

**PLAY-BASED LEARNING AS A MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGY
FOR ENHANCING PUPILS' ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

PAPER PRESENTED BY:

DIETE-SPIFF INEKIENGHA MERCY CHARITOO

EMAIL: charitoomercy@gmail.com

PHONE: 08033133357, 09011126510

&

LEVI TAMUNOTOM OGONIBA

EMAIL: franklinpeters@gmail.com

PHONE: 08038668172

**PRIMARY EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD
CARE DEPARTMENT**

**SCHOOL OF PRIMARY EDUCATION AND EARLY
CHILDHOOD CARE EDUCATION
FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**ISAAC JASPER BORO COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
SAGBAMA, BAYELSA STATE**

PLAY-BASED LEARNING AS A MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ENHANCING PUPILS' ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Abstract

This paper examined play-based learning as a motivational strategy for enhancing pupils' engagement in early childhood education in Nigeria. It explored the meanings of key concepts such as play, play-based learning, motivation, pupils' engagement and early childhood education, establishing play as a central medium through which young learners develop cognitively, socially and emotionally. The study further identified major forms of play-based learning, including creative, physical, social, digital/interactive and guided classroom play, all of which contribute to active participation and holistic development. It also highlighted the importance of play in improving interest, creativity, problem-solving skills, social interaction and academic retention among pupils. Despite these benefits, challenges such as inadequate instructional materials, poor teacher training, overcrowded classrooms and limited government support were noted. The paper concluded that strengthening play-based learning through improved curriculum design, teacher capacity building and stakeholder support will significantly enhance pupils' engagement and learning outcomes in Nigerian early childhood education.

Keywords: Play-Based Learning, Pupils' Engagement, Early Childhood Education
Introduction

Early childhood education remains one of the most critical stages in the development of a child because it lays the foundation for future learning, behaviour, creativity and social interaction. At this stage, children learn best through activities that stimulate curiosity, exploration and interaction with their environment. In recent years, educators and child development experts have increasingly advocated for play-based learning as an effective instructional approach for improving pupils' motivation and classroom engagement (Idogho, 2025). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2024) play-based learning promotes active participation, creativity and holistic child development, especially within early childhood classrooms in developing nations such as Nigeria. The growing interest in learner-centred pedagogies has therefore made the science of play an important issue in contemporary educational discourse.

Play-based learning refers to a child-centred instructional approach in which learning activities are organised through games, exploration, imagination and social interaction. Scholars have argued that children naturally construct knowledge when they engage in meaningful play activities (Adubuola et al., 2023). For instance, Olutomi (2019) asserted that

play is not merely a recreational activity but an essential medium through which children develop cognitive, emotional and social skills necessary for effective learning. Similarly, Adubuola et al. (2023) emphasised that play-based learning enhances socio-emotional development and improves children's interaction with peers in early childhood settings. This indicates that the integration of play into classroom instruction can significantly improve pupils' enthusiasm and participation in learning activities.

In Nigeria, however, early childhood education is still confronted with several challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, poor teacher preparation and excessive emphasis on rote learning. Many schools prioritise memorisation and formal academic drills at the expense of creative and participatory learning experiences. Idogho (2025) observed that the Nigerian educational system still suffers from inadequate utilisation of play as a pedagogical strategy despite its recognised benefits for child development. In the same vein, Anazodo (2025) found that pupils exposed to play-based instructional strategies demonstrated better language development, memory retention and social cooperation than those taught through conventional methods. These findings suggest that play-based learning possesses the capacity to transform early childhood education in Nigeria by making learning more engaging, enjoyable and meaningful for young learners.

Furthermore, researchers have maintained that play-based learning encourages collaboration, communication and problem-solving abilities among children. Oyegoke et al. (2024) argued that integrating indigenous and Western play practices in Nigerian schools can make learning culturally relevant and more appealing to pupils. This paper therefore argues that adopting play-based learning strategies in Nigerian early childhood education will not only motivate pupils' interest in learning but will also enhance active engagement, creativity and overall educational development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Play

Play refers to a voluntary, pleasurable and spontaneous activity through which children explore their environment, express emotions and develop intellectually, socially and physically. It is regarded as a natural medium through which children learn and interact with the world around them (Idogho, 2025). According to Shoaga (2015), play is an indispensable aspect of childhood that enhances creativity, imagination and problem-solving abilities. In the Nigerian

context, Idogho (2025) observed that play serves as a strategic pedagogical tool that promotes holistic child development and meaningful learning experiences in early childhood settings. Similarly, Olutomi (2019) maintained that play enables children to acquire developmental skills across cognitive, emotional and psychomotor domains. In agreement with these assertions, Mbachi et al. (2020) argued that play improves pupils' confidence, mental alertness and social adjustment. Therefore, play is not merely recreation, but an educational and developmental process essential for the growth of every child.

Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is a child-centred instructional approach in which play activities are intentionally integrated into teaching and learning processes to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values. It combines enjoyment with educational objectives, thereby enabling children to learn naturally through exploration, experimentation and interaction. Oyegoke et al. (2024) explained that play-based learning integrates culturally relevant play experiences that stimulate children's engagement and academic growth in Nigerian early childhood education. In another study, Anazodo (2025) described play-based learning as an effective pedagogical strategy that enhances children's cognitive and social development through guided and structured play activities. Ekeh (2023) also asserted that play-based pedagogy promotes creativity, communication and collaborative learning among preschool learners. Furthermore, Johnson (2022) noted that play-based methods improve children's cognitive skills and learning outcomes because they encourage active participation and experiential learning. Thus, play-based learning can be understood as an educational strategy that uses purposeful play to achieve meaningful developmental and academic outcomes among young learners.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the internal drive, desire or external stimulus that energises, directs and sustains an individual's behaviour towards achieving a particular goal. In educational settings, motivation influences pupils' willingness to participate actively in learning activities and persist in academic tasks. Sulaimon, Adebayo and Manditereza (2025) observed that motivating learning environments increase learners' collaboration, participation and

enthusiasm during classroom activities. In the context of early childhood education, motivation often emerges when children are exposed to enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences such as play-based activities. According to educational psychologists, motivated learners tend to display curiosity, attentiveness and commitment to learning tasks. Adubuola et al. (2023) further affirmed that engaging play experiences stimulate children's socioemotional development and sustain their interest in classroom participation. Consequently, motivation may be viewed as the force that inspires pupils to learn effectively, participate willingly and achieve desired educational objectives.

Pupils' Engagement

Pupils' engagement refers to the degree of attention, interest, participation and emotional involvement that learners demonstrate during classroom and school-related activities. It reflects the extent to which pupils are actively committed to learning and interacting positively with educational experiences. Educational researchers have identified behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement as important dimensions of pupils' engagement. Oyegoke et al. (2024) noted that culturally relevant play activities significantly improve children's participation and interaction during learning processes. Likewise, Anazodo (2025) reported that pupils exposed to play-based instruction showed greater cooperation, communication and active classroom involvement than those taught through conventional methods. In support of this position, Mbachii et al. (2020) explained that play enhances learners' curiosity, self-confidence and readiness to participate in academic activities. Therefore, pupils' engagement can be understood as the active involvement and sustained commitment of learners in educational activities that promote effective learning and development.

Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to the formal and informal educational experiences provided for children from birth to approximately eight years of age, with the aim of fostering their cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. It represents the foundational stage of education where children acquire basic life skills, attitudes and learning habits necessary for future academic success (Anazodo, 2025). According to Idogho (2025), early childhood education is a crucial stage that prepares children to meet societal and educational challenges through developmentally appropriate teaching methods such as play.

Similarly, Olutomi (2019) described ECE as a period in which children develop essential competencies through structured interactions and learning experiences. Anazodo (2025) further stressed that effective early childhood education promotes children's language development, memory retention and social cooperation. In Nigeria, early childhood education is recognised as a significant aspect of the educational system because it lays the foundation for lifelong learning, character formation and national development.

Forms of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education

Play-based learning exists in different forms that support the holistic development of children in early childhood education. These forms promote children's intellectual, social, emotional and physical growth while making learning enjoyable and meaningful. Scholars have emphasised that the use of diverse play activities enhances pupils' engagement, motivation and creativity in the classroom (Idogho, 2025). The major forms of play-based learning include the following:

1. Creative Play

Creative play involves imaginative and expressive activities through which children use their ideas, imagination and talents to create or represent situations and objects. It includes drawing, painting, storytelling, drama, singing, dancing and role-playing activities. According to Ekeh (2023), creative play promotes imagination, communication skills and self-expression among preschool learners. In Nigerian early childhood settings, creative play enables children to imitate societal roles and explore their environment meaningfully. Idogho (2025) maintained that children develop problem-solving abilities and emotional confidence when engaged in imaginative activities. Thus, creative play enhances originality, innovation and cognitive development among young learners.

2. Physical Play

Physical play refers to activities that involve bodily movement and coordination such as running, jumping, climbing, skipping and ball games. This form of play is essential for the physical and motor development of children. Mbachi, Enemuo and Chigbo-Obasi (2020) noted that physical play improves children's muscular strength, balance, coordination and overall health. It also contributes to emotional well-being by reducing stress and increasing children's enthusiasm for learning. Shoaga (2015) explained that physical play strengthens children's

concentration and readiness for classroom participation. Consequently, physical play remains an important component of early childhood education because it supports both healthy growth and active learning.

3. Social Play

Social play occurs when children interact, cooperate and communicate with one another during play activities. It includes group games, peer interaction, collaborative tasks and pretend play involving two or more children. According to Oyegoke et al. (2024), social play enhances cooperation, tolerance and interpersonal relationships among learners in early childhood education. Through social play, children learn how to share, take turns, resolve conflicts and respect others' opinions. Anazodo (2025) further observed that social interaction during play contributes significantly to children's language development and emotional adjustment. Therefore, social play helps children develop the social competencies necessary for successful classroom and societal relationships.

4. Digital/Interactive Play

Digital or interactive play involves the use of technological devices and interactive learning tools such as educational games, tablets, videos and digital storytelling applications to facilitate learning. In contemporary education, technology-based play activities are increasingly integrated into early childhood classrooms to stimulate children's interest and engagement. Sulaimon, Adebayo and Manditereza (2025) asserted that interactive play technologies improve collaboration, participation and learning motivation among children. Similarly, Johnson (2022) explained that digital play activities promote critical thinking and cognitive development when appropriately guided by teachers. However, scholars caution that digital play should be properly monitored to ensure educational relevance and prevent excessive screen exposure. Thus, digital play serves as a modern instructional strategy that combines entertainment with educational development.

5. Guided Classroom Play

Guided classroom play refers to structured play activities organised and supervised by teachers to achieve specific educational objectives. In this form of play, the teacher provides instructions, learning materials and guidance while allowing children the freedom to participate actively. Olutomi (2019) explained that guided play creates a balance between teacher-directed instruction and child-centred exploration. It enables teachers to facilitate learning experiences that improve literacy, numeracy and communication skills among children. Furthermore,

Adubuola et al. (2023) observed that guided classroom plays increase pupils' attention, participation and socio-emotional development. Therefore, guided classroom play remains an effective teaching strategy that encourages purposeful learning and meaningful classroom engagement in early childhood education.

Importance of Play-Based Learning in Motivating Pupils

Play-based learning is highly important in early childhood education because it creates enjoyable learning experiences that motivate pupils to participate actively in classroom activities. Educational scholars have consistently emphasised that children learn better when instruction is integrated with purposeful play activities. Play-based learning enhances pupils' curiosity, confidence, communication and emotional stability while making learning meaningful and less stressful. The following are some major importance of playbased learning in motivating pupils:

a. Enhances Interest in Learning

Play-based learning stimulates children's interest and enthusiasm towards educational activities because learning becomes enjoyable and engaging. Children are naturally attracted to games, songs, storytelling and imaginative activities, which increase their attention span during lessons. Adeyemi and Oluwabunmi (2022) observed that pupils exposed to playful instructional strategies demonstrate greater enthusiasm and willingness to learn than those taught through rigid teaching methods. This increased interest contributes positively to pupils' academic motivation and classroom participation.

b. Promotes Active Participation

Play-based learning encourages children to become active participants in the teaching and learning process rather than passive listeners. Through role-play, games, group tasks and interactive activities, pupils become directly involved in classroom experiences. Okoli and Nwosu (2021) explained that participatory learning activities improve pupils' confidence, attentiveness and commitment to classroom tasks. As a result, children develop a sense of belonging and responsibility in the learning environment.

c. Improves Creativity and Imagination

One of the major importance of play-based learning is that it develops children's creativity and imaginative thinking. Activities such as drawing, drama, music and pretend play allow children to express ideas freely and think innovatively. According to Yusuf and Alabi (2020), creative play activities improve children's problem-solving skills and intellectual flexibility. Through imaginative learning experiences, children become more confident in exploring new ideas and finding solutions independently.

d. Encourages Social Interaction

Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to interact, cooperate and communicate effectively with their peers and teachers. Group play activities help pupils to develop teamwork, tolerance and interpersonal relationships. Akinyemi (2023) asserted that social interaction during play strengthens pupils' communication skills and emotional adjustment within the classroom environment. This social development contributes greatly to children's motivation and sense of inclusion in school activities.

e. Supports Cognitive and Emotional Development

Play-based learning contributes significantly to children's intellectual and emotional growth. Through playful activities, pupils develop memory, reasoning, language and emotional regulation skills. Ibrahim and Hassan (2024) noted that play-oriented instruction enhances children's cognitive processing abilities and emotional stability. Furthermore, emotionally supportive learning environments reduce anxiety and improve pupils' readiness to learn effectively.

f. Develops Problem-Solving Skills

Play activities often expose children to situations that require thinking, decisionmaking and problem-solving. Educational games, puzzles and exploratory activities help pupils to analyse situations critically and discover solutions independently. Eze and Chukwu (2021) explained that children who engage regularly in play-based learning demonstrate stronger analytical and reasoning abilities. Consequently, pupils become more confident and motivated to tackle academic challenges.

g. Increases Retention and Academic Achievement

Play-based learning improves pupils' understanding and retention of knowledge because children learn better through practical and enjoyable experiences. Songs, games and

hands-on activities help learners to remember concepts more easily than traditional memorisation methods. Bello and Adewale (2022) affirmed that pupils taught through playbased strategies often achieve better academic outcomes and show greater consistency in classroom performance. Therefore, play-based learning strengthens both motivation and longterm academic success among early childhood learners.

Challenges Affecting the Use of Play-Based Learning in Nigeria

In spite of the recognised importance of play-based learning in promoting pupils' motivation and engagement, several factors continue to hinder its effective implementation in Nigeria. These challenges affect the quality of instruction provided in early childhood education centres and reduce children's opportunities for meaningful learning experiences. Educational scholars have consistently identified inadequate facilities, poor policy implementation and negative societal attitudes as major obstacles to child-centred learning approaches in the country. The following are some of the major challenges affecting the use of play-based learning in Nigeria:

i. Inadequate Learning Materials

One of the major challenges confronting play-based learning in Nigeria is the shortage of instructional and play materials in schools. Many early childhood education centres lack toys, puzzles, charts, blocks and outdoor play equipment needed for effective classroom interaction. Adeniran and Yusuf (2021) explained that inadequate learning materials reduce children's opportunities for exploration and active engagement during lessons. In many rural schools, teachers struggle to improvise suitable play resources because of limited financial support. Consequently, pupils are denied enriching learning experiences that stimulate creativity and motivation.

ii. Poor Teacher Training

Inadequate teacher preparation remains a serious obstacle to the successful implementation of play-based learning. Many teachers handling early childhood learners are not properly trained in child-centred pedagogical approaches and classroom play management. Chukwuemeka and Aina (2022) observed that some teachers still depend largely on traditional lecture methods because they lack adequate professional competence in play-based instruction. The absence of regular seminars and in-service training further weakens teachers'

understanding of modern teaching strategies. As a result, classroom learning often becomes rigid and less engaging for pupils.

iii. 3. Overcrowded Classrooms

Overcrowded classrooms constitute another major challenge affecting play-based learning in Nigeria. In many public schools, the number of pupils exceeds the available classroom space and teacher capacity. Ibrahim and Okeke (2020) noted that overcrowding makes classroom management difficult and limits effective supervision during play activities. Children in overcrowded classrooms also experience reduced opportunities for interaction, movement and individual participation. This situation discourages teachers from organising meaningful group play and practical learning activities. iv. Limited Government Support

Insufficient government commitment to early childhood education negatively affects the implementation of play-based learning in Nigeria. Many schools receive inadequate funding for the provision of play facilities, instructional materials and teacher development programmes. Akpan and Oladipo (2023) maintained that weak educational policies and poor monitoring systems have contributed significantly to the neglect of play-oriented learning in Nigerian schools. Inadequate investment in early childhood education continues to hinder the establishment of child-friendly learning environments across the country.

v. Excessive Emphasis on Rote Learning

The persistent emphasis on rote memorisation and examination performance is another challenge affecting play-based learning. Many teachers and parents still prefer conventional teaching methods that focus on repetition and note copying instead of active exploration and creativity. Ezeani and Bello (2024) argued that excessive dependence on rote learning suppresses children's curiosity, innovation and independent thinking abilities. This traditional orientation discourages the use of engaging instructional methods that motivate pupils and improve participation. vi. Negative Parental Perception of Play

Some parents misunderstand the educational value of play and regard it merely as a recreational activity rather than a learning strategy. As a result, they often expect teachers to concentrate only on formal academic tasks such as reading and writing drills. Ogunleye and Nwachukwu (2021) reported that negative parental attitudes towards play-based learning discourage teachers from fully implementing child-centred teaching approaches. This

misconception limits societal acceptance of play as an effective educational tool in early childhood education.

vii. Inadequate Learning Environment and Facilities

Poor school infrastructure and unconducive learning environments also hinder the effective use of play-based learning in Nigeria. Many early childhood centres lack spacious classrooms, playgrounds and safe recreational facilities needed for interactive learning activities. Musa and Egbunike (2022) explained that unconducive school environments reduce children's participation, comfort and enthusiasm during play activities. Without adequate facilities, teachers find it difficult to organise meaningful indoor and outdoor play experiences that support holistic child development.

Strategies for Improving Play-Based Learning in Nigeria

The effective implementation of play-based learning in Nigeria requires deliberate efforts from teachers, parents, government and other educational stakeholders. Since playbased learning promotes pupils' motivation, participation and holistic development, there is a need to strengthen policies and practices that support its use in early childhood education. Educational scholars have emphasised that improving learning facilities, teacher competence and curriculum content will enhance the quality of child-centred education in Nigeria. The following are some important strategies for improving play-based learning in the country:

1. Provision of Instructional Materials

Adequate provision of instructional and play materials is essential for improving playbased learning in Nigerian schools. Materials such as toys, charts, blocks, puzzles, picture books and outdoor play equipment help children to learn actively through exploration and interaction. Adegbite and Onifade (2022) observed that the availability of appropriate learning materials increases pupils' interest, participation and creativity during classroom activities. Schools should therefore be adequately equipped with child-friendly resources that support meaningful play experiences and effective learning outcomes.

2. Teacher Capacity Building

Continuous teacher training and professional development are necessary for the successful implementation of play-based learning. Teachers should be exposed to workshops,

seminars and refresher courses on modern child-centred teaching methods and classroom management strategies. Nnamani and Ezech (2021) explained that professionally trained teachers are more effective in organising purposeful play activities that stimulate pupils' engagement and cognitive development. Therefore, strengthening teachers' pedagogical competence will improve the quality of early childhood education in Nigeria.

3. Curriculum Improvement

Improving the early childhood education curriculum is another important strategy for enhancing play-based learning. The curriculum should provide adequate emphasis on practical activities, creativity, exploration and interactive learning experiences rather than excessive theoretical instruction. Salihu and Adeyinka (2023) noted that a flexible and activity-based curriculum encourages pupils' curiosity, innovation and active classroom participation. Curriculum planners should therefore integrate more child-centred learning activities that promote holistic child development.

4. Government and Stakeholder Support

The government and relevant educational stakeholders should provide stronger support for the promotion of play-based learning in Nigeria. Such support may include increased funding, policy implementation, monitoring of schools and provision of learning facilities. Okafor and Ibrahim (2024) maintained that effective government involvement is necessary for improving the standard of early childhood education across the country. Nongovernmental organisations, parents and community leaders should also collaborate in promoting child-friendly learning environments and educational resources.

5. Integration of Child-Centred Teaching Approaches

Teachers should adopt child-centred instructional approaches that encourage active participation, discovery and creativity among pupils. Instead of relying solely on rote memorisation, classroom instruction should involve games, storytelling, role-play and collaborative activities. Ojo and Bamidele (2020) argued that child-centred teaching strategies enhance pupils' confidence, communication skills and independent thinking abilities. The integration of these approaches will therefore make learning more engaging and meaningful for children.

6. Improvement of School Learning Environment

Creating safe, spacious and stimulating learning environments is essential for effective play-based learning. Schools should provide adequate classroom space, playgrounds and recreational facilities that encourage movement, interaction and exploration. Danjuma and Obi (2022) explained that a conducive school environment improves children's emotional comfort, participation and readiness to learn. A well-organised learning environment also motivates teachers to implement interactive and practical teaching methods effectively.

7. Parental Involvement and Awareness

Parents should be educated on the importance of play-based learning in children's academic and social development. Many parents still believe that play distracts children from serious learning activities, thereby discouraging its use in schools. According to Lawal and Chinedu (2021), parental understanding and support contribute significantly to the successful implementation of child-centred educational practices. Schools should therefore organise awareness programmes and parent-teacher interactions to sensitise families about the educational value of play in early childhood learning.

Link between Play-Based Learning and Pupils' Engagement in Early Childhood Education

Play-based learning has a strong relationship with pupils' engagement in early childhood education because it creates enjoyable, interactive and meaningful learning experiences that actively involve children in classroom activities. In early childhood settings, children naturally learn best through activities that allow them to explore, discover and interact freely with their environment. As a result, play-based learning increases pupils' attention, curiosity, motivation and willingness to participate in academic tasks. Educational researchers have consistently emphasised that children become more engaged when learning activities are practical, enjoyable and suited to their developmental needs. According to Udeh and Ekwueme (2022), pupils exposed to play-oriented instructional strategies demonstrate higher levels of classroom participation and concentration than those taught through conventional methods. This indicates that play activities stimulate children's interest and sustain their engagement during lessons.

Furthermore, play-based learning promotes active participation by encouraging children to communicate, collaborate and solve problems collectively. Through games, storytelling,

role-play, music and creative activities, pupils become emotionally and socially connected to the learning process. Adewale and Nnaji (2021) observed that children who participate regularly in guided play activities develop stronger communication skills, confidence and interpersonal relationships, which positively influence classroom engagement. In the same vein, interactive play activities help children to express themselves freely and overcome fear or anxiety that may hinder participation in learning activities. Consequently, pupils become more willing to ask questions, share ideas and cooperate with their peers during classroom instruction.

Play-based learning also supports cognitive and emotional development, which are important factors influencing pupils' engagement in early childhood education. During play activities, children develop memory, reasoning, creativity and critical thinking skills that enhance their understanding of classroom concepts. Okonkwo and Salisu (2023) maintained that children engaged in exploratory and imaginative play demonstrate improved attention span and stronger enthusiasm towards learning activities. Emotionally, play creates a relaxed and supportive learning environment that reduces boredom and frustration among pupils.

This positive emotional state motivates children to remain actively involved in classroom experiences and learning tasks.

In addition, play-based learning accommodates the diverse learning needs and abilities of young learners. Since children differ in interests, talents and learning styles, play activities provide opportunities for every child to participate according to individual strengths and preferences. Ekanade and Yusuf (2024) explained that child-centred play activities improve inclusiveness and encourage equal participation among pupils in early childhood classrooms. This inclusive nature of play-based learning strengthens pupils' sense of belonging and increases their commitment to school activities. Therefore, the relationship between play-based learning and pupils' engagement is significant because play serves as a motivational tool that enhances children's active participation, creativity, emotional stability and overall learning outcomes in early childhood education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, play-based learning remains a powerful motivational strategy for enhancing pupils' engagement in early childhood education in Nigeria. It transforms learning

into an active, enjoyable and meaningful process that stimulates children's interest, creativity and participation. Despite its numerous benefits, its effective implementation is still constrained by challenges such as inadequate resources, poor teacher preparation and limited institutional support. However, with improved curriculum design, stronger government commitment and sustained teacher capacity development, these barriers can be addressed. Ultimately, strengthening play-based learning practices will significantly improve pupils' motivation, engagement and overall learning outcomes in Nigerian early childhood education.

Recommendations

In view of the discussion of this paper, the following are hereby recommended:

1. Early childhood teachers should consistently adopt structured play-based strategies in daily lessons to make learning more engaging, interactive and meaningful for pupils.
2. School authorities should prioritise the provision of adequate instructional and play materials such as toys, puzzles, charts and outdoor equipment to support effective classroom play activities.
3. Government and education agencies should organise regular training, workshops and in-service programmes to strengthen teachers' competence in child-centred and playbased pedagogies.
4. Curriculum planners should further integrate practical, activity-based and playoriented content into the early childhood education curriculum to reduce overreliance on rote learning.
5. Parents and guardians should be sensitised on the educational value of play so they can support schools and encourage children's participation in play-based learning both at home and in school.

References

- Adegbite, T. O., & Onifade, A. S. (2022). Instructional resources and effective play-based learning in Nigerian preschools. *Journal of Educational Practice and Innovation*, 6(3), 58–70.

- Adeniran, R. O., & Yusuf, M. A. (2021). Availability of play materials and learning effectiveness in Nigerian preschools. *Journal of Early Childhood and Basic Education*, 4(2), 56–68.
- Adewale, T. O., & Nnaji, P. I. (2021). Guided play and classroom participation among preschool children in Nigeria. *Journal of Early Childhood Learning and Development*, 6(2), 44–56.
- Adeyemi, T. A., & Oluwabunmi, R. O. (2022). Play-way teaching strategy and pupils' interest in learning in Nigerian nursery schools. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education Studies*, 6(2), 44–53.
- Adubuola, E. O., Gbadeyanka, T. A., Hamzat, B. O., & Oyewumi, N. O. (2023). Influence of play-based learning on socio-emotional development among early childhood children in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. *Jurnal Inovasi Teknologi Pendidikan*, 10(4), 1–12.
- Adubuola, E. O., Gbadeyanka, T. A., Hamzat, B. O., & Oyewumi, N. O. (2023). Influence of play-based learning on socio-emotional development among early childhood children in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. *Jurnal Inovasi Teknologi Pendidikan*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.21831/jitp.v10i4.66352>
- Akinyemi, S. O. (2023). Social interaction and collaborative play among preschool children in South-West Nigeria. *African Journal of Educational Development*, 11(1), 65–78.
- Akpan, E. U., & Oladipo, S. A. (2023). Government policies and the implementation of childcentred education in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Policy Studies*, 10(1), 33–45.
- Anazodo, O. G. (2025). Impact of play-based learning on cognitive and social development in early childhood education centres in Anambra State. *UNIZIK Journal of Educational Laws and Leadership Studies*, 3(1), 1–15.
- Bello, M. T., & Adewale, F. A. (2022). Influence of play-based instructional materials on academic achievement of preschool pupils in Kwara State. *Journal of Childhood Education Research*, 8(3), 91–103.
- Chukwuemeka, N. C., & Aina, T. O. (2022). Teacher competence and the adoption of playbased pedagogy in early childhood education. *African Journal of Teacher Education*, 8(3), 71–84.
- Danjuma, M. I., & Obi, C. A. (2022). School environment and effective learning participation among preschool children in Nigeria. *African Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 9(2), 73–85.
- Ekanade, S. A., & Yusuf, R. M. (2024). Child-centred learning and inclusive participation in early childhood education. *African Journal of Educational Psychology*, 11(1), 67–79.

- Ekeh, M. C. (2023). Play-based pedagogy and creativity for early grade and preschool learners. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, 14(1), 52–63.
- Eze, P. N., & Chukwu, E. O. (2021). Play activities as predictors of problem-solving skills among early childhood learners in Enugu State. *Nigerian Journal of Educational Psychology*, 14(2), 101–112.
- Ezeani, P. N., & Bello, A. K. (2024). Rote learning practices and creative development among preschool learners in Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary Childhood Education*, 11(1), 49–60.
- Ibrahim, A. U., & Hassan, L. M. (2024). Play-oriented learning and emotional development among preschool children in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 9(1), 27–39.
- Ibrahim, H. M., & Okeke, J. I. (2020). Classroom overcrowding and learning participation among preschool children in public schools. *Nigerian Journal of Educational Administration and Planning*, 15(2), 92–104.
- Idogho, J. A. (2025). Dimensions of play in the 21st century pedagogy: Learning imperative for the Nigerian child. *Ibadan Journal of Theatre Arts*, 7, 45–58.
- Johnson, M. A. (2022). *Play-based method and development of cognitive skills in early childhood education in Surulere Local Government Area, Lagos State, Nigeria* (Master's thesis). Kampala International University.
- Lawal, B. A., & Chinedu, F. N. (2021). Parental awareness and support for play-based learning in nursery schools. *Journal of Childhood Education and Development*, 5(4), 40–52.
- Mbachii, R. A., Enemuo, J. O., & Chigbo-Obasi, T. U. (2020). Perceived influence of play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State. *Journal of Early Childhood and Primary Education*, 2(1), 33–44.
- Musa, A. A., & Egbunike, R. C. (2022). School environment and pupils' participation in play activities in early childhood education centres. *West African Journal of Educational Research*, 7(4), 80–93.
- Nnamani, S. C., & Ezech, G. A. (2021). Teacher professional development and classroom implementation of play pedagogy in early childhood education. *Nigerian Journal of Teacher Education*, 13(1), 89–101.
- Ogunleye, F. O., & Nwachukwu, E. C. (2021). Parents' perception of play-based learning in Nigerian nursery schools. *Journal of Childhood Studies and Development*, 5(1), 18–29.
- Ojo, R. T., & Bamidele, K. O. (2020). Child-centred instructional strategies and pupils' engagement in early childhood education. *International Journal of Educational Methodology*, 7(2), 95–107.

- Okafor, J. U., & Ibrahim, M. A. (2024). Government intervention and the advancement of early childhood education in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies*, 10(1), 22–35.
- Okoli, C. I., & Nwosu, J. C. (2021). Classroom participation and play-based pedagogy in early childhood education. *West African Journal of Educational Innovation*, 5(4), 73–84.
- Okonkwo, C. N., & Salisu, A. B. (2023). Exploratory play and pupils' engagement in early childhood classrooms in Nigeria. *International Journal of Childhood Education Studies*, 9(3), 88–101.
- Olutomi, A. A. (2019). Practitioners' position on play and learning in early childhood: Evidence of overschooling. *Covenant International Journal of Psychology*, 4(2), 1–12.
- Oyegoke, D. A., Abioye, J. A. I., Olatunji, S. O., & Oyekunle, A. T. (2024). The integration of indigenous and Western play-based learning practices in Nigerian early childhood education: A framework for culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Journal of Education and Evaluation Studies*, 1(8), 258–271.
- Salihu, H. M., & Adeyinka, P. O. (2023). Curriculum innovation and active learning in Nigerian early childhood education. *West African Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 8(3), 61–74.
- Shoaga, O. (2015). Play and learning: Inseparable dimensions to early childhood education. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 5(2), 185–192.
- Sulaimon, J., Adebayo, A. A., & Manditereza, B. (2025). Exploring the impact of play-based learning on teacher satisfaction, stress, and learners' collaboration. *INSPIRA: Indonesian Journal of Psychological Research*, 6(1), 22–34.
- Udeh, F. O., & Ekwueme, C. A. (2022). Play-based instructional strategies and learning engagement among preschool pupils in South-East Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 7(4), 51–63.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2024). *Enhancing early childhood care and development education in Nigeria: A play-based curriculum and capacity-building approach*.
- Yusuf, H. T., & Alabi, K. A. (2020). Creative play and imaginative thinking among preschool children in Lagos State. *International Journal of Childhood and Primary Education*, 7(1), 55–67.