

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY: NURTURING YOUNG MINDS IN THE EARLY GRADES

by:

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For many children in the Philippines, starting Grade 1 is both exciting and overwhelming. It is the point where formal education begins, where they encounter new routines, academic expectations, and peer relationships. At this stage, children are naturally energetic, curious, and imaginative, making it essential for teachers to create learning experiences that go beyond memorization and rigid drills. One of the most effective and developmentally appropriate ways to achieve this is through play-based learning, a strategy that uses play as a foundation for developing both academic skills and life values.

Play is sometimes misunderstood as a distraction from “serious” learning, but in truth, it is one of the most natural and powerful tools for education. When children play, they explore ideas, solve problems, and practice skills in ways that feel enjoyable and meaningful. A simple role-play like “bahay-bahayan” (pretend house play) allows learners to develop communication, expand vocabulary, and understand family roles. Traditional games such as “timbang preso” or “patintero” help strengthen decision-making, patience, and teamwork. Even classroom activities like “market-market” give opportunities to practice counting and understand the value of goods and money. These playful experiences may seem simple, yet they carry deep lessons that shape both academic performance and social development.

Beyond building literacy and numeracy, play also enhances creativity, imagination, and emotional growth. Storytelling, for example, not only sharpens comprehension but also allows learners to express ideas in their own words. Activities

that involve building with blocks, recycled boxes, or everyday objects develop early concepts of science, technology, and mathematics. Such experiences encourage children to experiment, ask questions, and take risks skills that are vital for critical thinking and problem-solving.

Play-based learning also nurtures values that are just as important as academic skills. Through play, children learn patience, cooperation, empathy, and respect for others. In group activities, they practice sharing, listening, and resolving conflicts peacefully. These social skills are not always directly taught in textbooks but are naturally formed when children interact and negotiate through play. This approach supports the goals of the Philippine K to 12 curriculum, which emphasizes the holistic development of learners academically, socially, and emotionally.

Teachers, however, play a vital role in making play meaningful. Play should not be random or directionless; it should be guided and designed to connect with learning objectives. A spelling lesson can be turned into a treasure hunt, while math drills may be transformed into friendly competitions where children cheer for one another. Purposeful play allows lessons to be remembered more vividly because learners not only understand the concept but also experience it in action.

Of course, challenges exist, especially in the Philippine setting where teachers often manage large classes and limited resources. Some may feel that incorporating play takes too much time away from formal instruction. Yet, evidence shows that children who learn through play tend to be more focused, cooperative, and engaged, which actually helps save time in the long run. Play does not require costly materials stones, sticks, bottle caps, and recycled items can be transformed into effective learning tools. Imagination, resourcefulness, and teacher creativity are the most important ingredients.

In the end, integrating play into Grade 1 classrooms is about respecting how children naturally learn. It turns the classroom into a space of discovery and joy, rather

than pressure and fear. For Filipino children who may face various social and economic struggles, the classroom can become a safe place where they not only learn lessons but also build confidence, resilience, and a love for education. Play reminds us that learning is not confined to books and tests but is woven into everyday experiences, laughter, and creativity.

When teachers embrace play-based learning, they do more than teach academic subjects, they nurture the whole child. By turning lessons into playful explorations, they give learners the chance to enjoy education, connect with peers, and develop the skills needed for life. Most importantly, they show children that school is not just about meeting standards, but about discovering the joy of learning itself. And when learning feels like play, children carry with them not just knowledge, but also a positive attitude toward education that will last far beyond their early years.

References:

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