



Play as Pedagogical Practice: Using Games to Support Elementary Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

Play-based activities occupy a central position in early and middle childhood education, functioning not only as recreational practices but also as meaningful contexts for social interaction, cognitive engagement, and the negotiation of diverse perspectives among children, including those with intellectual disabilities. Contemporary educational thought emphasizes that the early stages of schooling should prioritize playful learning environments, as these foster holistic development, accessibility, and active participation for learners with diverse cognitive profiles. Drawing on a play-centered pedagogical perspective, this study conceptualizes games as mediating resources through which children, particularly those who experience learning difficulties or intellectual disabilities, can develop reflective thinking, emotional well-being, and collaborative skills within inclusive classroom settings. The study was conducted in an elementary school, focusing on a Grade 5 classroom over a six-month period during the year, 2025. Employing a qualitative research design, the study examined how games and playful strategies were integrated into classroom instruction and how they functioned as learning tools for a diverse student population. Data were collected through sustained classroom observations and semi-structured questionnaires administered to the class teacher and the school principal. The findings highlight the pedagogical value of games in creating inclusive and engaging learning environments and underscore their role in supporting academic learning, social development, and participation among children with varying learning needs, including intellectual disabilities. The study calls for further research into the systematic integration of play-based pedagogies across elementary education, particularly to explore their long-term impact on inclusive instructional practices, learner engagement and developmental outcomes.

Keywords: Play; Early childhood; Pedagogy; Early Practitioners; Learning

Article Details:

Received on 10 Jan, 2026

Accepted on 31 Jan, 2026

Published on 02 Feb, 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Games and play constitute an essential dimension of the child's world, through which imagination, fantasy and subjectivity are continuously constructed. From early childhood, play enables children to create symbolic meanings, attribute life to objects, and build imaginary worlds that reflect their emotions, experiences and social realities. Toys often become confidants and companions, mediating children's understanding of themselves and the world around them. In this sense, games and playful activities play a decisive role in student development, as they stimulate imagination, reasoning abilities, symbolic thinking, and self-esteem, while also fostering emotional and social growth.

From a theoretical perspective, play is not merely a spontaneous or recreational activity but a socially situated practice embedded within broader cultural and power relations. Annagardd(2016) emphasizes that children's subjectivities are produced through networks of social meanings in which play activities actively participate. Toys and playful practices function as producers of meanings, behaviors, and feelings, shaping how children learn to think, feel, and act within their communities. As children engage with toys during play, they gradually internalize behaviors and norms that correspond to socially accepted lifestyles, thereby reinforcing the formative role of play in the construction of identity and social belonging.

Interaction through play further contributes to the development of autonomy and cooperative relationships among children. Playful activities involve creating objects, acquiring knowledge, and engaging socially with peers, allowing children to explore rules, negotiate meanings, and build shared understandings. Johl (2017) argues that the use of games in educational contexts must be intentional, serving as a means to achieve pedagogical objectives rather than functioning solely as entertainment. Games promote learning by reconnecting children with their experiences and facilitating the construction of knowledge in meaningful and enjoyable ways. Semiz (2022) notes, many objects now regarded as toys originated as representations of social or religious practices, which children transformed into play artifacts, demonstrating the adaptive and creative nature of play across cultures and historical periods.

Within the school environment, games and play assume a particularly significant role, as they contribute to the holistic development of learners, including children with intellectual disabilities. Play enhances autonomy, motor coordination, concentration, creativity, and social interaction, while also supporting cultural transmission across diverse social contexts. Through play, children develop essential social attitudes such as mutual respect, solidarity, cooperation, responsibility, and adherence to rules, learning the value of group participation and healthy competition (Shaikh, 2020). For learners with intellectual disabilities, these playful interactions are especially valuable, as they provide accessible and concrete opportunities to engage with peers, practice social norms, and participate meaningfully in group activities. Moreover, playful activities foster responsibility and initiative, enabling children to experience satisfaction and engagement within structured educational settings where rules and behaviors are purposefully guided and adapted to diverse learning needs. In educational practice, the integration of games and play as teaching and learning tools depends largely on the teacher's ability to design meaningful playful experiences aligned with instructional goals and responsive to learner diversity. (Habil, 2013) highlights the importance of considering children's actions and expressions, as these reveal complex relationships between imagination, reality and learning. Children learn more effectively when play is incorporated into instruction, particularly when games and toys are used as didactic-pedagogical resources that support differentiated learning and inclusive participation. For students with intellectual disabilities, play-based strategies allow for repetition, mediation and sensory engagement, thereby facilitating cognitive, emotional, and social development. (Kakepoto et al., 2013) further reinforces this perspective by framing play as a fundamental

right of citizenship, closely linked to culture, art, sport, and leisure, underscoring its legitimacy and necessity within formal educational contexts for all learners.

In light of these perspectives, this study seeks to understand games and play not merely as sources of amusement but as intentional pedagogical resources capable of enriching the teaching-learning process in inclusive classroom environments. It aims to explore how playful activities contribute to students' overall development, including those with intellectual disabilities, and how they can be effectively employed as tools for knowledge construction, socialization, and the promotion of autonomy. The scope of the study is limited to examining the role and educational potential of games and play within classroom practices, focusing on their contribution to meaningful learning experiences and the formation of well-rounded learners in diverse educational settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of games and play within educational contexts draws upon multiple theoretical perspectives that explain how children learn, construct knowledge, and develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally through playful activities, including children with intellectual disabilities. While early research on play often emphasized its intrinsic value, contemporary scholarship situates play as a core pedagogical and developmental mechanism that supports inclusive and differentiated learning. Understanding games and play as tools for learning requires synthesizing perspectives from developmental and educational psychology, sociocultural theory, and constructivist frameworks, all of which recognize play as a means through which learners with diverse cognitive profiles can actively engage with their environment. These theoretical strands provide insight into why play facilitates intellectual growth, social interaction, and meaningful engagement with curricular content in school settings, particularly by offering concrete, mediated, and socially situated experiences that are accessible to children with intellectual disabilities.

Jean Piaget's (1962) cognitive developmental theory has historically provided one of the earliest systematic accounts of play's role in learning. Piaget conceptualized play as a "happy display of known actions," grounded in the processes of assimilation and accommodation whereby children incorporate new experiences into existing cognitive structures and adjust their mental frameworks when necessary. According to Piaget, play evolves in form with cognitive maturation: sensorimotor or practice play characterizes infancy; symbolic or pretend play emerges in the preschool years; and games with rules develop later as children approach concrete operational stages. In this view, play is not merely spontaneous activity but reflects the child's current level of intellectual functioning. Through manipulation of objects and symbolic representation, children test hypotheses about the environment, construct meaning, and refine cognitive schemas.

While Piaget emphasized individual cognitive development through interaction with the physical environment, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory foregrounds the social and cultural dimensions of learning. Vygotsky argued that cognitive development is fundamentally shaped through mediated social interaction and cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and play itself (Raza et al., 2023). Within Vygotskian theory, play allows children to stretch beyond their immediate competencies by engaging in activities that involve imagination and symbolic thinking, which are considered essential for higher mental functions. Vygotsky proposed that play creates a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the space between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with support from more knowledgeable peers or adults. In play, children can operate "as though they were a head taller," demonstrating capacities beyond their current independent abilities and reflecting advanced levels of conceptual thinking (Stanojevich et al., 2026).

Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction aligns with observations in educational research that play facilitates not only individual cognitive growth but also collective engagement and negotiated learning in group contexts. For example, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), which extends

Vygotsky's ideas, conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated activity shaped by cultural and historical contexts, tools and community practices (Tatik et al., 2025). This perspective supports the idea that games and play in school are not isolated activities but are embedded within social structures that collectively shape learning.

Contemporary play theorists like Smith (2001) further expanded the conceptualization of play, highlighting its cultural, emotional and symbolic dimensions. Sutton-Smith argued that play must be understood across its various forms and that its functions extend beyond simple cognitive development to include identity formation, emotional expression and adaptive psychological processes. His interdisciplinary studies underscore the ambiguity and multifunctionality of play in human life, suggesting that play serves as a mechanism for coping, creativity, community identity, and resilience. An important theoretical bridge between Piaget's and Vygotsky's insights is found in constructionist learning theory. Constructionism, developed from Piaget's constructivism and elaborated by Seymour Papert, asserts that learners construct knowledge most effectively when they are actively involved in creating tangible artifacts or engaging in experiential problem-solving (Papert, 1991). Within this paradigm, play and games are not just contexts for spontaneous activity but are seen as deliberate, learner-centered processes in which children build meaning through exploration, experimentation, and creation. Play becomes a medium through which abstract concepts are grounded in concrete experience and reflective thought.

These foundational perspectives converge on several key propositions that inform the present study: first, play is a central mechanism through which children construct knowledge about themselves and the world; second, play is inherently social and is shaped by cultural and institutional practices; and third, play engages cognitive, emotional and social domains simultaneously and holistically. In educational settings, these theoretical propositions suggest that games and play should be conceptualized not as oppositional to formal instruction but as an integral component of meaningful learning experiences. In the context of elementary schooling, researchers have identified specific functions of games and play that are consistent with these theoretical constructs. Play allows children to engage in rule-based activities that introduce structures similar to academic tasks, thereby promoting logical reasoning and strategic thinking (Chhajro, 2020; Asila, 2025). Rule games, such as dominoes or structured ball games, provide opportunities for children to negotiate norms, exert self-control, and practice responsible participation — processes that reflect both cognitive and socio-emotional growth. In symbolic or pretend play, children navigate imagined scenarios, explore roles, and reinterpret cultural norms, enhancing language, creativity and emotional regulation (Pole, 2026).

METHDOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the educational role of games and play as teaching and learning tools within the school environment. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations (Ahmed et al., 2024). The research was conducted in an elementary school. The participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the implementation and supervision of instructional practices. Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with the Grade 5 class teacher and the school principal. These participants were selected to gain both instructional and administrative perspectives on the integration of games and play in the teaching-learning process.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' views on the pedagogical value of games and play, their perceived impact on students' cognitive, social and emotional development, and the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing play-based strategies in a formal school setting. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and familiar environment within the school premises to ensure participants' comfort and encourage reflective responses. With participants' consent, the

interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, whereby interview transcripts were carefully read and coded to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to play-based learning. The analysis focused on interpreting how games and play were conceptualized and utilized as educational tools, as well as how they contributed to students' engagement and learning. To enhance credibility, data were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency in coding and interpretation. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality of participants' identities and institutional information.

ANALYSIS

The interviews with the classroom teacher and the school director provide a comprehensive understanding of how games and play are conceptualized, implemented, and utilized as learning tools within the school environment. Both participants emphasized that games and play are integral to the daily experiences of students, offering pleasurable, meaningful and developmentally enriching activities.

Games and Play as Tools for Learning and Skill Development

The teacher highlighted that games are structured activities guided by explicit rules, whereas play represents a pleasurable, developmental activity that fosters socialization, self-discovery and engagement with the world. Through interaction with objects and peers, children expand their knowledge about themselves and their surroundings, gaining confidence as they complete playful tasks. *As a teacher responded, "they facilitate the construction of knowledge by becoming Pleasurable and desirable for everyone. Valuing games and play helps to spark interest in For a child, this learning can only strengthen their knowledge through... reproductive dynamics, thus promoting a break from tradition, building new educational relationships, whether in groups or individually, arising from experience with the playful".* This distinction aligns with Kishimoto (1997), who suggests that toys serve as representations of reality, allowing children to manipulate and explore human and material constructs meaningfully. The director also extended this perspective, defining games and play as extensions of classroom projects, designed to support holistic development, reinforce content, and encourage curiosity, logical reasoning, and collaborative skills. *"The games and activities introduced at school first carried out a survey of the tools that enable development socializer of the student in such a way that they can be used with each other, by through recreational activities or games that spark interest and contribute to Logical reasoning is constantly being reformulated and recovered through group interaction, such as through play, sparking interest in childhood while simultaneously, learn".*

Social and Emotional Development

Play activities were described as powerful catalysts for socialization. The teacher observed that children participate collaboratively, assist each other, and express joy and enthusiasm during playful moments. They develop autonomy, initiative, and interpersonal skills, strengthening peer relationships. *"They contribute to the socialization process, offering opportunities to carry out group activities, in addition to having positive aspects for the learning process and stimulates the development of basic skills and acquisition of new knowledge".* The teacher confirmed that learning occurs most effectively through play, where students construct knowledge in pleasurable and engaging ways. Games complement teaching by fostering reasoning, imagination, problem-solving, and acquisition of basic skills. *"Yes, learning happens when children play. This happens, which is why it is an important tool for building teaching and learning".* The director echoed this view, noting that play facilitates reinforcement of classroom content, encourages the development of mental and physical abilities, and allows teachers to observe students' aptitudes, tendencies, and interactions. *"Yes, because when you work with play, the students are able to absorb better reinforce the content covered in class".* Both participants stressed that games and play act as vital pedagogical tools,

bridging enjoyment and learning while promoting deeper understanding and experiential engagement. The director also emphasized the role of games in fostering group cohesion, emotional expression, and recognition among students. Collectively, these activities cultivate positive attitudes, cooperation, empathy, and a sense of belonging in inclusive settings, illustrating how play supports both individual and collective growth.

Implementation Strategies and Classroom Integration

The teacher integrates games and play into classroom lessons according to curricular content, ensuring alignment with educational objectives while promoting socialization. Play is incorporated in regular academic classes as well as physical education and cultural activities, with ongoing evaluation of student engagement and learning outcomes. *“students with different learning needs are especially engaged. Those who need more structured support respond positively, share games they remember or have played before, and take part at their own pace.”* The director highlighted that play-based projects are systematically developed during weekly meetings by subject area and learning phase, supervised by an educational coordinator. Structured planning ensures that activities are purposeful, inclusive, and responsive to students’ needs. *“Projects are planned collaboratively during subject-area meetings, organized according to the students’ learning phases. These meetings are held at school every Monday outside regular class hours and are supervised and monitored by an educational coordinator. These strategies demonstrate a deliberate effort to balance spontaneous exploration with guided, structured learning experiences*

Materials, Resources and Evaluation Criteria

Both participants underscored the importance of appropriate materials for facilitating play-based learning. The teacher selects games and objects based on lesson relevance, encouraging safe, exploratory play that allows students to experiment with ideas and develop autonomy. *This usually takes place in the classroom, in line with the planned activities. The content also extends to physical education classes, where games are incorporated. Cultural activities are implemented more frequently, and assessment is conducted on an ongoing basis.* The director detailed that the school provides diverse educational materials, including puzzles and dominoes for the regular classroom and differentiated resources for the resource room. Funding for materials is allocated through government programs, ensuring availability and sustainability. Evaluation is ongoing, with teachers assessing students’ engagement, reasoning, cooperation, and ability to apply rules. *“For students in the regular classroom we have educational toys such as dominoes, puzzles, etc., while for students in the resource room there are toys differentiated, depending on the student’s specific needs and also with mediation. Teachers...they develop appropriate materials so that he can build his toys, thus contributing to mental and physical development.”* These practices ensure that playful activities contribute effectively to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.

Integration of Theory and Practice in Pedagogical Planning

The analysis revealed that both the teacher and director prioritize the combination of theoretical knowledge and practical application when selecting and implementing games. Teachers carefully evaluate each activity’s potential to spark interest, develop reasoning, and promote cooperation. *“I believe the materials we use should be safe, simple, and flexible so that all children can use them in their own way. I try to choose objects that children can touch, move, and explore without difficulty, and I make sure they are suitable for different ability levels.”* Playful experiences are designed to encourage independent thinking and creative exploration, as supported by Lowenfeld (1976) and Kamii, who highlight the value of discovery and utilization of materials. Pedagogical planning reconciles curricular objectives with students’ developmental needs, ensuring that play-based activities are not only enjoyable but also educationally meaningful, contributing to holistic learning and skill development. As the director says, *“For students in the regular classroom we have educational toys such as dominoes, puzzles, etc., while for students in the resource room there are toys differentiated, depending on the student’s specific needs and also with mediation from the teacher, they develop appropriate materials so that he can build his toys, thus contributing to mental and physical development.”*

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study align with a growing body of research that positions play and games not only as enjoyable activities but as powerful pedagogical tools within inclusive educational contexts. In traditional education systems, play has often been relegated to the margins of curriculum design; however, contemporary scholarship emphasizes that play-based learning supports both typical learners and those with diverse learning needs, including children with intellectual disabilities (Rizwan et al., 2025; Kachur, 2025). The teacher and principal responses in this study reveal that games and play are integrated into instruction with the intention of promoting engagement, cognitive development, socialization, and autonomy—goals that are consistent with recent empirical research on play-based pedagogy in elementary settings.

One of the central contributions of play-based learning is its ability to enhance engagement and social interaction among all learners. Ahmed et al. (2023) report that play-based learning environments significantly increase attention, participation, and collaborative behaviors among elementary students, thereby supporting cognitive and socio-emotional development. These findings resonate with the teacher's observation that children are happy, involved, and interact positively when games are part of instruction. In inclusive settings, where students present a wide range of abilities and learning profiles, the inherently social nature of play allows peers to co-construct meanings and model behaviors, reinforcing both academic and interpersonal skills. This reflects broader consensus in the literature that play can be leveraged to foster social competencies such as cooperation, empathy, and rule adherence (Arif et al., 2025).

Moreover, play-based learning is not a monolithic concept; it encompasses both child-initiated play and teacher-guided play. Inclusive classrooms benefit from a balance of these modes, where educators scaffold learning without dominating play interactions (Gawlik-Kobylińska, 2026). The principal's emphasis on planning and structured projects illustrates how play can be intentionally designed to align with curricular goals while remaining responsive to learners' interests and needs. Research investigating inclusive play practices highlights the importance of flexible teacher involvement that supports child agency, engages children in one-on-one conversations, and facilitates small group activities during play (Qadr et al., 2024). Such practices help ensure that children with disabilities are not passive observers but active participants in meaningful learning.

Studies on inclusive play and disability further underscore that children with developmental challenges often require adapted environments and intentional support to fully benefit from play (Mas'ud, 2025). Findings from research exploring barriers to inclusive play in early childhood identify limited teacher knowledge, physical space constraints, and attitudinal barriers as common impediments to effective implementation (Raza et al., 2023). These insights suggest that while play holds pedagogical promise, its successful application in inclusive settings demands both professional development for educators and thoughtful environmental design. The present study's finding that teachers select materials based on lesson plans but lack formal criteria reflects this broader challenge. Without clearly articulated frameworks to guide resource selection for inclusive play, educators risk reinforcing existing inequities in participation and access. Importantly, play-based learning has demonstrated specific benefits for learners with intellectual and multiple disabilities. Research in the *International Journal of Intellectual Disability* illustrates how tailored play-based interventions can enhance mathematical, communication, motor, and socio-emotional skills among learners with complex needs (Villarente & Solis-Reyes, 2025). These outcomes reinforce

the teacher's observation that play enables children to acquire basic skills and knowledge in a manner that is concrete, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate. By incorporating structured games that can be adapted to diverse cognitive levels, educators create opportunities for learners with intellectual disabilities to engage in scaffolded learning that respects their pace and abilities.

The value of play for inclusive education is further supported by meta-analyses emphasizing play's role in choice, wonder, and delight, which are critical indicators of meaningful engagement across age groups and developmental profiles (Hashmi et al., 2025). Although most research has historically focused on early childhood, the meta-synthesis reveals play's relevance across a broader range of educational contexts and learner ages. Integrating choice and joyful engagement into learning is particularly important for students who may otherwise experience disengagement due to traditional didactic approaches. In present study, the teacher's description of allowing children to suggest games and choose activities mirrors this idea of child agency as part of inclusive play. Allowing students choice fosters intrinsic motivation and supports self-determination, outcomes that are pedagogically desirable for all learners (Aziz et al., 2025)

Play also serves as a natural vehicle for differentiated instruction. Because games can be modified in complexity, rules, and roles, they afford multiple entry points for learners with varying abilities. According to recent research on sensory and play-based learning, innovative methods that incorporate multisensory input—visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic—enhance learning for students with special educational needs by matching instruction to personal characteristics and reducing anxiety (Kachur, 2025; Thebo et al., 2025). In inclusive classrooms, adapting materials and activities to accommodate diverse sensory and cognitive profiles ensures that play supports learning rather than acting as a barrier to participation. Nevertheless, there remain challenges in translating play theory into consistent classroom practice. Research highlights a need for teacher training, awareness, and systemic support to enable high-quality inclusive play experiences (Amjad et al., 2025). Teachers in a similar study reported limited confidence in handling children with severe disabilities during play, underscoring a universal need for professional development that equips educators to design, facilitate, and assess play-based learning effectively (Ali et al., 2025). Similarly, the lack of formal criteria for material selection described by your teacher participant suggests a gap in resource planning that could be addressed through policy guidance and pedagogical frameworks. (Shaikh et al., 2025)

In sum, the empirical and theoretical literature affirms that play and games are more than recreational; they are meaningful pedagogical tools that support cognitive, social, and emotional development for all learners, particularly within inclusive settings. Play enhances engagement, supports differentiation, and fosters social interaction when thoughtfully integrated into curriculum and instruction. For children with intellectual and other disabilities, play makes learning accessible and participatory, aligning with contemporary educational priorities that value inclusion, equity, and holistic development. Future research should focus on evidence-based training models for teachers, systematic evaluations of play interventions for diverse learners, and the development of inclusive materials and assessment tools that ensure play-based learning benefits all students

CONCLUSIONS

This research provided valuable insights into the dynamics of teacher-student interactions mediated through games and play. The study confirmed that, while teachers may not explicitly frame games and play as formal instructional tools, these activities are consistently integrated into students' learning

experiences, serving as facilitators of curriculum content. Observations revealed that play supports intellectual, cognitive and affective development in a pleasurable and meaningful manner, allowing children to engage actively with ideas while fostering collaboration and social interaction. Activities such as ball games, hopscotch, dominoes, and matchsticks were observed to encourage participation, cooperation and skill development, highlighting the role of play in creating dynamic learning relationships. The study further indicates that for games and play to be most effective, their integration must be deliberate and inclusive, involving not only the teacher but the wider school staff, with adequate planning and resources. By reformulating strategies to make learning engaging and interactive, educators can spark curiosity, stimulate skills and enhance student understanding, demonstrating that playful activities are essential for holistic, student-centered education.

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