermore, the use of differentiated game-based strategies reflects an inclusive mindset, where diversity is not seen as a challenge but as an opportunity to create varied and engaging learning experiences.

Theme 3: Socio-Emotional Development through Collaborative Play

Teachers observed that play-based activities significantly contributed to the socio-emotional development of learners. Through collaborative games, learners developed essential social skills such as cooperation, patience, empathy, and communication. Play created opportunities for interaction, allowing learners to build relationships and develop a sense of belonging within the classroom.

Teachers emphasized that group-based games encouraged learners to work together, share ideas, and support one another. These interactions fostered positive social behaviors and helped learners develop emotional regulation, particularly in managing winning and losing situations.

Responses:

“Natututo silang maghintay at makisama.”

(They learn to wait and cooperate.)

“Mas nagiging close ang mga bata kapag naglalaro.”

(Children become closer when they play.)

“Natututo silang mag-share at tumulong sa iba.”

(They learn to share and help others.)

“Kahit nag-aaway minsan, natututo silang mag-sorry at mag-ayos.”

(Even when they argue, they learn to apologize and fix things.)

“Nagiging confident sila kapag kasama ang mga kaklase nila sa laro.”

(They become more confident when playing with their classmates.)

The findings highlight the critical role of play in fostering holistic development, particularly in the socio-emotional domain. This supports the view that early childhood education should not focus solely on academic outcomes but also on the development of interpersonal and emotional competencies.

From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with Vygotsky’s emphasis on social interaction as a key driver of learning and development. Collaborative play provides a context where learners co-construct knowledge while developing

essential life skills.

In inclusive classrooms, socio-emotional development is particularly important as it promotes acceptance, empathy, and respect for diversity. Play-based learning creates an environment where differences are normalized and valued, thereby strengthening inclusive practices.

Theme 4: Structural and Resource-Related Challenges

Despite the effectiveness of play-based inclusive practices, teachers identified several structural and resource-related challenges that hinder their consistent implementation. These challenges included a lack of instructional materials, limited classroom space, insufficient training in play-based and inclusive pedagogy, and time constraints due to curriculum demands.

Teachers expressed that while they are willing to implement game-based strategies, the absence of adequate support systems often limits their ability to sustain such practices. In many cases, teachers relied on their own creativity and personal resources to design and implement games.

Responses:

“Kulang ang materials kaya minsan hindi natutuloy ang laro.”

(Lack of materials sometimes prevents games from happening.)

“Hindi lahat ng teacher trained sa game-based teaching.”

(Not all teachers are trained in game-based teaching.)

“Maliit ang classroom kaya mahirap maglaro minsan.”

(The classroom is small, so it is sometimes difficult to conduct games.)

“Kami ang gumagawa ng paraan kahit kulang ang support.”

(We are the ones finding ways despite the lack of support.)

“Maraming kailangan tapusin kaya minsan kulang sa oras para sa laro.”

(There are many tasks to complete, so sometimes there is not enough time for games.)

These findings reveal that while play-based inclusive education is pedagogically effective, its sustainability is significantly influenced by systemic and institutional factors. The lack of resources and training indicates a gap between educational policy and classroom practice.

This aligns with broader research in developing contexts, where teachers often face challenges related to limited infrastructure, insufficient professional development, and heavy workload. The findings underscore the need for stronger policy implementation, increased funding, and targeted training programs to support teachers in delivering inclusive, play-based education.

Moreover, while teacher resilience and creativity are commendable, relying solely on individual effort is not sustainable. Systemic interventions are necessary to ensure that inclusive and play-based practices are consistently and effectively implemented across classrooms.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings reveal that play-based pedagogy serves as a powerful tool for promoting inclusive education in kindergarten classrooms. Through play, teachers are able to facilitate participation, differentiate instruction, and support socio-emotional development. However, the successful implementation of these practices is influenced by both teacher competence and systemic support. While teachers demonstrate adaptability and innovation, structural challenges highlight the need for institutional and policy-level interventions to sustain inclusive early childhood education.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that play-based pedagogy is a powerful tool for promoting inclusive education in kindergarten classrooms. Through games, teachers are able to engage diverse learners, foster collaboration, and support holistic development. However, the success of play-based inclusion depends on teacher competence, resource availability, and institutional support.

Recommendations

- Strengthen training on play-based and inclusive pedagogy
- Provide adequate instructional materials
- Enhance institutional support
- Promote culturally responsive teaching
- Conduct further mixed-methods research

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching*. Teachers College Press.
- Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report*.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.