TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES ON PLAY-BASED LEARNING ACTIVITIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN: BASIS FOR AN ACTION PLAN

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored kindergarten teachers' lived experiences regarding play-based learning activities and their influence on the development of social skills among kindergarten children. Ten kindergarten teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that play-based learning serves as an effective pedagogical approach that promotes communication, cooperation, empathy, problem-solving, and conflict resolution among children. Teachers emphasized the importance of intentional classroom design, scaffolding strategies, collaborative play, and psychologically safe learning environments. The study further proposed an action plan to strengthen the implementation of play-based learning strategies in kindergarten classrooms. The findings suggest that carefully planned and teacher-supported play experiences significantly contribute to children's social skill development.

Keywords: play-based learning, kindergarten, social skills, scaffolding, social interaction, early childhood education

Introduction

In early childhood education, play-based learning significantly fosters kindergarten children's essential social skills. Through interactive, meaningful activities, children engage in a pedagogical approach crucial to social development. Educators play a vital role in facilitating these learning experiences (Bogiannidis et al., 2023). Understanding educators' perceptions of their lived experiences with play-based learning is valuable for effective implementation. Children learn fundamental skills, such as cooperation, negotiation, and empathy, through peer interactions in play, laying the foundation for future social interactions (Bogiannidis et al., 2023). Teachers' perspectives illuminate the applications and challenges they encounter in the classroom.

This thesis aims to explore these lived experiences in greater depth, examining how play-based learning influences kindergarten social growth. By analyzing qualitative data from educators, this study aims to inform an action plan to enhance the implementation of play-based learning strategies in early childhood settings.

The early years of childhood are critical for the development of social skills, which are foundational for positive relationships and overall well-being. During this sensitive stage, children engage in various forms of play, using it to learn and socialize.

Play-based learning, centered around play as a fundamental aspect of education, has been shown to yield significant gains in social skills among kindergarten-aged children (Bogiannidis et al., 2023). Educators facilitate learning experiences that foster social skills while guiding children in navigating social situations (Bogiannidis et al., 2023).

Research indicates that children develop cognitive, fine-motor, and gross-motor skills in environments where play is age-appropriate. The social skills learned are critical for fostering a positive classroom community, including cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution. Thus, teachers' experiences with play-based activities provide rich, descriptive accounts of methods and strategies that support social development for young learners.

The study reveals both positive experiences, in which educators observe children enjoying play, and negative experiences, in which challenges arise in promoting social skill development. This research aims to deepen understanding of play in teaching and social skill development during early childhood through teachers' lived experiences, thereby informing an action plan to enhance effective practices in kindergarten contexts.

Overall, this literature review sets the stage for exploring the intersections between play-based learning and social skill development, informing and enhancing valuable teaching methods for kindergarten children.

Significance of the Study

The implications of this study are meaningful to many stakeholders: Preservice and Early Career Teachers. The study revealed the relationship between their lived experiences and how these experiences inform their current teaching philosophies and actions in play-based learning. Through self-reflection on their lived experiences, preservice and early-career teachers identified areas for growth to enhance their practice of play-based learning when introducing kids to social skills.

School Administrators: The findings helped school site administrators realize the significance of supporting teachers when using play-based learning. The study provided information to further administrators' understanding of how to provide current and future teachers with the resources and professional learning to develop their skills in teaching play-based learning activities to kids.

Kindergarten Children: The study aims to examine the impact of play-based learning on children's social skills. One of the purposes of the study is to influence pedagogical practices that improve the educational experience for the children. If kindergarten children develop better social skills, they will also improve their experiences with peers, their communication skills, and their emotional development. For kindergarten children, developing social skills is a key part of their learning. Integrating play-based learning for children is ultimately a foundation for future learning.

Parents and Guardians: The findings can inform parents and guardians about how their children's social skills development is supported through play-based learning. Parents and guardians can better understand how to engage with their children at home to support the learning taking place in kindergarten further.

Future Researchers: The findings identified gaps in the current literature around play-based learning and social skills development. The study provided initial research for future researchers to build on, leading to new and interesting research on pedagogical practices and play in early child development and learning.

Statement of the Problem

Central Question:

This phenomenological study is centered on the primary question: What is the essence of teachers' lived experiences regarding the implementation of play-based learning activities and their impact on the development of social skills in kindergarten children?

Corollary Questions

This study explores teachers' lived experiences with the implementation of play-based learning activities and their influence on the development of social skills in kindergarten children.

Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do the teachers describe their lived experiences with play-based learning in kindergarten instruction?
2. What emerging theme can be derived from experiences?
3. What kind of play activities do kindergarten teachers use?

4.Based on the study's findings, what Action Plan: Enhancing Kindergarten Social Competency Through Play-Based Learning may be proposed?

Methodology

This chapter provided the research methodology utilized in the study. It addressed the research design, participants, research location, data collection tools, data collection process, and data analysis. The selected qualitative approach allows for an in-depth investigation of the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants related to play-

based learning interventions and the impact of those interventions on psychomotor development in daycare learners.

Research Design

This research study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because this study aimed to understand and describe kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in practice with play-based learning activities and their perceived impact on children's social skill development. In contrast to quantitative methods that examine the impact and measurement of variables, phenomenology emphasized understanding the essence and meaning of experiences through the perspective of the participants' interpretations.

Using a phenomenological research design, this study explored kindergarten teachers' interpretations, practices, and reflections on play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom. This study provided an opportunity to document rich descriptions of how play-based learning activities shaped children's ability to communicate, cooperate, work as a team, and resolve conflicts.

The qualitative construct of this phenomenological study also allowed the use of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews to gather data while exploring the themes of teaching practices and social skill development. The findings, specifically from a qualitative phenomenological research design, will provide a

strong platform for developing a practical action plan to improve play-based learning strategies for the social growth and development of kindergarten learners.

Selection of Co-Participants

The co-participants in this study were licensed kindergarten teachers who were directly involved in implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. Purposeful sampling ensured that the individuals selected had lived experience with the phenomenon being explored. By focusing on teachers who have lived experience with play-based learning strategies, the study revealed rich accounts of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and challenges with these strategies, as well as the implications and impact of these activities on the development of kindergarten children's social skills.

The co-participants must meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) currently a kindergarten teacher, (b) 2 or more years' experience of teaching young children, (c) direct involvement in facilitating play-based learning activities, and (d) voluntarily participating in the study. Participants who did not meet these qualifications were excluded from the research to ensure they had appropriate and relevant experience.

Ten kindergarten teachers from five schools were invited to participate in this study. This number is acceptable for phenomenological research, as it allows sufficient variation while ensuring there is sufficient information to engage with their lived experiences. Recruitment will be coordinated with school administrators initially, followed by personal invitations to the identified prospective co-participants. Each co-

participant was provided sufficient information about the study's purpose, procedures, ethical safeguards, and so on to make informed choices about their potential participation.

Generation of Data

The "Experiences of kindergarten Teachers on Play-Based Learning Activities and the Development of Social Skills" guide questions will serve as the main instrument for this study. The guide questions were used to guide the interview process and to gain a more detailed understanding of kindergarten teachers' lived experiences with play-based learning and their perceptions of its impact on children's social skill development.

The guide included five main open-ended questions derived from the literature and related research. These questions were created to record authentic experiences while being neutral and unbiased. The questions aim to explore teachers' practices, reflections, and understandings of how play-based learning supports children's communication, cooperation, teamwork, and conflict resolution.

In addition to the guide questions, basic demographic data (age, gender, years of teaching experience, school assignment) were collected from the co-participants.

Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation of Data

This chapter presents the findings of the study regarding teachers' lived experiences with play-based learning (PBL) activities and their impact on the development of social skills in kindergarten. The data, derived from participant interview transcripts and thematic analysis, are organized into key themes that illuminate how educators perceive, implement, and facilitate play as a vehicle for social growth.

Presentation of Data

The study explores the lived experiences of teachers implementing Play-Based Learning (PBL) in early childhood education. Far from being just a recreational break, play-based learning represents a transformative shift where play is repositioned as a fundamental pedagogical medium. The findings established through participant interviews reveal a fundamental change in the educator's identity - a transition from being a director of knowledge to a facilitator and observer of discovery.

1. Teachers' Lived Experiences in Play-Based Learning

The responses to the interview established the Participant-Teachers' lived experiences in Play-Based Learning. Two emerging themes were discovered in the study: spontaneous communicative problem-solving and intentional environmental design. The following terms were covered comprehensively below:

1.1 Spontaneous Communicative Problem-Solving. **This theme is defined as the process where children independently navigate social friction or logistical hurdles during play using verbal and non-verbal negotiation.**

Play serves as an organic platform where communicative barriers are lowered, allowing for spontaneous collaborative problem-solving. According to the statement of Participant 3: *"There's this kid in my class, she is new and shy, so, I paired her to a stronger kid in my class, and every lesson, I noticed that she is improving her confidence because her pair is very talkative in a good way."* (P3)

Teachers describe their lived experiences as a transition from being directors of learning to facilitators and observers. They view play as the primary vehicle for education rather than a break from it. Participant 8 reports that implementing play-based learning requires intentionality, where they must carefully curate the environment to do half the teaching.

1.2 Intentional Environment Design. This theme is defined as the deliberate and strategic curation of the physical classroom space and materials to act as a catalyst for social interaction and learning. Intentional environment design and teacher modeling are catalysts for developing collaborative habits. Participant 8 stated that:

> *"I support this by designing play corners that encourage group interaction and by modelling collaborative language such as 'Can I join?' or 'Let's do it together.'"* (P8)

Some participants highlighted the emotional rewards of seeing shy (P3, P6, P10) or alone (P1) children achieve breakthroughs in confidence and social integration through peer-mediated play.

Recent literature emphasizes that for shared problem-solving to be effective, it often requires scaffolding. This aligns with Bruner's theories, where a more knowledgeable peer

Participant 8 highlights the importance of the teacher's role in **modelling collaborative language**. According to **Bustamante *et al.* (2022)**, while play is natural, high-quality collaboration

often requires **guided play** where adults scaffold the experience by designing the environment and prompting social interactions. This ensures that play remains inclusive and that children develop the vocabulary necessary to join and maintain group activities. Participants 2 and 8 both mention that the **environment often does half the teaching**.

This aligns with the concept of the environment as the **third teacher.** *Bustamante et al.* (2022) argue that intentional design (*e.g.* choosing materials that **require** cooperation) naturally triggers the development of social skills without the need for constant verbal instruction.

Effective play requires a **carefully curated** environment and intentional modeling of social scripts by the teacher. As stated by Participant 2:

"Set up the environment to encourage interaction... Model the social language you want to hear... Document and reflect... Remember that

play is learning…. The environment often does half the teaching." (P2)

The transition from traditional pedagogy to play-based learning represents a fundamental shift in the teacher's identity from a **director** of knowledge to a **facilitator** of discovery. By embracing the concept of the environment as the third teacher, educators can strategically curate spaces that trigger cooperation and social integration without relying on constant verbal instruction. This approach utilizes guided play to bridge the gap between natural exploration and academic rigor - through intentional scaffolding and the modeling of collaborative language, teachers support students within their ZPD. Ultimately, when the environment is designed to do **half the teaching,**

it creates an inclusive landscape where even the most isolated learners can achieve significant breakthroughs in confidence and peer-mediated social skills.

2. Emerging Themes Derived from Participant-Teachers Experiences

The emerging themes derived from the participants' experiences underscore a transformative shift in early childhood education, where play is repositioned from a recreational interval to a fundamental pedagogical medium.

2. Play as a Fundamental Pedagogical Medium. It is defined as an educational approach where play is not viewed as a recreational break or a secondary activity, but as the primary vehicle and essential method through which learning occurs.

Teachers in this study define play not merely as a recreational break but as the primary method through which children engage with the world. This perspective views play as a fundamental pedagogical medium, aligning with Social Constructivist Theory, which suggests that active engagement is the catalyst for learning. Participant 1 emphasized that play is a fundamental means of learning, a sentiment supported by the literature, which holds that play is essential for children to develop a deeper understanding of their surroundings.

This theme views play not as a break from learning, but as the primary vehicle for it. Participant 1 expressed: *"An educational approach that emphasizes the importance of play as a fundamental means through which children learn."* (P1)

Participants as teachers define play as the **fundamental means** or **method** of learning. This aligns with the Social Constructivist Theory which posits that children learn best through

active engagement. Literature supports this by stating that play is essential for developing a deeper understanding of surroundings. play-based learning is a critical pedagogical practice that fosters conditions for exploration and discovery (Weisberg *et al.*, 2020).

Teachers should weave playful interactions into all aspects of the school day to normalize social exploration. Participant 1 also argued: *"Create a safe and supportive environment... **integrate play** into daily routines: find ways to incorporate play throughout the day, not just during designated playtime."* (P10)

Collaboration is an inherent requirement of play, success is contingent upon mutual cooperation. In which Participant 2 agreed saying:

> *"**Play-based learning** naturally fosters collaboration because it creates situations where children need each other to make the play successful."* (P2) *"Play is not separate from learning… it is the method for developing key skills... developing foundational social skills."* (P2)

Play is seen as a holistic method where academic and social skills are intertwined. Many participants mentioned purposeful or guided play. Guided play is one of the most effective forms of play-based learning because it allows the teacher to communicate learning intentions while still respecting the child's agency (Pyle & Alaca, 2020). This is specifically used to target social skills like turn-taking and empathy. Research defines PBL as a conduit for bridging academic development with social competency (Skene *et al*., 2019).

The objectives listed by teachers (social, language, cognitive, physical) reflect a holistic view of the child. Denham *et al*., (2020) supports this by asserting that play yields significant gains in social skills, which are integral to academic success and lifelong resilience.

The participants (P1, P2, P3) consistently highlight that play creates a natural need for collaboration. This aligns with the research by Parker *et al.* (2022), who argue that play-based pedagogies are essential for developing social-emotional competencies because they require children to navigate the tension between individual desires and

group goals. When children build a zoo or a castle together, they transition from parallel play to cooperative play, which is a critical developmental milestone in early childhood.

Finally, Participant 3 stated:

*"Trust the **power of play** and should not feel pressured to control every moment."* (P3) Educators must move away from rigid directorship and trust in the natural developmental trajectory of play. The participants define play as a fundamental pedagogical medium, transitioning from viewing it as a recreational interval to recognizing it as the primary vehicle for cognitive and social-emotional development. Grounded in Social Constructivist Theory, this approach posits that active engagement serves as the essential catalyst for children to construct a deeper understanding of their surroundings and navigate the transition from parallel to cooperative play. By weaving playful interactions throughout the daily routine and fostering a **social laboratory** where success is contingent upon mutual cooperation, educators move away from rigid directorship toward a model of **pedagogical de-centering**. This shift aligns with contemporary research (Parker *et al.*, 2022; Weisberg *et al.*, 2020) asserting that intentional play-based environments are critical for developing essential social competencies and resolving the inherent tension between individual desires and collective goals.

2.2 *Intentional Pedagogical and Environmental Design.* It is defined as the deliberate orchestration of the physical classroom space and the teacher's instructional strategies to act as a catalyst for social growth. A recurring theme in the participants' experiences is the necessity of intentionality in both the classroom environment and the design of

activities. This theme emphasizes that while play appears spontaneous, the teacher organizes it to meet specific standards. Participant 3 expressed:

*"Every element is **purposefully** designed to meet developmental and academic goals... it feels like play, but it's intentional."* (P3)

Play-based learning is a critical pedagogical practice that fosters conditions for exploration while bolstering social-emotional development through teacher intent (Weisberg *et al*., 2020). The teachers' response (P3) emphasize that play is **purposeful**. This theme aligns with the theoretical framework that play-based learning is a conduit for bridging academic development with social competency. It suggests that the teacher's role is not passive but involves the careful selection of materials to trigger specific social interactions (Skene *et al.,* 2019). According to Participant 8:

"***Plan** your environments and materials with clear social goals in mind... Establish clear routines and expectations."* (P8)

Clear boundaries and goal-oriented setups provide the safety net children need to engage in complex social play. Participants 3 and 8 highlight scaffolding the language. Danniels and Pyle (2023) support this, noting that providing social tools or scripts helps children, especially those with social delays, navigate entry into group play and sustain complex interactions.

The data indicate that successful play-based learning is not synonymous with free-for-all play. Instead, it requires a high degree of **intentional pedagogical and**

environmental design By designing environments that require partnership (*e.g.* providing limited materials to encourage sharing or setting up a market simulation [**P1, P9**]), teachers create a **functional necessity** for social interaction. Research by Bustamante *et al.* (2022) supports this, arguing that intentional design naturally triggers social skill development without the constant need for verbal instruction.

2.3 *Scaffolding and the Continuum of Teacher Roles.* It is defined the fluid and intentional transition of the educator's involvement, moving from direct guidance to reflective observation to support a child's social-emotional growth.

According to Participant 10:

> *"Interactions are very active and move beyond just academic learning to real-life social problem-solving... copying the positive language and behaviors of their friends... they are learning to read non-verbal cues."* (P10) Play acts as a critical developmental space for peer modeling, empathy, and reading social nuances.

Participant 10's observation about non-verbal cues is supported by Hassinger-Das *et al.* (2023), who found that the unstructured nature of play requires children to develop heightened sensitivity to body language and tone, skills that are foundational for navigating complex real-world social environments.

Participant 10 highlights children copying positive language and showing emotional support. Wong and Low (2023) argue that play-based environments facilitate prosocial modeling, where children learn empathy not through direct instruction, but by

observing and imitating the supportive behaviors of their peers in high-stakes (to them) play situations.

Participant 4 stated:

> *"Plan purposeful play activities that encourage sharing, turn-taking, and communication... observe and guide children during play." (P4)*

Social growth is optimized when play is designed with specific social objectives and supportive teacher oversight (P4). In addition, Participant 4 added:

> *"Observe before intervening… if a small argument breaks out over a toy, wait 30 seconds... ask 'I wonder' questions." (P7)*

Teachers should prioritize observation (*e.g.* 30 seconds) over immediate interference to allow children to practice self-regulation.

Participant 7 **stress observing before intervening**. Pyle *et al.* (2022) describe this as the continuum of play-based learning, where teachers must balance free play with guided play to support social-emotional learning without hijacking the child's agency. By waiting 30 seconds (as suggested by Participant 7), teachers allow children to utilize their own conflict-resolution skills.

Furthermore, According to Participant 10:

"Play Rules… encourages 'peer-teaching,' where students who are more confident in English naturally help their friends... achieve more as a team than they can alone…. Seeing her (shy kid) transition from silent play to trying her best to use English sentences

to tell her friend 'Put the lion here!' was a major breakthrough in both her confidence and her social integration." (P10)

Collaborative play encourages a hierarchical yet supportive dynamic where advanced peers scaffold the learning of others, fostering community success. Play pushes children to move beyond isolation and realize the benefits of teamwork, especially in language acquisition. Meaningful play activities serve as a foundation for positive relationships and overall well-being. This theme captures **peer-teaching** where children act as **mentors to one another.**

This synergy allows the group to **achieve more than they can alone**. Peer interactions during play form the fundamental basis for all future socialization and **empathy** development (Bogiannidis *et al*., 2023). This aligns with the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**, where a child can achieve more complex tasks through the assistance of more capable peers or adults as posited by Vygotsky (1978) and cited by Zamkowska & Koczaaska (2025). Teachers facilitate learning by systematically adjusting support - increasing it when a child struggles and withdrawing it as they gain mastery - thereby allowing them to perform tasks they could not achieve alone.

Moreover, Participant 7 expressed:

"A lecture on 'sharing' is boring, but a game where they must share to win is a powerful lesson." (P7) Practical experience in play is more effective than direct instruction for **social values**. Play-based learning is a conduit for bridging academic development with social competency (Skene *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, Participant 4 added:

"Purposeful, guided play... to support social and emotional development." (P4)

Teachers serve as guides within a structured environment. Literature highlights guided play as a balance between student agency and teacher support to achieve specific social-emotional outcomes (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Similarly, Participant 7 expressed:

It is how children learn through playing, exploring, experimenting, pretend, move, play, talk and make choices… It is a natural way of guiding a child to learn through the environment created for them." (P7)

The classroom environment acts as a teacher. Literature notes that thoughtful preparation of play environments with diverse materials allows for richer interactions (Pyle & Alaca, 2020). Finally, Participant 8 stated:

"The activity stays child-led, but the learning goals, language development, and social interaction are always ***intentional****."* (P8)

This involves the teacher observing and providing social tools or language prompts without taking over the play. According to Pyle & Danniels (2017), guided play provides a balance of student agency and teacher support, communicating learning intentions while supporting children as they enter play. This theme captures the child-led but teacher-supported nature of the activities. By setting up flexible centers, teachers allow for autonomy, which the literature identifies as a key driver of intrinsic motivation. Scaffolding occurs when the teacher models social language (e.g., "Can I join?") to help children navigate peer conflict (Bogiannidis *et al.*, 2023).

2.4 *Social Simulation and Real-World Microcosms.* It is defined as a pedagogical approach where the classroom environment is transformed into a miniature version of society to allow children to practice complex human interactions.

The participants described their roles as moving along a continuum from direct intervention to reflective observation. Participant 1 expressed:

> *"Vendors set up their stalls... customers (children) visit different stalls... practice social interactions by asking questions."* (P1)

This activity creates a social microcosm where children must follow social scripts and norms. According to Skene *et al*. (2019), role-play allows students to acquire vital social skills in environments that mimic real-life interactions, facilitating the practice of negotiation and communication. This theme highlights activities that simulate real-world social structures. When children act as vendors or customers, they are practicing social competence, which involves navigating the complexities of human interaction. These authentic opportunities allow children to practice expressing themselves in a safe, low-stakes environment (Pyle & Alaca, 2020).

Participant 1 also added:

> *"The classroom is transformed into a market... allows them (child) to practice various social interactions… greeting customers, negotiating prices… asking questions.*" (P1)

This means that creating simulated social worlds where children adopt roles to practice real-life norms. According to Skene *et al.*, (2019), role-play allows students to acquire social skills in environments that mimic real-life interactions, facilitating the practice of negotiation and communication.

This theme encompasses activities like the **market** or **role-play centers**. These activities are vital because they provide authentic opportunities for children **to practice social norms**. Play-based learning acts as a conduit for bridging academic development with social competency by placing children in scenarios where communication has a functional purpose.

Participants 6 and 7 agree stating:

> *"During* play-based learning *activities… children often interact by brainstorming… taking turns… negotiating roles… in a block-building activity…"* (P6) *"The bridge is falling! We need more big blocks!" This builds teamwork and collective thinking."* (P7)

The shared problems mentioned by Participants 6 and 7 (*e.g.* a falling bridge) serve as catalysts for what Zosh *et al.* (2022) define as iterative play. This type of interaction fosters collective persistence, where the group's shared goal motivates individual children to stay engaged longer (group) than they would in isolation. Furthermore, a successful play environment provides enough structure to feel safe but enough freedom to allow for **organic social discovery**, Participants 6 and 1 both stated:

> *"Create a balanced environment where play is structured yet flexible, allowing for spontaneous interactions."* (P6)

"Play provides a natural context for children to interact, allowing them to develop social skills in an organic way." (P1)

Play creates a low-pressure environment where social norms are practiced naturally.

play-based learning yields significant gains in social skills as children engage in a pedagogical approach crucial for social development (Bogiannidis *et al.*, 2023).

This theme emphasizes that play-based learning removes the forced nature of social instruction. Teachers feel that play provides an organic context where interaction happens without artificial pressure. This approach is crucial because it allows children to practice cooperation and negotiation in a way that mimics real-world interactions.

Moreover, Participant 4 recalled:

"One successful experience was using role-play… at first, some children struggled to take turns… they became more confident in expressing their needs and cooperating with others…. children showed better social skills and engagement in learning." (P4).

The statement specifically highlights how structured play serves as a catalyst for socio-emotional and cognitive growth. It illustrates a transition from egocentric play (struggling to take turns) to collaborative learning (cooperation and confidence). Negotiation in play (reciprocal interaction) occurs where children cultivate prosocial patterns. By observing and then mimicking the successful collaboration of others, they internalize social The statement (P4) specifically highlights how structured play serves as

a catalyst for socio-emotional and cognitive growth. It illustrates a transition from egocentric play (struggling to take turns) to collaborative learning (cooperation and confidence).

Negotiation in play (reciprocal interaction) occurs where children cultivate prosocial patterns. By observing and then mimicking the successful collaboration of others, they internalize social norms such as empathy and teamwork (SHS Web of Conferences, 2025).

Structured play environments allow children to observe democratic negotiation. Resolving toy-sharing disagreements serves as a real-world application of observed peer behaviors, reducing classroom conflict (RSIS International, 2025).

Moreover, Participant 6 added: *"Basically: Play is a child's **'work**.'... figuring out how things **work**."* (P6) This classic pedagogical view frames play as the serious business of childhood. According to Skene *et al.* (2019) through this **work** children acquire vital social skills in environments that mimic real-life interactions. Participant 2 stated:

> *"Play is one of the most effective and natural tools... children encounter real, authentic social situations… taking turns, negotiating roles, solving disagreements."* (P2)

Teachers value play for providing real-life opportunities to practice negotiation. Role play and dramatic play nurture empathy and compassion as children explore different perspectives and practice navigating social interactions (Pyle & Alaca, 2020). Teachers view play-based learning as an authentic tool because it presents **real social dilemmas**, such as who gets to be the cashier or how to share a limited number of blocks.

The literature confirms that role-play allows children to practice negotiation and communication which are vital social skills (Skene *et al.*, 2019). Participant 8 also expressed the advantages:

> *"Boost students' confidence and independence as well as to develop their critical thinking."* (P8)

Play builds the child's sense of self. Pyle and Alaca (2020) play-based approaches provide authentic opportunities to practice navigating social interactions, thereby building social competence. In terms of alignment, Participant 1 expressed:

> *"Shared Goals… when engaged in play, children often work toward common objectives... collaborative play requires children to express their ideas, listen to others, and* ***negotiate*** *roles."* (P1)

Play provides a platform for children to align their intentions and practice the mechanics of **dialogue**.

Participants 1, 4, and 10 emphasize that play **forces** children to negotiate and express ideas. Zosh *et al.* (2023) support this, stating that **joyful, iterative, and socially interactive** play environments provide the optimal conditions for language acquisition and social negotiation. The act of **negotiating roles** (*e.g.*, who plays the vet vs. the dog) allows children to practice empathy and perspective-taking, which are foundational for lifelong collaboration.

Finally, Physical movement and peer observation become the primary tools for social bonding and language learning as Participants 10 observed:

" Instead of flashcards… use their bodies to represent vocabulary… turns a vocabulary lesson into a social game where they must observe their peers closely and communicate." (P10)

Physical movement and peer observation become the primary tools for social bonding and language learning. Interactive and meaningful activities **engage** children and serve as a foundation for positive relationships and overall well-being (Bogiannidis *et al.*, 2023).

Role-play acts as a **conduit** for bridging academic development with social competency. By mimicking real-world social structures, children internalize social scripts and perspective-taking.

2.5 *Affective Engagement and Psychological Safety.* It is defined the creation of a high-motivation, low-anxiety classroom climate where young learners feel emotionally secure enough to take social risks and immerse themselves in learning.

The final theme centers on the **internal drive** and **intrinsic motivation** of the child. Participants observed that children learn best when they are motivated and enjoying the process. Creating a **low-affective filter** environment - where children feel safe to take risks and fail without fear - is seen as essential for social-emotional growth.

Participant 10 advised: *"Don't be afraid of the noise. noise usually means they are engaged... social skills take longer to learn than vocabulary."* (P10)

Educators must practice patience and recognize that social competence is a long-term developmental process. Participant 10's advice to **not be afraid of the noise** is echoed by **Yu *et al*. (2023)**, who found that **productive noise** in play-based classrooms is a sign of

high engagement and active negotiation, which are key indicators of social-emotional growth.

Motivation is key to internalizing social lessons and children learn best when they enjoy the process. According to Participant 3:

> "*My kids learn best when they are engaged and motivated while playing."* (P3)

Meaningful and enjoyable activities engage children and serve as a foundation for positive relationships and overall well-being. This theme captures the teacher's belief that **fun** is the engine of learning. When children are motivated and engaged, they are more receptive to social lessons like **empathy** and sharing. Enjoyable play experiences are foundational for building positive relationships and long-term resilience (Bogiannidis *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, Participants 10 and 7 stated:

> *"Play is the most natural laboratory for social development... forces children to move beyond just words. They learn non-verbal cues, empathy, and negotiation."* (P10)

> *"* play-based learning *forces kids to collaborate because most play requires a partner to function... If children want to build a 'tall castle'... they quickly realize they need more hands."*

(P7)Play is a **laboratory** where children learn complex skills like reading non-verbal cues. Participant 10 describes play as a **laboratory** where children learn

non-verbal cues and **empathy**. This highlights that play is more than just fun; it is a complex developmental site. Literature supports this by stating that play-based learning fosters exploration and discovery while bolstering the multifaceted aspects of social-emotional growth (Weisberg *et al*., 2020). In terms of multisensory holistic learning (sensory engagement), Participants 5 expressed:

> *"Think of activities that the students could use cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains... the more senses that the learners are involved the more the better the learning."* (P5)

Engaging multiple domains of development simultaneously enhances the depth and retention of social learning. Moreover, Participants 5 stated:

> *"* play-based learning *... gives children natural, real-life opportunities to practice sharing... learn empathy, cooperation, and self-control."* (P4) Play serves as a **practice ground** for self-control and communal living (P4). Play-based interventions improve self-regulation and **collaboration** abilities compared to traditional teacher-led environments (Pyle & Danniels, 2019).

Moreover, in terms of goal-oriented collective purpose, the alignment of children's efforts toward a unified objective in play acts as a catalyst for collective action and group cohesion. Participant 1 remembered:

"One notable success story involved… Emma, who initially struggled with social interactions… often played alone… difficult to join in group activities… To

address this, we introduced a ***Friendship Circle…*** *which involved cooperative games focused on sharing and teamwork."* (P1)

This theme suggests that collaboration in kindergarten is most effective when it is anchored in a common objective, such as building a zoo or market. The literature highlights that when play is purposeful, it moves from solitary activity to a pedagogical medium that fosters cooperation and negotiation. Play activities create a shared reality where cooperation is the only means to achieve an end. Peer interactions during these shared goals form the fundamental basis for future social interactions (Bogiannidis *et al.*, 2023). Vygotsky (1978) and cited by Zamkowska & Koczaaska (2025) posited that play creates a zone of proximal development where collective goals push children to function beyond their individual capacities.

Cultivating classroom community is also important. Play serves as the foundation for creating a supportive and cohesive classroom culture. According to Participant 6:

> *"As they play, they learn to communicate, compromise, and support each other, which helps build a sense of community and teamwork."* (P6)
>
> Perspective-taking and empathy development is also developed in play-based learning. Participant 3 expressed:
>
> *"I let them pretend to be shoppers and cashiers."* (P3)

By stepping into another's shoes (cashier/customer), children learn to anticipate the needs and reactions of others. Pyle and Alaca (2020) found that role play and dramatic play nurture empathy as children explore different perspectives and practice navigating social interactions.

Furthermore, Participant 3 added:

"Through play-based learning *the kids see learning as fun and meaningful... I believe it's the love of learning."* (P3) This theme focuses on the child's internal drive. The mention of a **low-affective filter** refers to a state where children are not anxious and are thus more open to learning language and social cues. The literature highlights that a safe, supportive environment is crucial for fostering social-emotional development and allowing children to fail and try again without fear (Bogiannidis *et al*., 2023).

Affective social modeling was also developed through play-based learning. As reported by Participant 8:

> *"Emotions are involved so it's a good way for teachers to model appropriate behaviour."* (P8)

The emotional stakes of play allow teachers to intervene and model empathy in real-time. In line with Bogiannidis *et al*. (2023), educators play a vital role in facilitating these learning experiences and guiding children in navigating social situations. Participant 10 noted:

"It also encourages 'peer-teaching,' where students who are more confident in English naturally help their friends understand the instructions." (P10)

Participant 10 notes that play encourages **peer-teaching**, especially for language learners. Play-based settings allow children to leverage their strengths to support peers,

enhancing collective achievement. Recent literature by **Leggett and Newman (2024)** emphasize that play-based learning reduces the power imbalance between teacher and learners, allowing children to act as **more knowledgeable others** for their peers. This builds confidence and fosters a sense of belonging within the classroom community.

Diverse play activities serve as a rehearsal for essential teamwork and perspective-taking skills. Participant 10 stated:

"Through building, role-play, games, and group projects, children practice sharing ideas, taking turns, negotiating roles, and solving problems as a team." (P4) The functional necessity of peer support is essential under play-based learning. According to Participant 4:

"One challenge in implementing play-based learning *activities is managing diverse learning styles and keeping all children engaged… through teamwork… she (shy child) began communicating more… and formed lasting friendships, greatly improving his social skills."* (P6)

Collaborative teamwork within play-based learning serves as a critical inclusive bridge that transforms the challenge of managing diverse learner needs into a practical opportunity for shy children to gain communicative confidence and build lasting social connections. Chronis-Tuscano *et al.* (2022) demonstrates that structured, peer-facilitated play sessions are highly effective at reducing **socially wary** behaviors. By providing a **safe** environment for interaction, play-based interventions allow shy children to lessen their anxiety and increase their socially competent behaviors, directly supporting the idea of a transition from isolation to communicative confidence. Moreover, play offers a **safe**

space for children to navigate and resolve interpersonal friction without constant adult intervention. Participants 9, 5 and 6 stated:

"They are given the opportunity to freely interact... practice communication skills, learn to take turns, share materials, and solve small conflicts independently." (P9)

"It allows children to... learn to resolve conflicts in a natural and engaging way." (P5, P6)

Group play forces children to move from solitary thinking to **helping their peers to succeed**. Children learn fundamental skills like **cooperation** and **negotiation** during peer interactions, forming the basis for future socialization (Bogiannidis *et al*., 2023). Children engage in complex social behaviors spontaneously when given the freedom of play. Both Participants 3 and 10 stated:

"I've noticed that during our play, my kids naturally talk to one another, share ideas, take on roles and solve problems together." (P3)

"Habitat… creates a natural need for students to negotiate... to complete a shared goal." (P10) Children must agree on spatial design and material use, forcing collaboration through physical creation. Participants in play-based programs display improved collaboration abilities and problem-solving compared to traditional, teacher-led environments (Pyle & Danniels, 2019. Activities like building a **zoo** or **habitats** necessitate teamwork. This theme reflects the finding that play-based interventions significantly improve self-regulation and collaboration. As children negotiate where a **tiger lives**, they are practicing critical thinking and shared decision-making, which are vital for future social

success (Weisberg *et al.*, 2020). **Collaboration** is not just an outcome but a functional requirement of play. Children recognize their mutual dependency for the activity to continue. Participant 2 stated:

"One of the main challenges I've faced in implementing play-based learning *is helping all children engage meaningfully, especially those who struggle with language or social confidence."* (P2)

The inherent structure of role-play necessitates a **partner**, making social interaction a prerequisite for success. Research indicates that such activities provide authentic opportunities to practice expressing oneself and navigating social norms (Pyle & Alaca, 2020). This reflects **Cooperative Play**, the highest stage of social development, where children play together with a

common goal and assigned roles. It as a dynamic state where children are not just playing near each other, but are actively collaborating toward a shared goal (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Moreover, teachers observe that children **need each other** to make play successful, particularly in sociodramatic scenarios. This theme aligns with the finding that play-based learning **mimics real-life interactions**, forcing children to negotiate roles and solve disagreements in real-time to keep the **story** alive (Pyle & Alaca, 2020).

The synergistic social and cognitive development theme emphasizes that social growth happens alongside cognitive problem-solving. Participant 5 expressed:

"Develop social skills and problem-solving abilities while making learning fun and engaging." (P5)

Play-based interventions improve self-regulation and **collaboration** compared to traditional rote environments (Weisberg *et al.*, 2020). Finally, the benefit of psychological safety and student-centered autonomy as Participant 10 stated:

" play-based learning *... gives children natural, real-life opportunities to practice sharing... learn empathy, cooperation, and self-control."* (P10)

Focuses on a classroom atmosphere free of fear. The mention of a low-affective filter refers to a state where children are not anxious and are thus more open to learning language and social cues. The literature highlights that a safe, supportive environment is crucial for fostering social-emotional development and allowing children to fail and try again without fear. Literature advocates for a 'supportive, inclusive environment' that allows for student-led discovery and autonomy (Bogiannidis *et al.*, 2023).

3. Play-Based Activities for Kindergarten Teachers Utilization

Based on the pedagogical themes and teacher testimonies, the following play-based activities are designed as teaching tools to facilitate social, cognitive, and affective development in kindergarten settings.

1. *Sociodramatic Simulations and Market Microcosms*. Educators can implement Sociodramatic Simulations, such as a Classroom Market (P1, P9), to create a controlled social microcosm where children practice real-world social scripts. By transforming the classroom into stations - including bakeries, vegetable stalls, and flower shops - teachers can provide a platform for children to adopt specific roles such as vendors and customers.

This activity necessitates the use of functional social language, including greeting peers, negotiating prices, and asking clarifying questions, thereby lowering communicative barriers through spontaneous interaction. These simulations serve as a **natural laboratory** for social development (P10) where children transition from egocentric play to collaborative negotiation, learning to anticipate the needs and reactions of others through perspective-taking.

2. Collaborative Engineering and Constructive Problem-Solving. To foster Interdependence in play, teachers should utilize collaborative engineering tasks, such as block-building challenges (P6) or constructive habitat building (*e.g.*, designing a zoo, P10). These activities are structured around a **shared problem -** such as a falling bridge (P6, P7) or the need for more space - which acts as a catalyst for collective thinking and teamwork. Because these physical tasks often require more resources than one child can manage alone, they create a functional necessity for partnership and peer-mediated synergy.

Educators are encouraged to employ "Non-Intrusive Scaffolding" during these sessions, observing for at least 30 seconds before intervening in conflicts to allow children the opportunity to practice autonomous self-regulation and spatial negotiation.

3. Kinesthetic Academic Integration and Phonics Relays. To harmonize academic goals with the need for movement, teachers can deploy kinesthetic academic games (P10), such as vocabulary **act out sessions** or **phonics relays** (P5, P6, P7). Instead of passive flashcard drills, children use their bodies to represent concepts, turning a solitary cognitive task into a social game that requires close peer observation and non-verbal communication. These activities utilize **peer-teaching** dynamics, where more confident students naturally scaffold the learning of their peers, fostering a sense of collective success rather than individual competition. Such multisensory engagement ensures that social learning is deeply internalized through the simultaneous involvement of cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains.

4. Affective Scaffolding and Friendship Circles. To address the needs of learners struggling with social confidence, the implementation of **friendship circles** (P1) and **intentional role-play centers** (P2, P3) is essential. These activities use cooperative games and targeted storytelling - such as modeling kindness with dolls or stuffed animals - to provide a safe, low-pressure environment for practicing empathy. By purposefully pairing **shy** students with more **talkative** peers in these structured settings, teachers can facilitate a gradual transition from silent play to active social integration. This approach

prioritizes **psychological safety**, ensuring that the classroom remains a fear-free zone where social competence is viewed as a long-term developmental process rather than an immediate academic requirement.

Proposed Action Plan

The proposed action plan includes the establishment of flexible learning centers, implementation of collaborative play activities, integration of social-emotional learning strategies, and teacher training programs focused on play-based learning approaches.

Enhancing Kindergarten Social Competency Through Play-Based Learning (PBL)Proposed Action Plan

Title	Rationale	Objectives	Person responsible	Allocated fund	Timeline
Enhancing Kindergarten Social Competency Through Play-Based Learning (PBL)	Play shifts from recreation to a central medium for social and academic learning, supported by social constructivi	Transition teacher-led instruction to a student-centered **Social-Emotional Laboratory**; implement daily PBL blocks to	Classroom Teachers; Early Childhood Coordinator	Curriculum materials and minor classroom resources (approx. **$300–$600**)	**Weeks 1–2** planning; **ongoing daily** from **Week 3**; review at **end of Month 1**

	st and social-emotional frameworks.	deepen social understanding.			
Pedagogical Foundation: Play as the Primary Medium	Active exploration and peer interaction promote learning and social skill growth.	Create daily PBL block structure; ensure children engage in active exploration; strengthen peer interaction routines.	Classroom Teachers	Minimal (planning time + classroom supplies) (**$100–$200**)	**Weeks 2–3** to finalize routines; **Months 1–3** implementation

Environmental Design: The Third Teacher	Intentional classroom design reduces constant verbal instruction and increases naturally occurring social interactions.	Select and provide cooperation-requiring materials; establish flexible learning centers with clear goals supporting autonomy and intrinsic motivation.	Teachers; Classroom Manager/Support Staff	Materials for cooperation (blocks, limited tool kits, sensory bin supplies, art/role-play items) (**$600–$1,000**)	Procurement **Weeks 2–3**; rollout **Month 2**; adjust throughout **Months 2–4**
Simulated Social Microcosms (Sociodramatic Centers)	Role-play in safe environments helps children practice real social scripts and norms.	Set up permanent or rotating centers (Market Simulation, Clinic, Post Office); ensure children practice turn-taking, negotiation, and perspective-taking.	Teachers; Teaching Assistants (if available)	Center props and role-play supplies (**$400–$800**)	Build **Weeks 3–4**; rotate **weekly** starting **Month 2**

The Educator's Role: Scaffolding and Observation	Pedagogical de-centering supports children to regulate and solve conflicts independently.	Apply **non-intrusive scaffolding** (e.g., reflective observation: wait ~30 seconds); use observational notes to track conflict patterns and progress.	Classroom Teachers	Low-cost (observation tools, checklists) (**$50–$150**)	Training **Week 2**; implement **Months 1–4**; monitor continuously
Modeling Collaborative Language (Social Scripts)	Specific language supports group entry, sustained interaction, and cooperative problem-solving.	Introduce and rehearse scripts (e.g., "Can I join?", "Let's do it together"); model respectful communication during play.	Classroom Teachers		Begin **Week 3**; reinforce **weekly** through **Month 4**

Intentional Peer-Mediated Synergy (Pairing Strategy)	Peer teaching creates a Zone of Proximal Development for shy/struggling peers.	Pair socially confident/linguistically advanced students with peers needing support; monitor interaction quality and inclusion.	Classroom Teachers	Low-cost (pairing/rotation supports) ($0–$100)	Start Month 1; refine every 2–3 weeks
Socio-Emotional Integration and Resilience	Play provides emotional stakes that build long-term social resilience.	Use real-time conflicts as teachable moments (empathy, perspective-taking, compassion); maintain low-affective filter climate where children can take social risks.	Teachers; Support Staff	Low-cost (reflection cards, calm-down/feelings tools) ($50–$250)	Begin Month 1; ongoing through Months 1–4

Developmental Patience & Review Cycle	Social competence develops over time with repetition beyond academic vocabulary.	Maintain consistent PBL exposure; implement progress reviews using teacher observations and child interaction indicators.	Classroom Teachers; Early Childhood Coordinator	Evaluation/recording tools ($0–$200)	Baseline Week 2; mid-review Month 2.5; final review Month 4

V. Implementation Activities

The following activities serve as the practical application of this plan:

Activity	**Social Goal**	**Pedagogical Tool**
Market Simulation	Negotiation and Communication	Sociodramatic Play
Habitat/Zoo Building	Collective Persistence & Teamwork	Collaborative Construction
Friendship Circles	Cooperative Inclusion	Directed Group Games
Kinesthetic Games	Non-verbal Cue Reading	Physical Interaction

The study concludes that play-based learning (PBL) is a transformative pedagogical approach that moves beyond simple recreation to become the primary vehicle for social

and cognitive development in kindergarten. Below is a synthesis of the conclusions organized by the research problems.

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The integration of Project-Based Learning (PBL) prompts a significant shift in professional identity, as educators transition from didactic knowledge disseminators to facilitative mediators of student discovery. Within this framework, play is reconceptualized not as a peripheral activity, but as a primary pedagogical mechanism for cultivating essential social competencies. This transition is further supported by the classroom's role as a third teacher, in which the socio-spatial environment proactively catalyzes cooperation and peer engagement.

- Ultimately, these instructional shifts yield profound affective rewards for practitioners, specifically through the observed development of socio-emotional agency and confidence in previously isolated learners.
- The research indicates that the successful cultivation of social competencies is fundamentally predicated on the educator's intentionality and the maintenance of a psychologically safe classroom environment. Central to this process is pedagogical de-centering, a shift where teachers prioritize longitudinal observation over immediate interference, thereby trusting the organic developmental trajectory of play. This approach positions play as a social laboratory where collaboration becomes a functional necessity, requiring children to navigate interpersonal friction and achieve cooperation autonomously.

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- Crucially, this growth is facilitated through scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where the integration of peer-teaching and modeled social scripts provides the structural support students need to master complex social interactions beyond their independent capabilities.
- Evidence indicates that the most effective play-based activities for social development in Kindergarten are those that simulate real-world microcosms or require collective engineering. Sociodramatic simulations, including classroom markets, provide a platform for learners to practice functional social scripts, negotiation, and communication within low-stakes environments. These simulations function as natural laboratories where children transition from egocentric play toward collaborative negotiation. Furthermore, collaborative engineering projects, including block-building and habitat construction, establish a functional necessity for partnership because these tasks often require more resources than a single child can manage in isolation. These constructive challenges serve as catalysts for collective thinking and teamwork by centering on shared problems.
- Finally, academic objectives are harmonized with social bonding through kinesthetic integration and inclusion activities. Tools, including phonics relays and friendship circles, ensure that learning remains multisensory and inclusive of diverse styles while facilitating the gradual social integration of shy students through intentional peer pairing.

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The proposed action plan establishes a comprehensive framework for transitioning the Kindergarten curriculum toward a Social-Emotional Laboratory

by prioritizing the strategic integration of play throughout all daily routines to normalize social exploration as a constant pedagogical element. This transition is reinforced by intentional design, which advocates curation of physical environments using materials like large-scale blocks

or limited toolsets, that structurally necessitate cooperative behaviors and resource-sharing.

- Furthermore, the framework institutionalizes reflective practice through the implementation of non-intrusive scaffolding, a pedagogical strategy that requires

educators to observe a deliberate 30-second delay period during minor peer conflicts to catalyze student self-regulation and autonomous problem-solving.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the research findings and the proposed action plan to enhance the implementation of play-based learning (PBL) in Kindergarten settings:

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- Professional Development for Role Transition. Educational institutions should provide targeted training programs that help teachers transition from traditional knowledge directors to facilitators and observers of discovery.

Strategic Environmental Engineering. Educators should prioritize the intentional design of the physical classroom to function as a third teacher,

- utilizing layouts and materials that naturally trigger cooperation and provide opportunities for non-intrusive scaffolding.

- Implementation of Collaborative Pedagogies. The curriculum should formally integrate sociodramatic simulations and collective engineering tasks, providing students with a functional necessity for peer negotiation and communicative problem-solving.
- Institutionalization of the Social-Emotional Framework. It is highly recommended that school administrators adopt the proposed action plan to transition classrooms into social-emotional laboratories where developmental patience and the acceptance of the product are emphasized.

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