

Experiential Learning: A Pragmatic Approach to Teaching Kindergarten Pupils

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Abstract

This study investigated the implementation and effectiveness of experiential learning in kindergarten classrooms within the Diocese of Baguio Schools (DOBS). Grounded in Pragmatic Learning Theory and Social Constructivism, it aimed to examine how teachers organize, execute, and adapt experiential learning strategies and their perceived impact on pupils' social, cognitive, and emotional development. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, involving ten kindergarten teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted through Google Forms and follow-up online discussions, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Results showed that teachers predominantly utilized hands-on and play-based activities, complemented by flexible and adaptive planning, which significantly enhanced social skills, cognitive understanding, and emotional growth among pupils. Challenges such as limited time, inadequate resources, and classroom management difficulties were noted, addressed through differentiated instruction and scaffolding. The study concluded that experiential learning is a developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogical approach, with teachers acting as essential facilitators. Recommendations include continued use of experiential strategies, professional development, provision of adequate resources, and curriculum flexibility. The study contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) by promoting holistic development and active engagement in early childhood learning, supporting social, cognitive, and emotional sustainability in educational settings.

Keywords: Adaptation of Activities, Cognitive Development, Emotional Development, Experiential Learning, Kindergarten Education, Play-Based Learning, Pragmatic Learning, Social Development, Teacher Facilitation, Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Children learn most effectively through active engagement, sensory exploration, play, and social interaction rather than passive observation. Early childhood education, particularly in kindergarten, is critical for cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Experiential learning aligns with these developmental needs by allowing children to question, experiment, and manipulate their environment, enhancing understanding, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills Fan et al. (2024). Traditional education methods that rely on repetition or rote memorization often fail to leverage these natural inclinations, underscoring the importance of practical, experience-based instructional approaches (Kong, 2021). Play, including live play integrated into learning activities, contributes to community building, creativity, emotional expression, and engagement, creating a supportive classroom environment (Holden, 2016; Alcock, 2016; Orimaye, 2025; Hormann et al., 2025).

Experiential learning involves hands-on and play-based activities that actively engage pupils and improve cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Flexible planning allows teachers to adapt to students' responses (Waheed & Waseem, 2023; Kong, 2021). Socially, collaborative tasks enhance communication and cooperation (AsCañete et al., 2025; Jhea & Hafundar, 2025). Cognitively, experiential learning promotes critical thinking and understanding by linking abstract concepts to tangible experiences (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Kong, 2021). Emotionally, students develop confidence and self-expression through participatory learning (Hormann et al., 2025; Villocino & Roel Villocino, 2025). Challenges include limited resources, time constraints, and classroom management difficulties (Ilyas et al., 2022; Sulaiman & Abdullah, 2024), addressed via differentiation and scaffolding strategies (Thoriq Aji Silmi et al., 2025; Herdiana & Munir, 2023; Kong, 2021).

The study is situated in private kindergarten classrooms under the Diocese of Baguio Schools. Findings reflect local teaching practices, teacher experiences, and contextual constraints, while contributing to broader discussions on early childhood pedagogy and experiential learning implementation at national and international levels.

The study is grounded in Pragmatic Learning Theory, emphasizing that knowledge is best acquired through active, meaningful engagement in realistic situations (Rai, 2020). Social Constructivism by Lev Vygotsky highlights learning through guided social interaction, collaboration, and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (Hoose, 2020). Combined, these frameworks support experiential learning as a method that promotes holistic development through active, socially mediated, and contextually relevant educational experiences (Sarian, 2020; Admin 2020).

Despite evidence supporting experiential learning, traditional methods still dominate early childhood classrooms. There is limited research exploring the systematic application of experiential learning in local kindergarten contexts, the teachers' adaptive practices, and the resulting social, cognitive, and emotional outcomes. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth examination of experiential learning implementation, challenges, and adaptive strategies in the Diocese of Baguio Schools.

The study aligns primarily with: SDG 4 – Quality Education: By enhancing pedagogical strategies and active learning in early education. SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being: Through fostering emotional and social development in children. SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth: By promoting skilled, innovative teaching practices. By improving early childhood education quality and teacher facilitation methods, the research supports inclusive, equitable, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. The study contributes to educational sustainability by informing evidence-based teaching practices, supporting cognitive, social, and emotional growth in young learners, and guiding curriculum development. It promotes social sustainability through collaborative learning, emotional well-being, and inclusive pedagogies, while contributing to institutional and policy sustainability by providing actionable insights for teacher training, resource allocation, and early childhood program improvement.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative descriptive approach was utilized to obtain detailed insights into teachers' perceptions and practices without manipulating variables. This design is suited to provide holistic and contextualized information about the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers applying experiential learning, emphasizing social, cognitive, and emotional growth of pupils.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The research was conducted in private kindergarten classrooms under the Diocese of Baguio Schools (DOBS). This locale was chosen to reflect local practices in early childhood education and to study experiential learning in a structured yet developmentally appropriate environment.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of ten (10) kindergarten teachers currently teaching in DOBS private schools. Each participant had a minimum of one year of experience implementing experiential learning strategies, allowing them to provide informed insights on teaching practices, student engagement, and learning outcomes.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers actively involved in applying experiential learning in their classrooms. The sample of ten teachers provided sufficient experiential perspectives for the qualitative analysis, ensuring representation of teachers capable of reflecting on practical classroom experiences.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews designed to explore teachers' experiences with planning, implementing, and adapting experiential learning activities. Questions addressed instructional organization, the types of activities employed, the perceived effectiveness on pupils' social, cognitive, and emotional development, challenges encountered, and methods of modification to meet learner needs. Open-ended questions allowed participants to provide detailed responses and share nuanced experiences.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Interviews were administered through Google Forms, allowing teachers to respond at their convenience. Selected participants were invited to follow-up discussions online to clarify or expand on initial responses. This approach enabled thorough data collection without physical interaction while maintaining participant comfort and confidentiality.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed thematically. The researcher first familiarized herself with all transcripts, then conducted initial coding to identify significant words, phrases, and passages relevant to the research questions. Codes were grouped into broader themes representing common experiences, challenges, and perceptions of teachers. Patterns, relationships, and trends

within these themes were examined to interpret how experiential learning contributes to pupils' social, cognitive, and emotional development and how teachers adapt strategies to address challenges.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality and anonymity assured. Consent forms were obtained from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw or skip questions without consequence. Data were securely stored and only anonymized results were used for reporting purposes.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Organization and Implementation of Experiential Learning

3.1.1 Hands-on and Play-Based Activities

Teachers primarily employed hands-on and play-based activities, allowing pupils to actively engage with learning materials such as blocks, clay, and real objects. One teacher noted, "I allow my students to work with materials such as blocks, clay, and actual objects in order to be able to learn through practice (P1)," while another emphasized the role of games in learning, stating, "Play is involved in learning. They learn lessons quicker through games (P4)." These activities highlight the centrality of active, multi-sensory engagement in early childhood learning. Ndlovu et al. (2023) observed that multi-sensory and interactive experiences enhance comprehension, while Aloizou et al. (2025) emphasized that movement and practical tasks increase engagement and retention among kindergarten learners.

3.1.2 Structured yet Flexible Planning

Teachers reported that although experiential learning activities were pre-planned, they were adapted according to pupils' responses. A participant explained, "I plan, however, I can change activities, depending on the response of the children (P3)." This flexibility supports guided exploration and adaptive instruction (Waheed & Waseem, 2023). Kong (2021) similarly found that non-rigid, interactive methods enhance motivation and engagement, indicating that experiential learning must remain responsive to the dynamic needs of learners.

3.2 Effectiveness of Experiential Learning

3.2.1 Social Development

Teachers observed improved interaction, collaboration, and communication among pupils. One remarked, "They learn how to share, cooperate, and communicate with their classmates (P2)." These results align with the notion that learning is inherently social, as collaborative experiential activities foster social and emotional skills (AsCañete et al., 2025; Jhea & Hafundar, 2025).

3.2.2 Cognitive Development

Experiential learning contributed to deeper understanding and critical thinking. Teachers noted, "They learn the lesson well because they experience it, not just hear it (P5)." Engagement in hands-on activities facilitated cognitive processes and memory consolidation. Hosokawa et al. (2024) found that experiential involvement enhances knowledge acquisition, while Kong (2021) emphasized that physical and interactive experiences promote conceptual understanding by linking abstract ideas to tangible contexts.

3.2.3 Emotional Development

Teachers reported that pupils' confidence and emotional expression increased. "They gain confidence and can express themselves without any fear (P7)," one teacher observed. Experiential learning provides an encouraging and stimulating environment, supporting emotional development (Hormann et al., 2025; Villocino & Roel Villocino, 2025). These findings indicate that hands-on, interactive classrooms are essential for nurturing emotional competence in young learners.

3.3 Challenges in Implementing Experiential Learning

3.3.1 Lack of Time and Resources

Teachers faced constraints related to insufficient time and limited materials. A participant stated, "We do not always have materials or enough time to conduct the activities (P6)." Ilyas et al. (2022) highlighted that adequate resources and organizational support are necessary for effective experiential learning.

3.3.2 Classroom Management Difficulties

Active participation sometimes led to difficulties in maintaining order. Teachers reported, "It can be quite difficult at times to control the class when engaging in activities (P8)." Sulaiman & Abdullah (2024) emphasized that facilitation is critical for managing active classrooms, requiring strong classroom management techniques.

3.4 Adaptation of Experiential Learning Activities

3.4.1 Differentiation Based on Learners' Needs

Teachers modified activities to accommodate varying abilities. "I adapt activities to cater for slow learners, and offer additional guidance (P9)," one teacher explained. Differentiation ensures personalized participation, supporting inclusive learning (Thoriq Aji Silmi et al., 2025).

3.4.2 Use of Guidance and Scaffolding

Teachers emphasized supporting students throughout experiential tasks. "I support them in the process of exploring (P10)," a participant noted. This aligns with scaffolding principles, wherein guided assistance enhances cognitive and emotional development (Herdiana & Munir, 2023; Kong, 2021). Overall, the findings demonstrate that experiential learning effectively promotes social, cognitive, and emotional development in kindergarten pupils. Teachers act as facilitators who create engaging, adaptive, and meaningful learning experiences. Despite challenges related to resources, time, and classroom management, the benefits of experiential learning outweigh these limitations, confirming the applicability of Pragmatic Learning Theory and Social Constructivism in early childhood education.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concludes that experiential learning is an effective and developmentally appropriate pedagogical approach for kindergarten learners. Hands-on, play-based, and flexible learning strategies actively engage pupils, enhancing social skills through collaboration, cognitive skills via direct experience, and emotional growth through confidence and self-expression. Despite challenges including limited time, insufficient resources, and classroom management difficulties, teachers serve as essential facilitators who create interactive, inclusive, and responsive learning environments. The findings are aligned with Pragmatic Learning Theory and Social Constructivism, confirming that experience, interaction, and active participation are vital for holistic development.

Teachers are encouraged to continue employing experiential learning techniques, particularly hands-on and play-based approaches, while strengthening classroom management skills. Differentiated instruction and scaffolding should be utilized to meet diverse learner needs. School administrators should provide adequate resources and professional development to support experiential teaching. Curriculum developers are advised to design flexible, learner-centered curricula that allow activity modifications to address student needs. Future researchers may expand sample sizes, explore other educational contexts, or use quantitative and mixed-methods approaches to further evaluate the effectiveness of experiential learning and address challenges related to resources and classroom management.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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