

PRIORITISING PLAY-BASED LEARNING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN OKE OGUN RURAL AREA, OYO STATE

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Abstract

This position paper advocates for the central role of play-based learning in early childhood education, especially within rural areas of Nigeria. Using Oke-Ogun in Oyo State as a focal point, the paper examines how limited resources, infrastructural challenges, and socio-cultural factors impact learning outcomes. Drawing on the developmental theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, alongside successful global practices in resource-poor settings, this paper presents play not as a frivolous activity, but as a critical strategy for fostering cognitive, emotional, social, and language development in young children. The rural education context is explored in depth, highlighting challenges such as inadequate teacher training, scarcity of learning materials, and rigid, exam-focused curricula that often leave no room for creative and play-based approaches. Despite these barriers, this paper presents compelling evidence from teacher-led innovations and community-driven efforts that demonstrate how play-based learning can succeed even in resource-poor environments. Recommendations include integrating play into the curriculum, investing in teacher training, and launching community sensitisation campaigns. This paper calls for a shift in mindset, urging policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to recognise play as the foundation for early childhood education. This approach is essential for reducing educational disparities and ensuring that every child receives a strong start, regardless of location.

Keywords: Play-based learning, rural education, early childhood development, cognitive development

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a vital groundwork for lifelong learning. It plays a key role in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. In many places, especially in rural communities, access to quality early childhood education is limited due to a lack of resources, trained teachers, and suitable teaching methods. Yet, in these environments, where formal learning structures are often weak or absent, particularly in rural regions like Oke Ogun, children need engaging, flexible, and developmentally suitable learning experiences the most. Education theorists and psychologists have long recognised play-based learning as one of the most effective ways for young children to learn (Marfo, 2011). *Influenced by the ideas of pioneers like Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Maria Montessori*, play is more than just fun; it is a powerful tool through which children understand their world. It sparks curiosity, nurtures creativity, improves communication, and builds critical thinking skills. These qualities are essential for success both in and out of the classroom.

Definition of Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is an educational approach that uses play as the primary way of teaching in early childhood, particularly in environments with limited resources. Unlike traditional methods that depend on direct instruction

and memorisation, play-based learning focuses on hands-on experiences, active involvement, and exploration. It centres on the belief that young children learn best when they can interact freely with their environment, express themselves creatively, and take part in meaningful activities that match their interests and developmental needs (Whitlock, 2023).

In Oke Ogun, Oyo State, children learn best when play reflects what they see and experience in their everyday lives. Using local materials and cultural practices makes play more meaningful, enjoyable, and easier for children to understand. It also helps schools work within their resources while still providing quality learning experiences.

Free play can happen when children are given common materials from their environment and allowed to decide what to do with them on their own. Items such as sand, stones, leaves, sticks, calabashes, empty tins, and corn cobs can be used to create houses, roads, farms, or cooking areas. During outdoor play, children often imitate real-life activities like farming, selling goods in the market, fetching water, or cooking with firewood.

Guided play takes place when teachers gently support children's play to achieve certain learning goals. For example, a teacher may bring clay or soft soil and encourage children to mould familiar objects such as pots, farm tools, or animals they see around them. This helps improve hand skills and introduces new words in a natural way. Another good example is storytelling play, where a teacher tells a local folktale or proverb and asks the children to act it out using old wrappers, beads, or raffia as costumes. Through this, children develop language skills, learn moral lessons, and gain a deeper understanding of their culture, while still enjoying the freedom of play.

Structured play involves organised activities with clear rules and learning objectives. Traditional counting games using stones, seeds, or cowries can be used to teach numbers, turn-taking, and patience. Yoruba songs and clapping games that are commonly sung at home or during community events can be introduced to help children learn rhythm, listening, and memory skills. Simple games like relay races using sticks or other local objects can also be organised to teach cooperation, fairness, and physical coordination.

When free play, guided play, and structured play are combined with local materials and cultural traditions in Oke Ogun, learning becomes more meaningful and enjoyable for young children. This approach supports their overall development while helping them grow with a strong sense of identity and connection to their community.

According to Bramble Network (2024), play-based learning can adjust to different cultural contexts and resource levels. In rural areas, it can use locally available materials, stories, songs, and games that connect with children's experiences.

Purpose of the Position Paper

The purpose of this position paper is to support using play-based learning as a main approach in early childhood education in rural areas. Instead, this paper makes a strong case for why play should not be viewed as a distraction or luxury but as a crucial part of holistic child development and basic learning.

This paper aims to:

- i. Highlight the educational benefits of play as a valuable tool for cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development in young children.
- ii. Contextualise the rural learning environment, pointing out the unique challenges and opportunities in these settings, especially regarding early education.
- iii. Dispel common myths about play-based learning, particularly the idea that it lacks structure or academic depth.
- iv. Show how play-based learning can be adapted to rural contexts, using local materials, cultural practices, and teacher creativity.
- v. Offer practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and community members to support play-based methods in rural schools.
- vi. Inspire a change in mindset and policy, encouraging rural education systems to adopt a more flexible, child-centred, and developmentally appropriate teaching style.

Scope and Structure

This position paper specifically focuses on the role of play-based learning in early childhood education within rural communities, especially in low-resource settings where traditional teaching methods often fail to meet the developmental needs of young children. The scope of this paper is limited to:

- i. Early childhood education, specifically for children aged 0 to 6.
- ii. Rural and underserved communities with limited access to quality education.
- iii. The use of play-based learning as a main educational method, rather than a supplementary or recreational activity.
- iv. Policy, teacher training, and community involvement in adopting play-based methods.

This paper does not intend to provide statistical analysis or comparative data but instead relies on educational theory, field experience, and practical examples to make its case. The focus is on understanding concepts, advocating for changes, and providing actionable recommendations.

Understanding Play-Based Learning

2.1 Key Principles of Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is based on core principles that show how young children learn best through hands-on experiences, exploration, social interaction, and self-expression. These principles serve as the foundation for effective early childhood education, especially in rural settings where formal resources may be lacking but creativity and cultural richness are present (Bramble Network. (2024).

- i. **Child-Centred Learning:** At the heart of play-based learning is the idea that children actively participate in their education, which is especially crucial in rural areas like Oke Ogun, where resources and formal systems are limited. They are not just passive recipients of information but curious learners who want to understand their world. This principle encourages educators to observe children's interests, needs, and stages of development and to create learning experiences that connect with them.
- ii. **Learning Through Active Engagement:** Play works best when children are physically, mentally, and emotionally involved. Through activities like building, role-playing, drawing, and manipulating objects, children engage their senses and develop a deeper understanding of concepts. Active learning helps children remember information longer and apply it better in real-life situations, which is especially important in rural areas where practical knowledge is highly valued.
- iii. **Developmentally Appropriate Practice:** Play-based learning respects the natural stages of child development. It aligns with what children can understand and do at each age, making sure learning activities are not too easy or too hard. This principle prevents imposing formal academic expectations too early and allows children to build foundational skills at a pace that supports healthy growth.
- iv. **Integration of Cognitive, Social, Emotional, and Physical Development:** Real learning in early childhood involves the whole child. Play-based activities support this integration: group games build teamwork and empathy, storytelling improves language and literacy, and construction tasks enhance motor skills and spatial awareness. This holistic approach is especially crucial in rural areas where formal child services may be limited, making schools key places for comprehensive development.
- v. **Guided by Educators, Not Controlled by Them:** In a play-based environment, educators act as facilitators rather than directors of learning. They create settings that spark curiosity, provide open-ended materials, ask thought-provoking questions, and offer gentle guidance when needed. The goal is to support children's learning without taking over, helping them build confidence, independence, and decision-making skills.
- vi. **Meaningful Contexts and Real-Life Relevance:** Play-based learning works best when it connects to children's real-world experiences. For rural kids, this might mean pretending to run a market stall, caring for animals, or reenacting community events. When learning takes place in meaningful contexts, children make stronger connections between what they know and what they are learning, improving both understanding and retention.

vii. **Choice, Exploration, and Creativity:** A key aspect of play-based learning is the freedom it gives children to make choices, try new things, and express themselves creatively.

In rural classrooms, the practical application of play-based learning principles depends largely on how well teachers adapt learning activities to the local environment and the everyday realities of children. One of the most effective ways to do this is through the use of locally available materials, which are familiar, affordable, and culturally meaningful. In many rural communities, including areas such as Oke Ogun, classrooms may lack commercially produced toys and learning aids, yet the natural and social environment provides abundant resources that can support rich learning experiences.

Teachers can apply the principle of child-centred learning by allowing children to interact freely with materials they already recognise from home and community life. Objects such as stones, seeds, sticks, leaves, shells, empty containers, calabashes, and fabric remnants can be transformed into learning tools for counting, sorting, building, and imaginative play. Because these materials are familiar, children feel confident using them, which encourages active participation, creativity, and exploration.

The principle of inclusiveness can also be practically applied through the use of local materials. Since these resources are readily available, all children can participate equally regardless of their family's economic background. For example, using bottle tops or seeds for counting ensures that no child is excluded due to a lack of access to learning materials. Children with different abilities can engage at their own pace, as activities can be easily adapted by increasing or reducing complexity.

Flexibility is another key principle that can be strengthened through local resources. Rural teachers often work in environments where schedules, class sizes, or facilities may change unexpectedly. Locally sourced materials allow teachers to adjust activities quickly without relying on expensive or scarce equipment. For instance, a planned numeracy lesson can easily turn into an outdoor counting game using stones or leaves, while a language lesson can involve role-play based on market scenes or farming activities familiar to the children. This flexibility helps teachers respond to children's interests and environmental conditions while keeping learning purposeful.

Play-based learning also supports cultural relevance by embedding learning within local traditions and practices. Traditional songs, folktales, riddles, and games can be incorporated into daily classroom activities to teach language, moral values, memory, and social skills. Using local languages during play helps children understand concepts more easily and strengthens their cultural identity. When children see their culture reflected in their learning, they are more motivated and emotionally connected to school.

Key Principles of Play-Based Learning

According to Roche *et al.* (2024), play-based learning is built on the idea that play is not a distraction from learning; it is an essential part of it. This approach focuses on active, child-led, and age-appropriate experiences that encourage meaningful growth. The main principles are:

- i. **Child-Centred Learning:** Activities are based on children's interests, abilities, and developmental stages. Educators act as observers and helpers instead of directing the learning process.
- ii. **Active Engagement:** Children learn best when they are engaged both physically and mentally. Play incorporates movement, exploration, decision-making, and problem-solving, all vital for deep learning.
- iii. **Holistic Development:** Play nurtures cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth at the same time. It fosters language, empathy, fine motor skills, and critical thinking.
- iv. **Teacher as Facilitator:** Teachers create environments that spark curiosity, stimulate questions, and offer chances for discovery rather than just delivering strict instructions.

These principles are foundational for quality early childhood education and are particularly important in resource-limited rural areas where adaptability and local importance are essential.

Types of Play in Early Childhood Education

Play is a varied and lively activity. It can take many forms, each providing different learning opportunities. Recognising these types helps educators craft richer learning experiences:

- i. **Free Play (Unstructured Play):** Initiated by children and directed without specific learning goals. It promotes independence, creativity, and social negotiation skills.

- ii. Guided Play: Structured by adults with learning goals while still allowing children some independence. For instance, providing materials for kids to build homes while learning about community roles.
- iii. Structured Play: Activities led by adults that have rules or educational goals—such as puzzles, counting games, or singing educational songs.
- iv. Dramatic or Pretend Play: Children use their imagination to create stories and roles. This enhances language skills, emotional expression, and cultural understanding.
- v. Physical or Active Play: Activities like running, climbing, and dancing improve motor skills and physical health, both crucial for staying focused and participating in class.
- vi. Constructive Play: Activities involving building with blocks, drawing, or crafting support planning, coordination, and spatial awareness (Kaluba, C. et al., 2024).

Theories Supporting Play in Learning

Many educational theorists have laid a strong intellectual foundation for incorporating play into early childhood education. Their theories support the idea of play as an effective learning strategy:

- i. Jean Piaget (Cognitive Development Theory): Piaget suggested that children move through developmental stages and learn best by actively exploring and having hands-on experiences. For him, play—especially symbolic play—was a way for children to absorb and process new knowledge (Piaget, J. 1952).
- ii. Lev Vygotsky (Sociocultural Theory): Vygotsky highlighted social interaction's role in learning. He introduced the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), explaining what a child can do with help but not yet on their own (Vygotsky, L. S. 1978).
- iii. Maria Montessori: Montessori believed children have a natural desire to learn through purposeful activity. Her approach supports structured yet child-driven play that fosters independence, focus, and self-discipline (Montessori, M. 1964).
- iv. Friedrich Froebel (Father of Kindergarten): Froebel introduced the concept of educational play through "gifts" and "occupations" and designed early learning settings that prioritised creativity and exploration (Tovey, H. 2017).

The Rural Early Childhood Education Context

Characteristics of Rural Learning Environments

Rural learning environments stand out due to their unique structure, setting, and social dynamics. Unlike urban classrooms, which often follow formal systems, rural early childhood education tends to involve improvisation, limited infrastructure, and strong connections to local traditions. Learning can occur in open-air spaces or shared buildings, where one teacher works with children of various ages and skills (Wang *et al.*, 2024).

Cultural and Community Influences on Early Learning in Rural Areas

Culture plays an important role in how children learn in rural communities. They grow up in environments rich in oral storytelling, music, dance, rituals, and everyday experiences that can easily integrate into early learning. These cultural practices provide valuable ways to promote language development, creativity, and social skills. Involvement in family activities like farming, caregiving, and trading helps children develop practical skills from an early age (Ndlovu, 2023).

Why Play-Based Learning is Essential in Rural Settings

Supporting Cognitive and Social Development

Play-based learning is an effective way to support cognitive and social development in early childhood, especially in rural areas where formal educational resources might be scarce (Bramble Network. (2024). Through imaginative and structured play, children explore, discover, and experiment with activities that promote brain growth, memory, and logical thinking, particularly in settings where formal educational infrastructure is lacking

Encouraging Creativity and Problem-Solving Skills

Children in rural areas often face real-world challenges early on, and play can effectively nurture the creativity and critical thinking skills they need to navigate their surroundings. When children are encouraged to use common items like sticks or fabric scraps as play materials, they learn to innovate, repurpose, and adapt. This type of unstructured play allows them to solve problems independently, test ideas, and persist through trial and error.

Enhancing Language and Communication Through Play

Language develops best in environments where children feel free to express themselves in meaningful ways. Play provides that space. Whether through storytelling, singing, or conversations during games, children practice their language skills naturally. In rural communities, where oral traditions are strong, these interactions create a bridge between home and school language (Su, 2024).

Addressing Misconceptions About Play-Based Learning

“Play is Not Learning” – Debunking the Myth

One enduring myth in early childhood education, especially in rural areas, is that play distracts from serious learning. This belief often comes from traditional education models that equate structured, quiet activities with productivity and prioritise reading and writing achievements above all else. As a result, play is sometimes seen as mere entertainment or a waste of time (Kaluba *et al.* 2024). However, research and global best practices show that play is a vital part of early learning and the best method for young children.

Balancing Structure and Freedom in Learning

Another challenge for educators is finding the right balance between structure and freedom in play-based learning. While free play is essential for encouraging creativity and independence, guided play, where teachers provide a supportive environment with clear learning goals, can greatly improve educational outcomes. In rural classrooms, where resources and time are often limited, educators may feel pressured to focus only on structured lessons to meet curriculum targets (Lindeman, 2022). However, play-based learning does not mean giving up on educational goals. Instead, it involves reaching those goals through engaging, age-appropriate, and child-focused activities. For example, a literacy lesson can include storytelling with puppets, while a numeracy lesson can involve sorting and counting local items.

Challenges to Implementing Play-Based Learning in Rural Areas

Limited Access to Materials and Learning Tools

Many rural communities face a significant lack of basic learning materials, which poses a major barrier to implementing effective play-based learning. However, local, low-cost alternatives such as using everyday materials can overcome this challenge. Classrooms often lack resources, with few toys, books, or visual aids to promote hands-on engagement. Even basic items like crayons or storybooks can be hard to come by in some rural areas.

Lack of Teacher Training and Awareness

Another significant issue is the widespread lack of training for rural early childhood educators on facilitating play-based learning. Many teachers in these areas may not have formal qualifications in early education and may be unfamiliar with the teaching theories that support learning through play.

Solutions for Teacher Training or Community Involvement

To make play-based learning a real priority in Early Childhood Education in Oke Ogun, Oyo State, attention must be given to how teachers are trained and how communities are involved. Many of the challenges facing play-based learning in rural areas come from limited training opportunities for teachers, a lack of materials, and a poor understanding of the value of play among parents. These challenges can be reduced through practical teacher support and active community participation.

One useful step is to organise regular training workshops for early childhood teachers that focus on play-based learning using materials found within the local environment. During these workshops, teachers can be shown simple ways to turn everyday items such as stones, bottle tops, leaves, calabashes, clay, and old fabrics into learning materials. Rather than long lectures, the training should involve hands-on activities where teachers practice designing play-based lessons and classroom games. This helps teachers gain confidence and realise that effective play-based learning does not require expensive toys.

Another important approach is peer support among teachers. Teachers who already use play-based methods successfully can support others by sharing ideas, demonstrating activities in class, and working together to plan lessons. School heads and supervisors can encourage this by creating time for teachers to meet, observe one another, and discuss what works best in their classrooms. This kind of support helps teachers feel less overwhelmed and more willing to try new teaching methods.

Community involvement is also very important. Schools can hold meetings with parents and caregivers to explain why play is important for children's learning and development. When parents understand that play helps children learn to count, talk, cooperate, and think, they are more likely to support play-based activities. These discussions can take place during PTA meetings or community gatherings and should be done in the local language so everyone can understand clearly.

Parents and community members can also support play-based learning by providing local materials and sharing cultural knowledge. Items like wood pieces, clay, seeds, baskets, old clothes, and locally made toys can be donated to schools. Elders in the community can teach traditional games, songs, and stories that teachers can use in the classroom. This not only reduces costs but also helps children learn about their culture while playing. Overall, when teachers are properly supported and communities are actively involved, play-based learning becomes easier to implement in rural areas like Oke Ogun. With simple training, local materials, and shared responsibility, children can enjoy learning in a way that is meaningful, joyful, and suited to their everyday lives.

Strategies for Promoting Play-Based Learning in Rural Areas

Integrate Play-Based Learning into National Early Childhood Education Policies

To make play-based learning recognised and widely accepted in rural areas, it must be included in national early childhood education policies. Policymakers should ensure that the national curriculum focuses on appropriate learning through play, instead of overwhelming young learners with academic content. Schools and teachers need guidelines to incorporate both structured and unstructured play into daily routines.

Invest in Teacher Training and Professional Development

Ongoing teacher training is vital for effective play-based education, especially in rural areas with limited access to specialised instruction. Governments and education stakeholders should create training programs that provide teachers with the skills and resources to establish play-rich environments. Training should offer practical workshops on designing play activities with local materials, managing diverse age groups with playful methods, and assessing learning outcomes through observation.

Mobilise Communities to Support Play in Learning

Community involvement is essential for improving education in rural areas. Campaigns and workshops should be organized to clarify play-based learning and show its benefits for children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Educators can use storytelling, local examples, and parent-child play sessions to build community support.

Encourage the Use of Local and Recycled Materials for Play

Instead of relying on expensive imported teaching aids, rural schools should use materials available in their communities. Training teachers and staff to make use of local, safe, and recycled materials like bottle caps, fabric scraps, clay, or wood can lead to sustainable and context-appropriate play-based learning.

Case Study 1: A Village School's Play-Led Transformation

In Oke-Ogun, a rural area in northern Oyo State, the primary school in Ilero village faced challenges common to many rural schools crowded classrooms, limited resources, and low student engagement. Teachers had difficulty keeping students interested, and many young children dropped out because they found school dull and disconnected from their lives.

This changed when a new headteacher, trained in child-centered teaching, introduced play-based learning in the early childhood classrooms. Using materials like gourds, pebbles, clay, and woven baskets, the school created an interactive and lively classroom. Teachers added Yoruba songs, traditional stories, role-play of market scenes, and counting games with corn kernels. After six months, attendance rates improved, especially for younger students. Parents reported that their children were teaching them songs at home and showing off their counting skills during play.

Case Study 2: Teacher-Led Innovation in a Resource-Poor Setting

In a small settlement near Kishi, also in the Oke-Ogun area, Mrs. Ajoke, a dedicated early childhood teacher, faced a tough challenge teaching 35 pre-primary children in a one-room block with minimal supplies. With no textbooks, no standard toys, and few desks, she relied on her creativity and her knowledge of the community. She started by watching how children played at home sweeping compounds, pretending to farm with sticks, and organizing mock community meetings. Inspired by these activities, she developed a weekly play plan. Lessons on numbers became yam-counting games, and phonics were taught through call-and-response chants. She set up a storytelling corner with mats for children to sit and listen to folktales rich in morals, local words, and life lessons. Despite lacking conventional materials, the children thrived. Mrs Ajoke also engaged parents by inviting them to share play materials like calabash fragments, old clothes for dress-up, and empty cans for sorting games. Eventually, her efforts were recognised by the school management committee, which allocated part of their community development funds to build a small open-air play area.

Summary

The paper started by defining play-based learning and its main principles, referencing the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, and highlighting its global recognition. It examined the realities of rural learning environments marked by limited resources, cultural diversity, and systemic obstacles and demonstrated how play can help close educational gaps.

Conclusion

This paper argues that play-based learning should be central to early childhood education, especially in rural areas like Oke-Ogun, Oyo State. Play is not a luxury; it is an effective educational approach that fosters cognitive growth, social interactions, creativity, emotional well-being, and foundational literacy and numeracy skills in young children, especially in resource-poor settings like Oke Ogun. For rural communities with limited access to costly learning resources, play-based methods provide a practical, culturally relevant, and inclusive solution for meaningful early learning.

Suggestions

Integrating Play-Based Methods in National and Local Curricula: To sustainably implement play-based learning in early childhood education, it needs to be included in Nigeria's national and local curricula. The Federal Ministry of Education, with curriculum development agencies like NERDC (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council), should update early childhood education frameworks to specifically include play-based methods and guidance for implementation, especially in rural areas like Oke-Ogun.

Funding and Support for Rural Teacher Development: Successful implementation of play-based learning relies heavily on prepared and capable teachers. Governments at all levels must prioritise the training, support, and motivation of rural educators. This requires dedicated funding for pre-service and in-service teacher training programs focused on play-based methods.

Community Involvement and Awareness Campaigns: Community understanding and support are crucial for the success of play-based programs. Public awareness campaigns delivered in local languages via radio, religious centres, market meetings, and community events should aim to challenge misconceptions that equate play with laziness.

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