

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the understanding that learning is relational, individualized, and experiential. Children learn best when they feel supported, engaged, and are able to explore their environment in meaningful ways. Theories of care emphasize that relationships and emotional safety are foundational for learning (Noddings, 2005), while experiential learning highlights the importance of active, hands-on engagement (Guttek, 2015).

Learners enter kindergarten with diverse strengths, interests, and developmental readiness levels, requiring flexible and responsive teaching approaches. Play-based learning supports this by allowing children to explore, interact, and construct understanding through experience rather than passive instruction (Guttek, 2015).

However, educational systems often prioritize standardized outcomes, structured instruction, and measurable performance. Critical perspectives on education suggest that these approaches can position students as passive learners and limit opportunities for meaningful, student-centered engagement (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

This framework helps explain why play-based learning, although widely supported in theory, can be difficult to implement in practice. It highlights the tension between developmentally appropriate, relational approaches to learning and the structural demands placed on teachers within curriculum-driven classrooms. Overall, this framework positions play-based learning as essential to supporting the whole child, while recognizing the systemic challenges that influence its implementation.

Research Topic and Question

This study examines the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, with a focus on the challenges teachers face within curriculum-driven educational environments. Play-based learning is widely recognized as developmentally appropriate and beneficial for young children, supporting social, emotional, and cognitive development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

However, teachers often experience tension when trying to balance play with increasing academic expectations, assessment demands, and accountability pressures (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016). These competing expectations can lead to more structured, teacher-directed approaches, even when educators value play-based learning.

As a result, a gap exists between research-supported practices and what is enacted in classrooms.

Research Question:

What supports do kindergarten teachers need to effectively implement play-based learning within curriculum-driven classrooms?

Literature Review

These findings highlight both the supports needed and the barriers teachers face in implementing play-based learning

Curriculum and Academic Pressures

Increasing expectations for academic outcomes often limit time and flexibility for play-based learning. Teachers frequently feel pressure to prioritize structured instruction in order to meet curriculum goals, even when they value play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). This creates tension between developmentally appropriate practice and academic accountability.

Teacher Beliefs and Understanding of Play

Teachers who have a strong understanding of play and its connection to learning are more likely to implement play-based approaches effectively. However, when teachers feel uncertain about how play aligns with curriculum expectations, they may rely more on structured instruction (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Professional Development and Training

A lack of sustained, practice-based professional learning can limit teachers' ability to apply play-based strategies. One-time workshops are often insufficient, while ongoing support such as coaching, collaboration, and reflection has been shown to strengthen teacher practice (Pyle et al., 2020).

Assessment and Accountability Demands

Pressure to demonstrate measurable academic outcomes often leads to more teacher-directed instruction. When assessment practices are not aligned with play-based learning, teachers may feel discouraged from using play, even when it supports student development (Weisberg et al., 2016).

Time, Resources, and Classroom Conditions

Factors such as large class sizes, limited time, and resource constraints can make it challenging to sustain play-based learning. These conditions can increase reliance on more controlled and structured approaches to manage classroom demands (Leggett & Ford, 2013).

Barriers in Practice

- Curriculum pacing and academic expectations limit flexibility
- Lack of time for planning, observation, and documentation
- Limited access to ongoing professional learning opportunities
- Pressure to produce visible and measurable outcomes

Key Insight:

Overall, the literature suggests that the challenges teachers face are not due to a lack of understanding or value for play-based learning, but rather the result of competing structural demands within the education system. These findings highlight the need for greater alignment between curriculum expectations, assessment practices, and professional support in order for play-based learning to be effectively implemented in kindergarten classrooms.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening Teacher Capacity Through Ongoing Professional Learning

Ongoing, practice-based professional development is essential in supporting teachers' understanding and implementation of play-based learning. Teachers benefit from collaborative approaches such as coaching, mentorship, and professional learning communities, which allow for reflection and refinement of practice over time (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016).

In practice:

- Co-planning play-based lessons with colleagues
- Observing other classrooms or team teaching
- Reflecting on play through staff discussions or inquiry groups

These approaches support teachers in developing confidence and understanding, making play-based learning more intentional and effective.

2. Aligning Assessment Practices with Play-Based Learning

Greater alignment between play-based learning and assessment practices is needed to reduce the tension teachers experience between play and academic expectations. Observation-based assessment strategies help make learning through play visible and meaningful (Weisberg et al., 2016; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

In practice:

- Using anecdotal notes during play
- Taking photos/videos to document learning
- Creating documentation panels or portfolios

When teachers can clearly show how learning occurs through play, it becomes easier to justify these approaches within accountability-driven classrooms.

Conclusion

Play-based learning is widely recognized as developmentally appropriate; however, kindergarten teachers often face structural challenges that limit its implementation. This study highlights the need for greater alignment between professional learning, assessment practices, and classroom realities in order to support teachers more effectively.

Supporting play-based learning requires more than belief—it requires systems that recognize and value how children learn best through play, interaction, and experience (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Future research should explore how schools and policies can better support teachers in creating sustainable, play-based classroom environments.

References

