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EFFECT OF PLAY BASED LEARNING STRATEGY ON PRESCHOOLERS' ACQUISITION OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN BABURA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, JIGAWA STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of play-based learning strategy on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills in Babura Local Government Area of Jigawa State, Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study, and three null hypotheses were tested. A quasi-experimental research design, specifically the pretest–posttest non-equivalent control group design, was adopted. The population comprised 7,919 five-year-old nursery school children in Babura Local Government Area, from which a sample of 379 preschoolers was selected from four schools using simple random sampling. Data were collected using the Preschoolers' Socio-Emotional Skills Rating Scale (PSSRS), which yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.88, indicating high internal consistency. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that preschoolers exposed to the play-based learning strategy demonstrated significantly higher acquisition of socio-emotional skills than those taught using the demonstration strategy. Although male preschoolers recorded slightly higher mean scores than their female counterparts, the difference was marginal. Based on the findings, the study recommends that school authorities should provide a conducive learning environment equipped with adequate play-based instructional facilities to support the effective implementation of play-based learning. Teachers should encourage collaborative play activities involving both male and female preschoolers to promote equal opportunities for socio-emotional skill development. Furthermore, teachers should adopt play-based learning as a distinct instructional strategy rather than combining it with the demonstration strategy to maximize preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

Key words: Play based, learning, strategy preschoolers', acquisition, socio-emotional skills

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Introduction

Preschoolers, typically aged three to five, are at a critical developmental stage, transitioning from toddlers to independent individuals. The acquisition of socioemotional skills is fundamental to this growth, yet it presents global challenges. These skills involve the ability to understand and regulate emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2017). According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) in the National Policy on Education, this involves fostering self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation. Lane and Smith (2021) expand this to include social awareness and relationship management, contributing to overall emotional intelligence. Similarly, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018) identifies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as core competencies. In this study, socioemotional skills involve a preschooler's ability to recognize emotions, empathize, communicate effectively, and form respectful relationships. This developmental phase lays the essential foundation for their future academic and social success as they prepare for primary education.

Socioemotional skills are essential competencies enabling individuals to manage emotions, build positive relationships, and function effectively in social settings. Often termed soft or non-cognitive skills, they encompass attributes like empathy, integrity, and cooperation (Sultanova et al., 2024). These skills are developed through learning experiences in families, schools, and communities rather than being purely innate (Kumari & Rao, 2024). For preschoolers, this involves recognizing emotions, understanding others' feelings, sharing, and interacting positively with peers. These years are vital for forming self-concepts and learning social norms. Despite the emphasis in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014), many children struggle with emotional regulation and social interaction. In Babura Local Government Area (LGA), these difficulties are often linked to behavioral challenges, poor peer relationships, and safety rule violations. Research shows that weak competencies increase vulnerability to bullying and hinder social adjustment (Martínez et al., 2020). Therefore, providing responsive learning environments is crucial for fostering these essential emotional and social developmental milestones.

Preschoolers are children typically aged three to five undergoing a crucial growth stage before formal schooling. During this period, they develop motor, language, and cognitive skills while becoming more confident in exploring their environment (Tomporowski, McCullick, & Pesce, 2015). According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014), preschoolers include children aged zero to five. They are characterized by curiosity, playfulness, high physical activity, and a strong desire for social interaction (Mötteli & Dohle, 2020). In this study, preschoolers refer to five-year-olds in Nursery 1 in public schools and Nursery 3 in private centers in Babura LGA. As children prepare for the transition to primary school, the development of socioemotional skills becomes essential. While families and schools play vital roles, teachers often rely on conventional methods that provide limited opportunities for individual needs. In Babura LGA, these teacher-centered approaches may unfortunately hinder the effective development of necessary socioemotional competencies among young learners.

Conventional teaching approaches have limitations that can hinder engagement and socioemotional development. These methods often rely on generalized curricula that overlook individual interests and encourage passive learning with limited participation. Their rigid structure makes it difficult to accommodate different learning styles, restricting personalized experiences (Asad & Qureshi, 2025). Such limitations are concerning at the preschool level, where children require support in developing essential socioemotional skills.

Although schools play a key role, teachers in Babura LGA frequently rely on demonstration methods that disregard children's values and individual differences (Fischer & Hänze, 2019). Consequently, these approaches limit opportunities for meaningful interaction, collaboration, and emotional growth. To address these challenges, experts advocate for active, child-centered strategies. Evidence suggests that play-based activities promote engagement, communication, and problem-solving through enjoyable experiences (Al Shloul et al., 2024). Therefore, play-based learning is an effective strategy for supporting socioemotional development in preschool education.

Play-based learning is an educational approach that promotes growth through active participation, collaboration, and social interaction. It emphasizes engagement, providing opportunities for children to develop social, communication, and problem-solving skills through meaningful experiences (Butler, 2024). Through activities involving sharing, negotiating, and cooperating, children enhance their ability to work with others while developing cognitive competencies. This approach also encourages autonomy and motivation, supporting overall holistic development (Sills, Rowse, & Emerson, 2016). In this study, play-based learning refers to instructional activities that enable preschoolers to collaborate while developing socioemotional skills. The study investigates the effect of this strategy on preschoolers in Babura LGA. Effectiveness was assessed based on four key skills: understanding own emotions, understanding others' emotions, relating positively, and maintaining relationships. These were evaluated through direct observation of empathy, cooperation, and sharing. Baseline and post-intervention assessments were used to determine changes, while considering factors like gender and school type.

Gender plays a significant role in shaping children's identities, social interactions, and emotional development. It refers to the social and cultural expectations associated with being male or female, rather than just biological sex. According to the World Health Organization (2024), gender involves socially constructed roles that influence individual identities within society. Research, such as Bakhshaei et al. (2023), highlights gender as an essential component of identity that young children explore as they navigate social contexts. Considering gender is crucial, as it allows for tailored support that promotes healthy identity formation. However, it is important to avoid overemphasizing gender, which might lead to stereotypes or overlook individual differences. By acknowledging both perspectives, we can better understand how preschoolers exhibit varied behaviours based on gender identity. While gender-related factors shape development through social expectations, outcomes are more strongly influenced by the quality of instructional experiences. Previous studies have reported varying findings regarding the influence of gender on preschoolers' socioemotional development, suggesting that its role remains inconclusive. Given these variations, this study sought to determine whether play-based learning strategy could enhance preschoolers' acquisition of socioemotional skills and whether gender influenced the effectiveness of the strategy among preschoolers in Babura Local Government Area of Jigawa State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Globally, socioemotional development is widely recognized as a fundamental component of early childhood education, as it supports children's ability to build relationships, regulate emotions, and interact effectively with others. In well-developed education systems, socioemotional learning is integrated into daily classroom practices through structured programs that promote emotional literacy, collaboration, and interactive learning experiences. These approaches enable preschoolers to develop self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, which are essential for positive social adjustment and later academic success. However, despite these global advancements, the development of

socioemotional skills remains a significant challenge in many regions, including Babura Local Government Area (LGA), Jigawa State, Nigeria, where many preschoolers lack adequate opportunities to build these competencies.

Research shows that inadequate socioemotional skills can result in social isolation, behavioral problems, and poor academic performance, especially when children are not exposed to structured, learner-centered instructional strategies. In many preschool settings in Babura LGA, the absence of effective approaches such as play-based learning limits children's ability to express emotions, relate positively with peers, and adapt smoothly to primary education. Although various efforts have been made to improve socioemotional learning, many interventions remain limited in scope and effectiveness, and the application of play-based learning in Nigerian preschool classrooms has not been sufficiently explored. This study, therefore, investigates the effect of play-based learning on the acquisition of socioemotional skills among preschoolers in Babura LGA, Jigawa State, with the aim of providing empirical evidence to guide policy and improve early childhood education practice.

Purpose of the Study

Generally, the study investigated the effect of the play-based learning strategy on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills in Babura Local Government Area, Jigawa State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the effect of the play-based learning strategy on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills;
2. ascertain the influence of gender on the acquisition of preschoolers' socio-emotional skills;
3. determine the interaction effects of strategy and gender on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered to guide the study:

1. What is the mean socioemotional skills of preschoolers exposed to play-based learning strategies and those exposed to the demonstration method?
2. What is the mean acquisition of socio-emotional skills of preschoolers based on gender?
3. What is the mean interaction effect of strategy and gender on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses raised were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H_{01}. There was no significant mean difference in socioemotional skills of preschoolers exposed to play based learning strategy and those exposed to demonstration strategy.

H_{02}. There was no significant influence of gender on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

H_{03}. There was no significant interaction effect of strategy and gender on preschoolers' acquisition of socioemotional skills.

Methodology

This study adopted a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest non-equivalent control group design to examine the effect of a play-based learning strategy on preschoolers' acquisition of socioemotional skills without random assignment of participants. The study was conducted in Babura Local Government Area of Jigawa State, Nigeria, selected because of the need to

address challenges in preschoolers' socioemotional development. The population comprised 7,919 five-year-old preschoolers, from which a sample of 379 children was selected from four randomly chosen schools using simple random sampling. Intact classes were maintained, with two schools assigned to the experimental group and two to the control group.

Data were collected using the Preschoolers' Socioemotional Skills Rating Scale (PSSRS), developed by the researcher. The instrument was validated by experts in Early Childhood Education, Educational Psychology, and Measurement and Evaluation, whose comments and suggestions were incorporated to improve the clarity, relevance, content coverage, and appropriateness of the items before the final version was produced. A pilot study was conducted to establish the reliability of the instrument, and Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine its internal consistency, yielding an acceptable reliability coefficient.

Before the commencement of the intervention, eight regular classroom teachers were trained as research assistants to ensure uniform implementation of the treatment and adherence to ethical procedures. The PSSRS was first administered as a pretest to establish the preschoolers' baseline socioemotional competencies.

The experimental group then participated in an eight-week play-based learning intervention involving free play, role-play, storytelling, songs, cooperative games, puppet play, drawing, collaborative projects, group discussions, and problem-solving activities. These activities were designed to progressively develop children's ability to identify and express emotions, understand others' feelings, build positive relationships, resolve conflicts, regulate emotions, and demonstrate self-control. During the same period, the control group received instruction using the conventional demonstration strategy.

At the end of the intervention, the PSSRS was re-administered as a posttest. The pretest and posttest scores of both the experimental and control groups were compared using appropriate statistical techniques to determine the effectiveness of the play-based learning strategy in improving preschoolers' socioemotional skills

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of the Acquisition of Socio-Emotional Skills by Preschoolers

Groups	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD	Mean Gain	Mean Gain Difference
Experimental	207	30.27	6.75	71.90	7.66	41.63	24.42
Control	172	30.81	7.42	48.02	6.33	17To.21	–

Table 1 shows that preschoolers exposed to the play-based learning strategy obtained a higher posttest mean score (71.90) than those taught using the demonstration strategy (48.02). The experimental group also recorded a higher mean gain (41.63) than the control group (17.21), with a mean gain difference of 24.42. This indicates that the play-based learning strategy was more effective in improving preschoolers' socio-emotional skills than the demonstration strategy.

Table 2: ANCOVA of the Acquisition of Socio-Emotional Skills by Preschoolers

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	26464.318[a]	2	13232.159	262.808	.000	.741
Intercept	35716.702	1	35716.702	709.380	.000	.794
Pretest	28.724	1	28.724	.570	.451	.003
Groups	26331.092	1	26331.092	522.970	.000	.740
Error	9264.249	184	50.349			
Total	732654.000	187				
Total	35728.567	186				

R Squared = .741 (Adjusted R Squared = .738)

Table 2 indicates that the instructional strategy had a statistically significant effect on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills (F = 522.970, p = .000). Since the probability value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that preschoolers exposed to the play-based learning strategy acquired significantly higher socio-emotional skills than those exposed to the demonstration strategy.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of the Influence of Gender on Preschoolers' Acquisition of Socio-Emotional Skills

Groups	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD	Mean Gain	Mean Gain Difference
Males	56	30.18	.77	73.46	1.14	43.28	3.61
Females	46	30.39	1.16	70.00	.88	39.61	–

Table 3 shows that male preschoolers obtained a slightly higher posttest mean score (73.46) and mean gain (43.28) than female preschoolers, who recorded a posttest mean score of 70.00 and a mean gain of 39.61. The mean gain difference of 3.61 suggests only a slight variation between male and female preschoolers in their acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

Table 4: ANCOVA of the Influence of Gender on Preschoolers' Acquisition of Socio-Emotional Skills

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	347.236[a]	2	173.618	.903	.407	.010
Intercept	39102.611	1	39102.611	203.352	.000	.525
Pretest	118.358	1	118.358	.616	.434	.003
Gender	214.010	1	214.010	1.113	.293	.006
Error	35381.331	184	192.290			
Total	732654.000	187				
Total	35728.567	186				

R Squared = .010 (Adjusted R Squared = –.001)

Table 4 reveals that gender had no statistically significant influence on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills (F = 1.113, p = .293). Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis was retained. This implies that male and female preschoolers did not differ significantly in their acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

Table 5: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Strategy and Gender on Preschoolers' Acquisition of Socio-Emotional Skills

Methods	Gender	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD	Mean Gain
Experimental Group	Male	56	30.18	.77	73.46	1.14	43.28
	Female	46	30.39	1.16	70.00	.88	39.61
Control Group	Male	39	30.26	1.18	45.87	1.08	15.61
	Female	46	31.28	1.11	49.85	.79	18.57

Table 5 shows that both male and female preschoolers in the experimental group recorded higher posttest mean scores and mean gains than their counterparts in the control group. Male preschoolers in the experimental group recorded the highest mean gain (43.28), while male preschoolers in the control group recorded the lowest mean gain (15.61). This suggests that the effectiveness of the play-based learning strategy differed across gender groups.

Table 6: ANCOVA of the Strategy and Gender on Preschoolers' Acquisition of Socio-Emotional Skills

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	27109.187[a]	4	6777.297	143.104	.000	.759
Intercept	35721.447	1	35721.447	754.266	.000	.806
Pretest	36.842	1	36.842	.778	.379	.004
Gender	3.996	1	3.996	.084	.772	.000
Groups	26110.964	1	26110.964	551.338	.000	.752
Gender × Groups	644.777	1	644.777	13.615	.000	.070
Error	8619.380	182	47.359			
Total	732654.000	187				
Total	35728.567	186				

R Squared = .759 (Adjusted R Squared = .753)

Table 6 shows that there was a statistically significant interaction effect between instructional strategy and gender on preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills (F = 13.615, p = .000). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that the effect of the instructional strategy on preschoolers' socio-emotional skills varied according to gender. However, gender alone was not a significant factor, as shown in Table 4.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that preschoolers taught using the play-based learning strategy demonstrated higher gains in socioemotional skills than those taught using the demonstration strategy. This suggests that play-based learning provides children with meaningful opportunities to interact with peers, express emotions, develop empathy, and practice appropriate social behaviours in a natural and engaging environment. Such outcomes reflect the understanding of Denham, Bassett, and Zinsser (2017), who explain that socioemotional skills involve children's ability to understand, express, and regulate emotions while forming positive relationships with others. The implication is that when children are actively involved in learning experiences, they are more likely to internalize emotional and social competencies.

The superiority of play-based learning may be attributed to its child-centred and experiential nature, which allows learners to learn through doing rather than passive reception of information. Butler (2024) notes that play-based learning promotes active engagement, communication, and social interaction among children, while Sills, Rowse, and Emerson (2016) emphasize that it fosters autonomy, cooperation, and holistic development. In practical terms, play activities such as role play, group games, and shared tasks create natural opportunities for children to negotiate, share, and solve problems together, thereby strengthening both emotional awareness and interpersonal skills.

In contrast, conventional teaching approaches tend to limit children's active participation and socioemotional engagement. Asad and Qureshi (2025) argue that teacher-centred methods often restrict interaction and reduce opportunities for collaborative learning, while Fischer and Hänze (2019) highlight that such approaches frequently fail to address individual learners' emotional and social needs. In preschool settings, this limitation is particularly significant because children at this stage learn best through interaction, imitation, and play. Consequently, reduced engagement may hinder the development of essential competencies such as empathy, emotional regulation, and cooperation.

Regarding gender, the findings showed that although male preschoolers had slightly higher mean scores than females, the difference was not statistically significant. This indicates that socioemotional skills development is not inherently influenced by gender but is more dependent on the quality of instructional experiences provided. Denham, Bassett, & Miller (2017) emphasize that socioemotional development is shaped largely by environmental interactions and guided experiences rather than biological differences. This suggests that when both boys and girls are exposed to the same supportive and interactive learning environment, they are equally capable of developing socioemotional competencies.

Furthermore, the interaction effect of instructional strategy and gender revealed that play-based learning was effective for both male and female preschoolers. Butler (2024) supports this finding by noting that play-based environments naturally encourage inclusivity, cooperation, and shared participation among all learners regardless of gender. In such environments, children engage in collective activities that allow them to express emotions freely, practice turn-taking, and build friendships, thereby reducing potential gender-based differences in learning outcomes.

In summary, the study provides strong empirical evidence that play-based learning is a highly effective instructional strategy for enhancing preschoolers' socioemotional skills. This finding aligns with Denham et al. (2017), who emphasize that early socioemotional competencies are best developed through active, supportive, and emotionally responsive learning environments. Therefore, integrating play-based learning into preschool classrooms is essential for promoting meaningful interaction, emotional understanding, and positive social development among young children.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that the play-based learning strategy is more effective than the demonstration strategy in enhancing preschoolers' acquisition of socio-emotional skills. Preschoolers who were exposed to play-based learning demonstrated significantly greater improvement in socio-emotional skills than those taught through the demonstration strategy, confirming the effectiveness of active, child-centred instructional approaches in early childhood education.

The study further concluded that while gender does not independently act as a primary determinant for the acquisition of socio-emotional skills, there is a statistically significant interaction effect between instructional strategy and gender ($F=13.615, p=.000$). This indicates that the effectiveness of the play-based strategy is moderated by gender, with male and female preschoolers exhibiting distinct patterns of improvement.

Overall, the study establishes that play-based learning is a highly effective and inclusive instructional strategy. Given that both male and female preschoolers possess comparable potential to develop socio-emotional competencies when provided with appropriate, active learning opportunities, it is recommended that this approach be widely adopted in preschool classrooms to foster emotional understanding, social interaction, and positive relationship-building.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made that:

1. The school authorities should provide the teachers with conducive learning environment that is enriched with play-based facilities in order facilitate play based learning for the acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

2. The teachers should continue to pair the preschoolers in the school actives irrespective of their gender orientation in order to promote their acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

3. The teachers should avoid the combination of play based strategy with demonstration strategy in a mixed school in order to properly enhance the acquisition of socio-emotional skills.

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