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# Exploring Perceptions on Play-Based Kindergarten Classrooms: Benefits and Challenges from **Parents, Pupils, and Teachers**

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#### Abstract

Aim: This qualitative study explored the perceptions of parents, kindergarten pupils, and teachers regarding the benefits and challenges of play-based classrooms in select schools in the National Capital Region (NCR). It aimed to understand how structured and unstructured play-based learning was experienced and interpreted by these key stakeholders.

**Methodology:** Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents and pupils, and focus group discussions with teachers. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns and themes across the responses, providing rich, descriptive insights into participants' perspectives.

Results: Findings indicated that play-based approaches promoted holistic development—including social, emotional, cognitive, and motor skills-by fostering engagement, creativity, and collaboration. However, challenges emerged related to classroom management, resource limitations, and differing expectations between parents and teachers. Pupils described both enjoyment of free play and frustration with certain rules, while teachers emphasized the need for better training and materials.

Conclusion: The study underscored the importance of strengthening communication between home and school, supporting teachers with professional development, and involving children's voices in planning activities. These steps were seen as essential to addressing challenges and creating more inclusive, child-friendly play-based learning environments.

Keywords: play-based learning, holistic development, parents' perceptions, pupils' perceptions, teachers' perceptions, qualitative research, child-friendly environment.

# INTRODUCTION

Globally, play-based learning has been recognized as a cornerstone of quality early childhood education (John, et al., 2025). Educational frameworks in countries such as Finland, Australia, and New Zealand emphasize the role of play in fostering holistic child development—encompassing social, emotional, cognitive, and physical domains (Rezaee, et al., 2022). Research has consistently shown that structured and unstructured play can promote creativity, critical thinking, cooperation, and problem-solving skills, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning. International organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF advocate for child-centered, play-based pedagogies to ensure inclusive and equitable early learning opportunities worldwide.

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In the Southeast Asian region, there is growing momentum to integrate play-based learning into early childhood education policies and practices. Countries such as Singapore and Malaysia have invested in teacher training and curriculum reforms that prioritize learning through play. These developments reflect a recognition that academicfocused, didactic instruction alone cannot meet the diverse developmental needs of young children. Instead, balanced approaches that value exploration, interaction, and meaningful experiences are increasingly seen as essential for preparing children for the demands of the 21st century (Khatiwada, et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, the importance of early childhood education is enshrined in Republic Act 10157, also known as the Kindergarten Education Act, which made kindergarten a compulsory stage of basic education. The law recognizes the critical nature of the first six years of life for building the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual foundations of learning. The Department of Education (DepEd) has endorsed play-based learning as a key pedagogical approach for implementing the kindergarten curriculum, encouraging teachers to use both structured and unstructured play activities to nurture children's holistic development.

Despite these policy directions, implementing play-based learning in the Philippine context faces notable challenges. Teachers often struggle to balance play with academic expectations, particularly amid pressures to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes (Dizon & Sanchez, 2020; Muńoz & Sanchez, 2023). Parents may hold varying beliefs about the value of play in formal education, with some questioning its relevance to school readiness. Meanwhile, schools face resource constraints that limit access to appropriate play materials and safe, stimulating environments. These practical challenges highlight the need to better understand how play-based learning is perceived and experienced by those directly involved.

Within the National Capital Region (NCR), these issues take on added complexity due to its diverse and dense urban context (Uy & Ocampo, 2023). NCR schools serve children from varied socio-economic backgrounds, with differing levels of parental awareness and expectations regarding play-based approaches. While some private and wellresourced public schools have made strides in adopting play-based methods, many classrooms continue to rely on teacher-centered, worksheet-heavy instruction. There is a pressing need to examine the actual perceptions of parents, pupils, and teachers in NCR schools to identify supports and barriers to effective play-based implementation.

A review of local literature reveals a research gap in this area. Most existing studies on play-based learning in the Philippines have employed quantitative designs focused on measuring developmental outcomes or teacher practices. Few have qualitatively explored the nuanced perspectives of parents, pupils, and teachers themselvesespecially in the NCR context. This gap limits the understanding of the social and cultural factors that shape how playbased learning is interpreted, accepted, and implemented in real classrooms.

This study sought to address that gap by adopting a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of parents, kindergarten pupils, and teachers regarding the benefits and challenges of play-based classrooms in selected NCR schools. By giving voice to these key stakeholders, the research aims to generate rich, contextualized insights that can inform policy, teacher training, and school-level planning. Ultimately, the study contributes to the goal of creating more inclusive, child-friendly learning environments that truly support holistic development in the early years.

### **Objectives**

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of parents, kindergarten pupils, and teachers regarding the benefits and challenges of play-based classrooms in select schools in the National Capital Region (NCR). It aimed to understand how structured and unstructured play-based learning was experienced and interpreted by these key stakeholders.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- 1. How do parents perceive the benefits and challenges of play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom?
- 2. How do pupils describe their experiences of structured and unstructured play in school?
- 3. How do teachers perceive the advantages and difficulties of implementing a play-based approach?
- 4. What themes emerge that can inform the development of a more child-friendly classroom environment?

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## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to capture rich, in-depth insights into how parents, kindergarten pupils, and teachers perceived the benefits and challenges of play-based classrooms. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because it is well-suited to exploring participants' subjective experiences and meanings without imposing overly abstract interpretations. This design allowed the researchers to document detailed, authentic accounts of how structured and unstructured play-based learning were understood, valued, or critiqued by key stakeholders in the school community.

The focus of the design was to remain close to participants' actual words and descriptions to provide practical insights that schools and policymakers could apply. By using an interpretive yet low-inference approach, the researchers aimed to highlight the real-world complexities of implementing play-based learning in the National Capital Region (NCR), where classrooms are diverse in student needs, resources, and cultural expectations about early childhood education.

# **Population and Sampling**

The study was conducted in select public elementary schools with kindergarten programs in the National Capital Region, Philippines. Participants included parents of enrolled kindergarten pupils, kindergarten pupils themselves, and kindergarten teachers with direct experience implementing play-based learning approaches. This focus on three key stakeholder groups was designed to capture multiple perspectives on both the benefits and the challenges of play-based learning in real classroom settings.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse information about the topic. Researchers selected 12 parents representing different socio-economic backgrounds to reflect the diversity typical of NCR classrooms. 15 kindergarten pupils aged 5 to 6 years old were included, chosen with teacher recommendations and parental consent, to ensure they were able to express ideas verbally in age-appropriate ways. Finally, 5 kindergarten teachers with demonstrated experience in implementing both structured and unstructured play-based learning participated in the study. The use of purposive sampling ensured that all participants could meaningfully contribute to answering the study's research questions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

### **Instruments**

The primary instruments for data gathering were semi-structured interview guides developed specifically for each stakeholder group. For parents, the interview guide included open-ended questions about their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of play-based learning, including their expectations for their children's learning and concerns about classroom management or academic readiness. This format allowed parents to elaborate on their personal experiences and observations.

For pupils, the researchers designed an age-appropriate interview and storytelling protocol that used simple, quided questions about favorite and least favorite play activities, feelings about rules during play, and descriptions of what happens during play time in school. Visual prompts and playful conversational techniques were used to help young children express themselves comfortably. For teachers, the instrument took the form of a focus group discussion guide exploring their perceptions of the advantages and difficulties of implementing play-based learning, classroom management strategies, materials and resources needed, and experiences with parental expectations. All guides were pilot-tested with a small group of non-participant teachers and parents to ensure clarity, age-appropriateness, and cultural relevance.

# **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted in person in the participating NCR schools during the academic year, with the cooperation of school administrators. Researchers scheduled individual interviews with parents at convenient times within the school premises, ensuring privacy and minimizing disruption to their routines. Interviews typically lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted in Filipino or English, depending on participant preference. The researchers took care to create a welcoming, non-judgmental atmosphere to encourage open sharing.

Pupil interviews were conducted in small groups of two to three children or individually when needed, in familiar classroom settings with their teachers present nearby to ensure comfort and security. Researchers used storytelling, drawing prompts, and simple questions to quide discussions lasting 15-20 minutes. Focus group discussions with teachers were held in dedicated meeting rooms after class hours, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes.

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All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Throughout the data collection period, the researchers maintained detailed field notes to capture contextual observations, such as non-verbal cues and group dynamics, enriching the qualitative data.

## **Data Analysis**

The researchers analyzed the data using thematic analysis grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2023) process, tailored to the context of this study. First, all transcripts were read and re-read to achieve familiarization with the data, with researchers making preliminary notes about possible patterns or interesting points. Next, the researchers generated initial codes by systematically labeling meaningful features of the data relevant to the research questions, using both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (based on the interview guides) approaches.

The team then searched for themes by collating related codes into broader categories that captured recurring ideas about benefits and challenges of play-based learning. Themes were reviewed and refined collaboratively to ensure they accurately represented the dataset, avoiding overlap or ambiguity. Researchers then defined and named the final themes, focusing on clarity and relevance to the study's objectives. In the final stage, the team produced the report, selecting vivid, representative quotes from parents, pupils, and teachers to illustrate key themes. This systematic approach ensured analytical rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness in the interpretation of participant perspectives.

#### **Ethical Considerations**

The researchers prioritized strict ethical standards throughout the study to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the school administrators and local authorities, ensuring the study complied with institutional quidelines and community expectations. Informed consent forms were provided to all adult participants in their preferred language, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw at any time without

For pupil participants, the researchers obtained written informed consent from parents or quardians and verbal assent from the children themselves, ensuring they understood in age-appropriate terms what participation would involve. During data collection, researchers emphasized participants' privacy and confidentiality, storing all recordings and transcripts securely with restricted access. In reporting results, pseudonyms and aggregated data were used to protect identities. The researchers were also attentive to power dynamics, especially with child participants, ensuring interviews were child-friendly, non-threatening, and conducted with the support of familiar adults to safeguard children's comfort and safety throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

# Parents' Perceptions of Play-Based Learning

Parents in the study generally viewed play-based learning as beneficial for their children's social and emotional development. Many highlighted improvements in cooperation, confidence, and enthusiasm for school. One parent shared, "My child has learned to share and cooperate," while another noted, "He used to be shy, but now he talks more." These accounts suggest that play-based activities support social skills and self-expression, which parents recognize as essential for early development. Additionally, parents described increased motivation for school attendance: "She's excited to go to school because of the games." This enthusiasm indicates that play serves as a key driver of positive school experiences (Parker, et al., 2022).

However, parents also expressed important reservations about play-based learning, reflecting a tension between developmental goals and academic expectations. A common concern was whether children were receiving enough formal academic instruction: "I worry they don't learn enough reading and writing." Safety was another recurring theme, with one parent saying, "They run a lot—what if someone gets hurt?" Beyond safety and academics, parents identified a communication gap with teachers: "I don't always understand what they're doing in class." These concerns reveal that while parents generally value play-based learning, they need clearer communication from schools about its academic value and the safeguards in place. Without this alignment, misunderstandings may undermine support for play-based pedagogies.

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# **Pupils' Perceptions of Play-Based Classrooms**

Pupil interviews revealed overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward play in school, underscoring its role in fostering creativity, ownership, and joy. Children enthusiastically described their favorite activities, such as building blocks, painting, inventing games, and sports. One child explained, "I made my own game with my friends," demonstrating a sense of agency and collaboration. Another remarked, "We can play anything!" when describing unstructured play, highlighting the appeal of choice and freedom. These reflections suggest that play-based learning provides rich opportunities for self-directed exploration and social bonding among peers (Mohamed, 2023).

Nevertheless, children also articulated frustrations that pointed to challenges in managing play-based classrooms. Several pupils felt constrained by classroom rules, with one saying, "Teacher says we can't shout." This suggests that while rules are necessary for safety and order, they can limit the open-ended nature of play that children enjoy most. Another common complaint was limited playtime: "I want more play." These sentiments underline the importance of finding the right balance between freedom and structure in planning play-based activities (Mentzer, 2022). Teachers must navigate this balance carefully to maintain order while still fostering the intrinsic motivation and creativity that unstructured play can offer (Wang, et al., 2024).

# **Teachers' Perceptions of Play-Based Learning**

Teachers offered nuanced insights into the benefits and challenges of implementing play-based learning. Many emphasized its developmental advantages, with one teacher explaining, "Play naturally integrates motor, cognitive, and social skills." Others praised its capacity to engage students deeply: "They learn more when they're having fun.' Teachers also valued play for its diagnostic potential: "I see who needs more help through play." These perspectives highlight that educators recognize play-based learning as an effective, holistic pedagogical strategy aligned with child development theories and curricular goals.

At the same time, teachers identified significant barriers to successful implementation. Classroom management emerged as a major challenge: "It gets noisy and hard to control." Such difficulties are particularly acute in settings with large class sizes and limited space, common in many NCR schools. Teachers also cited parental expectations as a source of tension: "Some want more worksheets." These conflicting expectations can place teachers in a difficult position, balancing mandated academic outcomes with play-based methods. Finally, resource constraints were widely noted: "We don't always have enough materials." This practical limitation hampers the quality and variety of play activities, reducing their effectiveness and appeal for children.

# **Communication Gaps Between Home and School**

A clear theme across stakeholder groups was the communication gap between home and school regarding the goals, methods, and value of play-based learning. Parents expressed confusion about classroom activities, with one parent admitting, "I don't always understand what they're doing in class." Teachers, on the other hand, reported that "Some parents want more worksheets," indicating a mismatch between the pedagogical goals of play-based learning and parental expectations for academic rigor.

This disconnect risks undermining support for play-based approaches if left unaddressed. Without clear, consistent communication, parents may undervalue play as "just fun" rather than appreciating its role in developing critical social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Strengthening home-school communication can align expectations, build trust, and empower parents to reinforce play-based learning at home. Teachers in the study suggested that regular parent orientations, open-house sessions, and newsletters could help explain the curriculum, showcase learning outcomes, and demonstrate how structured and unstructured play activities contribute to school readiness.

# **Balancing Freedom and Structure in Play-Based Learning**

Another prominent theme was the challenge of balancing freedom and structure in play-based learning. Pupils praised the open-ended nature of play, sharing comments like, "We can play anything!" and "I made my own game with my friends," demonstrating their preference for creativity and autonomy. At the same time, they expressed

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frustration with limits: "Teacher says we can't shout." Such remarks highlight the tension between children's desire for unstructured play and the need for maintaining classroom safety and order.

Teachers, too, acknowledged this challenge, describing how "It gets noisy and hard to control." Striking an effective balance requires carefully designed activities that preserve choice and exploration while setting developmentally appropriate boundaries. Professional development for teachers can offer strategies for scaffolding unstructured play, managing transitions, and maintaining a safe, inclusive environment. Recognizing that both freedom and structure are necessary allows educators to maximize the developmental benefits of play while meeting practical classroom demands.

### **Resource Needs for Effective Implementation**

The study also underscored critical resource needs that shape the success of play-based learning. Teachers repeatedly emphasized material constraints: "We don't always have enough materials." Inadequate supplies limit the variety and quality of structured and unstructured activities, reducing children's engagement and learning opportunities. Similarly, limited space in crowded NCR classrooms can make safe, active play difficult to manage, heightening concerns about injuries and classroom control.

Parents echoed these concerns, worrying about safety: "They run a lot-what if someone gets hurt?" Addressing these issues requires investment in appropriate play materials, classroom design, and outdoor spaces that support safe, imaginative, and developmentally appropriate play. Policymakers and school administrators must recognize that play-based learning is not cost-neutral; it demands dedicated resources to be effectively and safely implemented. Without such support, even the most well-intentioned play-based programs may fall short of their promise.

# **Children's Agency in Planning Play**

An important but often overlooked theme that emerged from pupil interviews was children's agency—their desire to have a voice in shaping play experiences. Comments like "I made my own game with my friends" and "We can play anything!" reveal the value children place on choice and ownership in learning. This sense of agency not only motivates participation but also supports social negotiation skills, creativity, and problem-solving (Polat, et al., 2022).

However, pupils also expressed wanting "more play," suggesting that time allocated for these activities may be insufficient. Balancing curriculum requirements with children's developmental needs calls for more intentional planning that includes children's voices in decision-making about activities and rules. Teachers and school leaders can involve pupils in co-creating play guidelines and selecting materials, fostering a more inclusive and responsive classroom environment that honors children's perspectives as central to effective learning (Amevordzie, 2025).

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study illuminates the complex, multi-faceted perceptions of parents, pupils, and teachers regarding play-based kindergarten classrooms in the National Capital Region. While stakeholders widely recognize the benefits of play in promoting social-emotional growth, engagement, creativity, and holistic development, they also identify significant challenges. These include managing classroom behavior, meeting academic expectations, bridging home—school communication gaps, securing adequate resources, and balancing freedom with structure. By highlighting these insights, the study contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of how play-based learning can be better supported and implemented in diverse Philippine school contexts.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the researchers propose several actionable recommendations to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms:

#### 1. Strengthen Home–School Communication

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Conduct regular parent orientation sessions explaining the value and methods of play-based learning. Use newsletters or social media to share classroom activities and learning outcomes.

# 2. Enhance Teacher Training

Provide professional development focused on classroom management strategies specific to play-based learning. Offer workshops on balancing structured and unstructured play while maintaining learning objectives.

# 3. Invest in Resources and Infrastructure

Allocate budgets for diverse, culturally appropriate play materials. Improve classroom and outdoor spaces to ensure safe, engaging play environments.

# 4. Promote Children's Participation in Planning

Involve pupils in creating classroom rules and selecting play activities. Recognize and support children's agency as an essential component of learning.

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