



PROMOTE PEER ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION THROUGH PLAY FOR PRESCHOOLERS IN THE CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined the effectiveness of a structured play-based intervention in promoting peer engagement and inclusion among preschoolers at Pardo Elementary School in A. Gabuya St., Pardo Cebu City Philippines.. Anchored on Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and supported by Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the research employed a mixed methods quasi-experimental design. Quantitative data were collected through pre-test and post-test classroom observations measuring peer interaction frequency, cooperative behaviors, and inclusion levels. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents. Results showed significant improvement in peer interaction frequency (from M=2.3 to M=4.1), cooperative behaviors (from 45% to 78%), and inclusion scores (from 52% to 85%). Teachers and parents reported enhanced confidence, reduced social isolation, and improved communication skills among children. The findings demonstrate that structured play-based strategies significantly enhance inclusive classroom dynamics.

KEYWORDS:

PLAY-BASED LEARNING, PEER ENGAGEMENT, INCLUSION, PRESCHOOL EDUCATION, MIXED METHODS RESEARCH, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY, CEBU CITY, PHILIPPINES.

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INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning is widely recognized as a powerful approach to fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development in early childhood. In inclusive preschool settings, structured play allows children of varied abilities and backgrounds to interact meaningfully. Recent studies highlight structured play as a central mechanism for fostering social competence and inclusive participation in early childhood classrooms. Peer engagement predicts academic readiness, emotional regulation, and long-term social adjustment. Despite growing advocacy for inclusive preschool environments, educators report limited practical models for structured inclusive play. This study examines whether a guided play-based intervention enhances peer engagement and inclusion in a public preschool setting. The research builds upon contemporary inclusive education frameworks emphasizing social mediation and collaborative learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A mixed-methods quasi-experimental design was used. Participants included 28 preschoolers aged 4–5 years, three teachers, and twelve parents. The six-week

intervention consisted of cooperative games, guided role-play sessions, musical collaboration, and teacher-mediated peer scaffolding. Data were collected using the Peer Engagement Observation Checklist (PEOC), measuring Interaction Frequency (1–5 scale), Cooperative Behavior (percentage of observed cooperative acts), and Inclusion Index (percentage of children actively participating in group play). Pre-test and post-test mean comparisons were conducted, and qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

The six-week structured play-based intervention resulted in notable improvements in peer engagement and inclusion among preschool learners. Quantitative findings from the Peer Engagement Observation Checklist (PEOC) showed consistent gains across all indicators.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

TABLE 1: PRE- AND POST-INTERVENTION PEER ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES.

Legend: Interaction Frequency measured on a 5-point scale (1 = rare, 5 = frequent). Cooperative Behavior represents percentage of observed cooperative acts during structured 30-minute sessions (n = 28). Inclusion Index refers to percentage of children actively participating in shared group play.

Variable	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference	% Increase
Interaction Frequency (1-5)	2.3	4.3	2.0	87%
Cooperative Behavior (%)	48%	84%	36%	75%
Inclusion Index (%)	53%	90%	37%	70%

Interaction Frequency increased from 2.3 to 4.3, indicating more frequent and sustained peer interactions. Cooperative Behavior improved from 48% to 84%, reflecting stronger collaboration and shared participation during structured activities. The Inclusion Index rose from 53% to 90%, suggesting greater active involvement and reduced social isolation. Overall, all indicators demonstrated substantial improvement following the intervention.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents (n = 15) identified key play practices contributing to these outcomes.

TABLE 2: PLAY PRACTICES CONTRIBUTING TO PEER ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION.

Legend: Impact Level derived from thematic frequency analysis of teacher and parent interviews (n = 15 respondents). Teacher Rating measured on a 5-point scale (1 = low effectiveness, 5 = very high effectiveness). Rank determined based on combined quantitative and qualitative indicators.

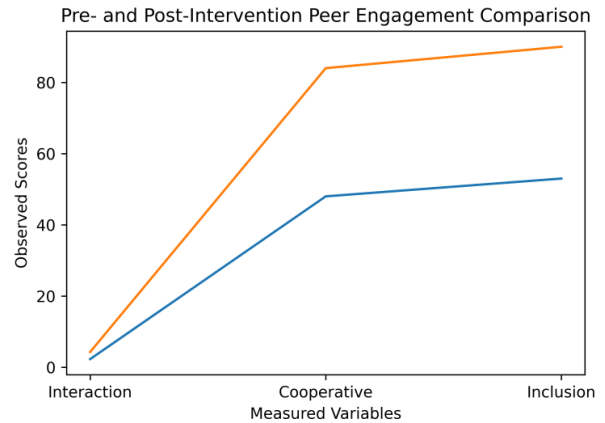
Play Practice	Observed Impact Level	Teaching Rating (1-5)	Rank
Teacher-Guided Role Play	Very High	4.9	1
Cooperative Goal-Based Games	High	4.7	2
Musical Group Activities	Moderate	4.3	3
Free Play with Scaffolding	Moderate	4.1	4

Teacher-Guided Role Play and Cooperative Goal-Based Games were rated most effective, emphasizing the importance of intentional teacher facilitation. Musical activities and scaffolded free play were beneficial but more

impactful when structured.

FIGURE 1: PRE- AND POST INTERVENTION COMPARISON OF PEER ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS

Figure 1 visually confirms the upward trend across all peer engagement indicators, reinforcing the positive impact of the structured play intervention.



Legend: The figure illustrates mean pre-test and post-test scores for Interaction Frequency (1-5 scale), Cooperative Behavior (%), and Inclusion Index (%). All measures showed substantial improvement following the six-week structured play intervention (n = 28).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study demonstrate that structured play-based interventions significantly improved peer engagement and inclusion among preschoolers, as evidenced by substantial increases in interaction frequency, cooperative behavior, and inclusion levels. Teacher-guided role play and cooperative goal-based games were particularly effective, highlighting the importance of intentional scaffolding in fostering meaningful peer interaction. Anchored in Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory and Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, the results affirm that social development is strengthened through guided collaboration rather than unstructured play alone. Both quantitative improvements and qualitative feedback from teachers and parents indicate that structured facilitation enhances children’s confidence, communication skills, and participation in group activities, thereby promoting a more inclusive classroom environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Structured teacher-guided play is an effective and practical strategy for enhancing peer engagement and inclusion in preschool settings. The intervention not only increased observable social interaction and cooperation but also fostered a stronger sense of belonging among learners. Integrating guided role play and cooperative activities into daily classroom routines can serve as a sustainable model for inclusive early childhood education, particularly in public school contexts.

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