

FROM PLAY TO PROGRESS: EMPOWERING YOUNG LEARNERS IN K-3

by:

MARGOT T. ISIDRO

Teacher I, Bataan Aeta Integrated School

Play is essential to early learning, nurturing cognitive and social-emotional growth while building lifelong skills. The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines embodies this philosophy through the MATATAG Kindergarten Curriculum, which emphasizes play-based, developmentally appropriate practices to foster holistic development among Filipino learners. The curriculum focuses on engaging children through playful experiences intrinsic to their learning and development, aligning with the global recognition of play as a foundational element in early childhood education (Yelland, 2011; Thomas et al., 2011).

Play is not merely a leisure activity but an essential framework within which children develop various skills critical for their growth. Through structured and unstructured play, children cultivate cognitive skills such as problem-solving and memory, social-emotional skills like empathy and self-regulation, language proficiency, and fine and gross motor skills (Langford, 2010; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). The MATATAG Curriculum specifically leverages these developmental outcomes by integrating play within thematic learning areas, such as Makabansa, Languages, and Mathematics, ensuring that learning experiences remain purposeful and aligned with expected educational outcomes.

Research shows that play-based learning sparks creativity, allowing children to explore concepts beyond traditional teaching methods (Lestari et al., 2024; Bird & Edwards, 2014). Participating in play enhances children's ability for critical thinking and allows them to express themselves in various ways, including through digital

technologies (Yusrina et al., 2018). Moreover, play promotes social interactions, equipping children with the essential skills to navigate relationships with peers and adults (Thomas et al., 2011; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011).

To effectively incorporate play in the K to 3 curriculum, educators may utilize various strategies that enhance learning experiences through interactive and meaningful play. Teachers can establish learning centers, such as dramatic play areas, block construction zones, and reading corners, to cater to diverse learning styles and interests (Mariadi, 2023; Wardani et al., 2020). Integrating music, games, and storytelling within the curriculum energizes the learning environment and supports language development and numeracy skills (Yin, 2022; Mansurdin, 2023).

Furthermore, allowing free play periods fosters children's autonomy and creativity, illustrating an understanding of the importance of self-directed exploration in learning. Teachers can enhance these experiences through guided discovery, facilitating rather than dictating learning, and cultivating a rich educational environment that encourages curiosity and resilience (Maba & Mantra, 2018; Murwati et al., 2022).

Play-based learning is an ancillary aspect of childhood education and an essential methodology for learners' balanced and holistic development. This approach is crucial for ensuring that children's initial experiences in school are joyful, meaningful, and enriching. Educators should advocate for play-based learning within curricula, like the MATATAG Curriculum, to cultivate engaging, relevant, and effective educational pathways for young learners.

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