

UDC 372.3:373.2:7

DOI: 10.52534/msu-pp2.2025.23

Martin Chukwudi Ekeh*

PhD in Early Childhood Education, Senior Postdoctoral Research Fellow

University of Johannesburg

2019, 157 Beit Str., Johannesburg, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7799-9885>**Chibuzor Gloria Martin-Ekeh**

Master of Theater Arts, Assistant Lecturer

Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education

P.M.B. 1033, Orlu Rd., Owerri, Nigeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5529-7247>**The dance of pedagogy: Integrating play in early childhood creative art education****Article's History:**

Received: 07.02.2025

Revised: 02.06.2025

Accepted: 30.06.2025

Suggested Citation:

Ekeh, M.C., & Martin-Ekeh, C.G. (2025).

The dance of pedagogy: Integrating play in early childhood creative art education.

*Scientific Bulletin of Mukachevo**State University. Series "Pedagogy**and Psychology"*, 11(2), 23-31. doi:

10.52534/msu-pp2.2025.23.

Abstract. This study aimed to uncover how educators conceptualise, implement, and reflect on play-based pedagogical practices within the context of creative arts instruction. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, the research involved semi-structured interviews with seven early childhood educators conducted over five weeks. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis and supported by reflexive journaling to capture the depth of the participants' experiences. This study explored the integration of play-based learning in early childhood creative arts education, focusing on its impact on cognitive flexibility, problem solving, and creative self-expression. The results indicated that play-based strategies significantly foster young learners' artistic expression and cognitive development. Educators reported adapting structured curricula to include open-ended and exploratory activities that promote student agency and engagement. Despite these benefits, participants identified several barriers to effective implementation, including rigid institutional schedules, limited access to materials, and inadequate opportunities for professional development. This study highlighted the importance of aligning pedagogical practices with developmental needs through flexible and play-centred approaches. It also emphasised the necessity of systemic support, including targeted teacher training and policy adjustments, to overcome practical constraints. These findings contribute to the discourse on early childhood education by offering actionable insights into the effective integration of play-based learning into creative arts curricula. This research calls for a re-evaluation of current educational frameworks to better support innovative, child-centred teaching methodologies that align with contemporary understandings of early learning and development

Keywords: artistic integration; arts curriculum; cognitive enhancement; play-based learning; international teaching practices; early childhood education; pedagogical innovation

*Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

This study holds significant importance as it explores the teaching of young children through creative arts, the study illustrated the delicate balance educators must maintain

between structure and freedom. During the early years, when children are highly receptive and absorb everything around them, integrating play into education can great-



ly enhance their cognitive, social, and emotional development. This research draws on the renowned theories M. Montessori, J. Piaget and J. Dewey, demonstrating how play not only makes learning enjoyable but also profoundly enriching. It emphasises the necessity of providing teachers with the appropriate training and support to implement these playful methods in classrooms, despite obstacles such as tight schedules and limited resources. Furthermore, it discusses the exciting potential of digital tools to foster creativity while preserving the hands-on experiences crucial for young learners. This research offers valuable insights for those involved in shaping the future of early childhood education, ensuring that children's creativity and development are nurtured in meaningful ways.

The metaphor of dance in pedagogy effectively encapsulates the fluid, dynamic, and expressive nature of teaching and learning within early childhood creative arts education. Much like dance – which merges movement, rhythm, and emotional expression – educators in early childhood settings choreograph learning experiences that interweave play, creativity, and artistic development. As M. Garaigordobil *et al.* (2022) and M.C. Ekeh (2023a) argued, such integration is particularly vital during the formative years, when cognitive, social, and emotional development is deeply interconnected with engagement in creative practices. The value of creative arts education for young children is widely supported in the literature; L. Brovchak *et al.* (2024), for instance, demonstrated its beneficial influence on cognitive flexibility, problem-solving abilities, and emotional intelligence. Furthermore, contemporary research underscores the efficacy of play-based approaches in enhancing learning outcomes, social competence, and creative expression in early childhood arts education. Nonetheless, as these scholars suggested, the successful application of such approaches within formal educational frameworks demands careful attention to pedagogical strategies and the development of teacher expertise.

Integrating play-based approaches into creative arts education introduces a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges for early childhood educators. E. Halverson & K. Sawyer (2022) and K. Peppler *et al.* (2022) noted that traditional educational paradigms often prioritise structured learning outcomes, which can conflict with the inherently spontaneous and exploratory nature of artistic expression through play. This tension becomes particularly pronounced in early childhood contexts, where educators must navigate curricular demands while adhering to developmentally appropriate practices. According to K. Rathunde & R. Isabella (2020) and B. Švábová & E. Dolinská (2024), the successful implementation of play in art education depends on intentional planning, a solid grounding in theory, and strong practical teaching skills. Despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding how educators conceptualise and integrate these methods in everyday practice. Given the dynamic character of creative arts education and the diverse developmental needs of young children, B. Miseliūnaitė *et*

al. (2022) and H. Catalano *et al.* (2023) argued for a more nuanced understanding of effective pedagogical strategies, especially as education systems increasingly adopt holistic and child-centred approaches.

Contemporary discourse in early childhood education increasingly highlights the value of play-based learning across all developmental domains, including creative arts education, as argued by M.S. Dewi & Yufiarti (2021). Their work underscores the role of play as a primary medium through which young children explore, express themselves, and make sense of their environment. Despite this recognition, B. Lee *et al.* (2015) pointed out that the practical implementation of play-based approaches within creative arts education varies widely across different educational settings. While some institutions effectively embed play into their arts curricula, others encounter significant challenges, including structural limitations, lack of resources, or gaps in pedagogical expertise. J. Prins *et al.* (2022) further suggested that such discrepancies in practice prompt critical reflection on the underlying factors influencing successful implementation, including the specific methodological strategies employed by educators. Gaining a deeper understanding of these contextual differences is essential for informing the design of robust professional development initiatives and support systems tailored to the needs of early childhood educators.

This study aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and classroom practices in early childhood creative arts education by investigating how educators integrate play-based methodologies. Grounded in the lived experiences of teachers, it seeks to provide actionable insights into the alignment of pedagogical theory with practical implementation. Specific objectives:

1. To examine how early childhood educators conceptualise play-based learning in creative arts instruction, including their philosophical and pedagogical motivations.
2. To identify and analyse the practical strategies and methodological approaches teachers employ to integrate play into creative arts lessons.
3. To evaluate the challenges and opportunities teachers encounter in operationalising play-based art education, including institutional, resource-related, and pedagogical barriers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This phenomenological study utilised qualitative research methods to investigate the lived experiences of early childhood educators as they integrated play into creative arts education across various early childhood learning centres in Owerri municipal. The researchers employed purposive sampling to recruit 7 early childhood practitioners to ensure the selection of relevant cases; hence, the total number of sample participants is seven. The selection criteria emphasised educators with documented and sustained engagement in play-based learning approaches, as evidenced by their teaching portfolios, peer recommendations, and participation in professional development programs

focused on child-centred pedagogy. This strategic sampling approach ensured that the participants possessed both the experiential depth and reflective capacity necessary for phenomenological enquiry.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were scheduled over a five-week period from October to November 2024 to accommodate the participants' teaching responsibilities and foster rapport and trust. Participants, aged between 30 and 55 years, were interviewed during non-instructional hours in quiet, distraction-free settings on school premises. During non-instructional hours, sessions were held in quiet, distraction-free settings on school premises. The semi-structured format allowed for open-ended dialogue, enabling the participants to articulate their experiences, challenges, and pedagogical intentions in their own words. This approach facilitated the elicitation of rich narrative data that captured the complexity of their professional realities.

The analysis followed the principles of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts to identify significant statements, emergent themes, and underlying meanings. The researchers engaged in iterative coding and thematic clustering, allowing for the emergence of patterns related to pedagogical decision-making, negotiation of institutional expectations, and embodiment of play-oriented teaching philosophies. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the research process incorporated peer debriefing sessions with fellow qualitative researchers and maintained a reflexive journal to document the researchers' evolving interpretations and positionalities throughout the study.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Faculty of Specialized Education at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education (Ref: FSE-EC 2024/45). All participants provided informed consent through culturally sensitive procedures that acknowledged local norms and the communication styles. Participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's aims, their rights as research subjects, and the voluntary nature of their involvement, including the option to withdraw at any stage, without penalty.

The phenomenological design was particularly well-suited to uncovering the often implicit and intuitive teaching philosophies that guide educators' integration of play into creative arts curricula. The extended interview period allowed for the development of trust and the collection of layered and contextually grounded insights. This methodological alignment was essential for capturing what the researchers conceptualised as "the dance of pedagogy", a metaphor that encapsulates the fluid, responsive, and embodied nature of teaching practices that blend structure with spontaneity, especially in play-based learning environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section comprehensively analysed the findings from semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators

regarding play-based learning in creative arts education. The study explores the implementation of play-based approaches, the role of professional development, challenges faced by educators, and the potential of technology integration. The findings highlight the importance of balancing structured guidance with creative freedom, supported by J. Dewey's (1938) experiential learning theory. The section delves into participants' experiences, institutional barriers, and innovative strategies for enhancing creative arts education in early childhood settings.

Responding to the research questions via the semi-structured interview, participant 1 added, "To me, play-based learning is using activities that allow children to explore their creativity in a fun, engaging way. I learned that through firsthand experience engaging with children in the classroom, as well as through their exploration of various materials. This isn't just about learning techniques; it's about allowing children to express their ideas freely through art". Similarly, participant 2 noted: "Through creative arts, play is knowing as you do – paint, dance, craft. It aids in developing their cognitive and motor skills and allows them to glorify their emotional expression as well. I learned this method at workshop training and observed how kids thrive creatively when they are not put in a box of rules".

Referring to art as not needing to learn techniques but instead just participating through play to express themselves. The authors M. Ekeh (2023b) and L. Brovchak *et al.* (2024) contended that through play-based learning, early childhood educators can intentionally promote cognitive and artistic growth, an echo of that sentiment lives within the manuscript. Participant 7 confirmed this perspective, stating: "Open-ended questions I often use ie creativity prompt. So I would like to ask, "What colours do you think would be good for the painting? This gives them the space to consider their options and choose. I also incorporate music and movement into my teaching strategy to open up the door to expression in art".

This suggests that play is a significant vehicle for creative expression. This idea is also supported in the literature on J. Dewey's experiential learning model, whereby children access higher cognitive and creative capacities through guided playful interactions (Luo, 2024). Like much of the addition of play in education, the dance of structure and free expression is essential in its integration. As Participant 2 commented: "I offer a framework. For example, I'll have a theme for the day – such as nature or animals. but allow children to interpret it however they want. The structure is already given in the prompt or materials (what kind of poem it is, for example), but it's up to them how they express what the theme is and how it relates to their own lives".

This aligns with the "dance of pedagogy" notion in the manuscript, in which teachers balance structured guidance with creative freedom to support deeper engagement (Halverson & Sawyer, 2022). In line with this, Participant 3 added: "I create defined goals but keep the path to achieve them uncertain. So, for example, I might say to the children, "Come and make a picture to show me your

family”, but how they do that, whether it’s drawing or collage or sculpture, is their choice”.

This resonates with J. Dewey’s experiential learning theory, which proposes that firm goals can exist alongside the adaptability required for artistic exploration (Luo, 2024). These two angles are intrinsic to building discipline balance against the flare of creativity, especially in early childhood education (Peppler *et al.*, 2022). Focus on effective play-based art instruction: Professional development in education is key to helping educators hone in on effective play-based art instruction. Participant 3 stated, “About a few years ago, I attended a professional development workshop on play-based learning concepts. It had an emphasis on incorporating play in the early childhood decades. This very much shifted how I view creative arts in the classroom. I also learned a lot from my years teaching, where I knew how kids engage with art materials and how they learn best in a playful setup”.

Endorsing this firsthand experience, the authors also noted that teacher training helps bridge theory and practice, allowing educators to use innovative methodologies (Ata-Akturk & Sevimli-Celik, 2020). Participant 4 also commented, “Both my early childhood education degree and my creative arts pedagogy degree centred on child-centred learning. I have encountered many different teaching methods throughout my studies, and the different perspectives I had greatly affected the way I utilise play. Storytelling and drama (which I had learned in training) are two ways I build creativity into art lessons”.

Demonstrating how a structured training program can widen teaching approaches. This is in accordance with recent studies that suggest that intense pre-service training is critical to breaking down limiting beliefs and building self-efficacy in visual arts teaching (Lindsay, 2020). Interviews revealed institutional barriers and resource limitations as key struggles. Participant 6 said, “The major issue is time. The curriculum is so jam-packed that there isn’t always time to devote to play-based learning. Sometimes I need to rush through creative lessons, which isn’t always ideal for developing deep artistic expression”. He explains the tension between scheduled curricular demands and the need for playful exploration. Another challenge is inadequate resources, as Participant 7 noted: “With art materials in limited supply or being costly, I have to be inventive with what I use. And sometimes the children’s creative potential limits what they can access”, noting that physical constraints can limit creative expression.

Additionally, “There’s also a lack of teacher training on play-based learning specifically.” Participant 2 noted: “I learned a lot on my own but there’s not such structured support and resources from the government to implement this and scale the ideas I have in here”. These perspectives reflect literature that criticises conventional educational paradigms for not valuing play-based learning and demands the implementation of more helpful institutional policies and resource allocation to encourage ongoing artistic enquiry (Cheung, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Miseliūnaitė *et al.*, 2022).

Participants also emphasised the potential of technology to enhance creative arts education. Participant 4 described: “I believe that there’s a great deal of potential that comes with integrating technology. There are apps and online tool/platforms that can engage children with creating arts digitally. By introducing these tools in a playful, guided way, it could further refine the creative experience”.

Participant 2 added: “I have considered using digital storytelling apps where children can create their own story and illustrations. These tools are a new way for kids to play and learn, combining creativity with technology”. Participant 3 mentioned: “I’ve used music apps that let kids create their own little tunes and rhythms, which is fun and educational. This kind of technological integration exists that creates new opportunities for creative expression”. These new strategies align with the more recent literature, which reflects how digital media expands beyond traditional art encounters to new multi-modalities (Hua & Yu, 2024). However, this does not mean that they advocate for the complete abolishment of traditional media; instead, they prescribe the careful implementation of technology to connect creative practice across disciplines and perspectives, opening the door for a more integrated experience through education.

Particularly salient in this discussion is the role of well-established theoretical foundations in informing play-based creative arts pedagogies. The study draws upon J. Dewey’s experiential learning model to elucidate how guided play serves as a vehicle for developing higher-order cognitive skills (Luo, 2024). Although the manuscript presents these theoretical elements effectively, deeper integration and analysis of their observable classroom applications remain areas for further exploration (Creaghe & Kidd, 2022; Vasiuk & Vyhovska, 2023).

These findings underscore the critical influence of teacher training and professional development in shaping practical play-based learning experiences in creative arts education. Participants’ narratives highlighted that structured professional learning opportunities empower educators to skillfully balance the safe structure of thematic lessons with the necessary creative freedom (Ata-Akturk & Sevimli-Celik, 2020). Investing in pre-service and in-service training facilitates the merging of academic theories with practical strategies, enabling teachers to foster environments that support comprehensive cognitive and artistic growth (Lindsay, 2020).

A significant challenge identified in this study is the restrictive nature of institutional structures, particularly limited resources and inflexible schedules that constrain play-based practices. Participants noted that rigid curricular requirements often contradict the organic and spontaneous essence of playful learning, leading to missed opportunities for holistic creative expression. Academic literature further critiques traditional educational paradigms for undervaluing creative exploration and advocates for more adaptable institutional policies and improved resource allocation (Cheung, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Miseliūnaitė *et al.*, 2022).

Equally noteworthy is the cautious yet optimistic stance on integrating digital technology into creative arts education. Educators acknowledge that digital tools can significantly enhance artistic expression and creativity when employed as a complement to traditional hands-on experiences. However, it remains essential to strike a balance so that these technologies supplement, rather than replace, tactile learning approaches. This careful integration can open new multimodal avenues for creativity that align with current trends in art education innovation (Hua & Yu, 2024).

This study provided rich insights into the application and challenges of play-based learning in early years creative arts education. The findings underscored the importance of integrating structured guidance and free expression, as illustrated by participants' successful balancing of predetermined themes with open-ended exploration. The authors found that the conceptual framework of J. Dewey's experiential learning theory forms the backbone of this approach, ultimately supporting both cognitive and artistic growth, as observed in participants' narratives (Ekeh, 2023b; Brovchak *et al.*, 2024). In summary, this study focused on the paradoxes and realities faced by teachers who aim to incorporate play within creative arts education and the solutions that may assist them. Although the latter is relatively simple, this study explores in detail how teachers apply research to understand how to teach effectively in early childhood.

Given the critical role of professional development, educational institutions and policymakers must invest in comprehensive training programs. The authors recommend enriching pre-service and in-service training curricula with modules on play-based learning and creative arts pedagogy. Workshops, mentoring relationships, and collaborative professional learning communities can enable teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice, ultimately empowering them to balance structure and creative autonomy in their classrooms (Ata-Akturk & Sevimli-Celik, 2020; Lindsay, 2020).

The study identified time constraints and inadequate resources as significant barriers to effective play-based learning. The authors suggest that educational policymakers reframe institutional support systems to provide more flexible schedules and increased resource allocation to address these challenges. Curriculum planners must incorporate designated periods for creative enquiry and authentic play, thereby reducing the conflict between rigid curricular demands and the spontaneous nature of art. Enhanced support mechanisms, including regular funding for art materials and teacher-training programs, are crucial for overcoming these systemic impediments (Cheung, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2015).

Participants also highlighted the promising potential of digital technology for enriching creative arts education. The authors recommend a balanced approach in which digital tools serve as a complement to traditional tactile experiences rather than as a replacement. Integrating digital platforms for activities such as digital storytelling or virtual art exploration can broaden children's creative horizons. However, it is important to maintain the integrity

of hands-on learning; thus, any technological integration should be strategically planned to sustain the experiential quality that is central to effective creative arts instruction (Hua & Yu, 2024).

This literature review was grounded in the foundational theory of J. Dewey's experiential learning model, which frames artistic play as a dynamic process of meaning-making and skill development (Luo, 2024). The review further explored how teachers conceptualise play in creative arts settings, revealing how professional experiences, cultural contexts, and pre-service training shape pedagogical practices (Ata-Akturk & Sevimli-Celik, 2020; Ekeh, 2023a). In addition, it examined implementation practices that balance structured and unstructured activities to foster holistic creative expression (Hooshyari *et al.*, 2023; Brovchak *et al.*, 2024) and considers innovative methodological approaches, including project-based learning and the thoughtful integration of digital tools to expand artistic opportunities (Catalano *et al.*, 2023; Hua & Yu, 2024). These discussions provided a comprehensive framework for understanding and advancing play-based approaches to early childhood arts education.

The intersection of play-based learning and arts education is grounded in several complementary theoretical frameworks that illuminate our understanding of how children develop artistic capabilities. J. Dewey's experiential learning theory emphasised learning through direct experience, particularly relevant to arts education. J. Dewey's (1938) work highlighted the importance of hands-on exploration and discovery in learning processes. His foundational text, is a key reference for understanding his approach to experiential learning (Luo, 2024). Recent research highlighted the significant role of experiential learning through artistic play in supporting cognitive development and enhancing creative expression. For instance, creative activities such as music, art, and storytelling significantly enhance children's cognitive and imaginative skills, including originality, fluency, and flexibility (Aulakh *et al.*, 2024).

The theoretical landscape has been further enriched by sociocultural perspectives that emphasise the role of cultural context in artistic play (Creaghe & Kidd, 2022). Children's artistic expression through play is deeply influenced by their cultural backgrounds and community values. This understanding has led to more culturally responsive approaches to early childhood arts education (Göthberg *et al.*, 2018). Teachers' understanding of play in creative arts education is shaped by their professional experience, cultural background, and institutional context. This understanding is crucial for fostering creativity and engagement in educational settings (Dewi & Yufiarti, 2021). Educators recognise the importance of creative play, which is influenced by pedagogic culture, including space, interpersonal collaborations, and materials. These elements collectively shape the manifestation and perception of creative play is manifested and perceived in early childhood settings (Prins *et al.*, 2022; Ekeh, 2023a).

Research on pedagogical beliefs in arts education reveals distinctive patterns in teachers' approaches to artistic play. Several studies have highlighted the influence of educators' self-efficacy beliefs and pedagogical knowledge on their teaching methods in the arts. For instance, early childhood educators' visual arts self-efficacy beliefs significantly impact their pedagogical choices, often limiting children's access to visual arts due to educators' lack of confidence and skills. This limitation is compounded by insufficient pre-service training, which fails to disrupt these limiting beliefs and enhance educators' visual arts skills and knowledge (Lindsay, 2020). Early childhood educators' beliefs about child development significantly influence their facilitation of artistic experiences. These beliefs range from prioritising structured guidance to emphasising child-led exploration, impacting how art is integrated into early childhood education.

Educators' self-efficacy in the visual arts, often shaped by their childhood experiences and insufficient pre-service training, affects their ability to support children's artistic learning. This can lead to a restricted visual arts curriculum unless these beliefs are challenged and expanded through constructivist approaches and practical skills development (Lindsay, 2020). Teachers' beliefs about creativity and good creative practices often align with the literature, but may not always translate into classroom practices. These practices are influenced by various factors beyond personal beliefs, such as environmental settings and teaching strategies (Cheung, 2012; Ata-Akturk & Sevimli-Celik, 2020). Programs involving co-mentoring between educators and artists can enhance engagement with the arts and positively change pedagogy. Such initiatives emphasise the importance of reflection, planning, and understanding the capabilities of young children (Hayes *et al.*, 2021).

The interplay between structured and unstructured play in art education offers unique opportunities for artistic development. Structured play often involves organised activities with specific goals, whereas unstructured play allows for more freedom and creativity, both of which are essential for fostering artistic skills and cognitive development. Structured activities provide foundational skills and techniques, whereas unstructured play fosters creative exploration and personal expression. Successful programs typically incorporate both approaches to maximise learning outcomes (Hooshyari *et al.*, 2023).

The integration of different art forms demands thoughtful consideration of cross-disciplinary connections between them. Visual arts, music, drama, and dance offer unique opportunities for expression and learning (Dewi & Yufiarti, 2021). When intentionally combined, these diverse artistic modalities create rich multisensory experiences that enhance children's artistic understanding and creative capabilities (Brovchak *et al.*, 2024). The physical environment plays a crucial role in supporting artistic explorations. Thoughtfully designed spaces and carefully selected materials encourage sustained engagement in artistic processes (Ekeh, 2023b). Time management and

scheduling considerations affect the quality of the artistic engagement. Flexible scheduling approaches that allow for extended exploration periods often yield more meaningful artistic experiences. Contemporary approaches to play-based arts education emphasise the importance of balanced pedagogical strategies that respond to children's needs and interests. Child-centred and teacher-guided approaches offer distinct benefits, with successful programs often blending both methodologies to create optimal learning environments (Garaigordobil *et al.*, 2022; Catalano *et al.*, 2023).

Project-based learning and emergent curriculum approaches provide frameworks for sustained artistic exploration. These methodologies allow children to investigate artistic concepts in depth while following their natural curiosities and interests. Long-term projects enable the development of complex artistic understanding and technical skills through sustained engagement (Hayes *et al.*, 2021). Documentation and observation techniques are crucial for understanding and supporting artistic development, particularly in educational settings. These methods help educators and students gain insights into the creative process and foster artistic growth. Systematic observation protocols combined with flexible recording strategies help educators track progress and plan appropriate interventions while maintaining the spontaneous nature of artistic exploration.

The integration of digital technology into arts education requires careful consideration of both its advantages and limitations. When thoughtfully implemented, digital tools can enrich traditional artistic experiences while preserving the essential hands-on engagement that defines practical arts education (Hua & Yu, 2024). Collaborative learning strategies such as group projects and shared creative experiences foster social development and collective creativity, reflecting the inherently social nature of artistic knowledge and expression (Ekeh, 2023a). Overall, this study examined the implementation of play-based learning within early childhood arts education, outlining both its benefits and challenges. The findings highlighted the importance of striking a balance between structured guidance and creative autonomy, grounded in theoretical frameworks such as J. Dewey's experiential learning theory. Central themes include the pivotal role of teacher training and professional development, institutional barriers such as limited time and resources, and the considered integration of technology. These insights offer valuable guidance for enhancing play-based practices and addressing systemic obstacles in early years arts education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers significant insights into the integration of play-based learning within early childhood creative arts education, highlighting the intricate "dance of pedagogy" that educators must navigate as they balance structured guidance with creative freedom. This research is grounded in theoretical framework of J. Dewey's experiential learning model, which provide essential perspectives for understanding how play facilitates cognitive and artistic

development in young children. However, translating these theories into classroom practice presents a considerable challenge for educators.

Professional development and training are crucial for equipping educators with the skills necessary to implement play-based approaches effectively. Workshops, mentoring, and collaborative learning opportunities bridge the gap between theory and practice, enabling teachers to confidently integrate play-based learning into their creative arts instruction. Despite these efforts, institutional constraints, including rigid schedules and limited resources, pose significant barriers to play-based learning. There is a clear need to reframe curriculum design and resource allocation to better support creative enquiry and artistic expression in early childhood education.

Digital technology presents promising opportunities to enhance creative arts education when it is thoughtfully integrated as a complement to hands-on experiences. However, maintaining a balance with traditional approaches is essential to ensure that children receive a comprehensive artistic education. Educators demonstrate remarkable creativity in overcoming challenges and adapting structured curricula to incorporate more open-ended and exploratory activities that promote student agency and engagement. This adaptability is crucial for the successful implementation of play-based learning in creative arts education.

This study underscored the importance of aligning pedagogical practices with children's developmental needs through flexible, play-centred approaches. It also emphasises the necessity of systemic support, including targeted teacher training and policy adjustments, to overcome practical constraints. Moving forward, continued research on effective implementation strategies and professional development models is needed. Additionally, policymakers and

educational leaders should prioritise creating supportive institutional environments that value play-based learning in creative arts education.

It can be can better nurture children's artistic potential and support their holistic development by fostering pedagogical approaches that balance structure and creative freedom. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the integration of play-based learning in early childhood creative arts education and provides a foundation for future research and practice in this important area. Further research should explore the long-term effects of play-based creative arts education, effective teacher training, and the integration of digital tools without losing hands-on engagement. Key areas include institutional support, cross-cultural comparisons, inclusive practices for diverse learners, and the role of environment and family involvement in supporting creative development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to thank the research participants for their openness and willingness to answer the interview questions on which this study is based. The authors also acknowledge the use of Monica and Paperpal AI, which served as language-refining tools for this study.

FUNDING

The researchers did not receive any funding from any public or non-governmental organisations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist. Neither of us has financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have improperly influenced or biased our work.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ata-Akturk, A., & Sevimli-Celik, S. (2020). Creativity in early childhood teacher education: Beliefs and practices. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31(1), 95-114. [doi: 10.1080/09669760.2020.1754174](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2020.1754174).
- [2] Aulakh, D., Rajiv, A., Goyal, P., Garg, A., Khurana, S., Singh, A., & Singh, P. (2024). Assessing the impact of creative tasks on cognitive and imaginative development in children. *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 8.2(S2), 1011-1022. [doi: 10.70082/esiculture.vi.1099](https://doi.org/10.70082/esiculture.vi.1099).
- [3] Brovchak, L., Starovoit, L., Likhitska, L., Todosiienko, N., & Shvets, I. (2024). Integrating music, drama, and visual arts in extracurricular programs: Enhancing psychological development in early school-aged children. *Sapienza International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 5(3), article number e24052. [doi: 10.51798/sijis.v5i3.791](https://doi.org/10.51798/sijis.v5i3.791).
- [4] Catalano, H., Albulescu, I., Stan, C., Mestic, G., & Ani-Rus, A. (2023). Child-centred approach through slow education principles: A view of child personality development in early childhood. *Sustainability*, 15(11), article number 8611. [doi: 10.3390/su15118611](https://doi.org/10.3390/su15118611).
- [5] Cheung, R. (2012). Teaching for creativity: Examining the beliefs of early childhood teachers and their influence on teaching practices. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(3), 43-52. [doi: 10.1177/183693911203700307](https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911203700307).
- [6] Creaghe, N., & Kidd, E. (2022). Symbolic play as a zone of proximal development: An analysis of informational exchange. *Social Development*, 31(4), 1138-1156. [doi: 10.1111/sode.12592](https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12592).
- [7] Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- [8] Dewi, M.S., & Yufiarti. (2021). Play-based learning activities for creativity in children's dance movement. *JPUD – Jurnal Pendidikan Usia Dini*, 15(1), 101-120. [doi: 10.21009/jpud.151.06](https://doi.org/10.21009/jpud.151.06).
- [9] Ekeh, M.C. (2023a). Developing early graders' collaborative skills through group work and play-based pedagogy. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 22(4), 160-177. [doi: 10.26803/ijlter.22.4.10](https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.4.10).

- [10] Ekeh, M.C. (2023b). Play-based pedagogy and creativity for early grade and preschool learners. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, 14(4), 278-289. [doi: 10.47750/jett.2023.14.01.005](https://doi.org/10.47750/jett.2023.14.01.005).
- [11] Garaigordobil, M., Berrueto, L., & Celume, M. (2022). Developing children's creativity and social-emotional competencies through play: Summary of twenty years of findings of the evidence-based intervention "Game Program". *Journal of Intelligence*, 10(4), article number 77. [doi: 10.3390/jintelligence10040077](https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence10040077).
- [12] Göthberg, M., Björck, C., & Mäkitalo, Å. (2018). From drama text to stage text: Transitions of text understanding in a student theatre production. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 25(3), 247-262. [doi: 10.1080/10749039.2018.1480633](https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2018.1480633).
- [13] Halverson, E., & Sawyer, K. (2022). Learning in and through the arts. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 31(1), 1-13. [doi: 10.1080/10508406.2022.2029127](https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2022.2029127).
- [14] Hayes, N., Maguire, J., & O'Sullivan, C. (2021). Professional development in arts education for early childhood education: A creative exchange model. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 53, 159-174. [doi: 10.1007/s13158-021-00290-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-021-00290-y).
- [15] Hooshyari, F., Molanorouzi, K., Ghasemi, A., & Kashi, A. (2023). The effectiveness of a selected movement program with structured, unstructured, and mixed on the social and psychological development of children aged 4 to 6 years. *Shenakht Journal of Psychology and Psychiatry*, 10(4), 15-26. [doi: 10.32598/shenakht.10.4.15](https://doi.org/10.32598/shenakht.10.4.15).
- [16] Hua, C., & Yu, M. (2024). Innovations in art education: Analysing new teaching methods, technology integration, and unique curriculum designs reshaping art education in higher education institutions. In *Abstracts of the 5th world conference on arts, humanities, social sciences, and education* (pp. 81). Vienna: Eurasia Conferences. [doi: 10.62422/978-81-968539-1-4-048](https://doi.org/10.62422/978-81-968539-1-4-048).
- [17] Lee, B., Patall, E., Cawthon, S., & Steingut, R. (2015). The effect of drama-based pedagogy on PreK-16 outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(1), 3-49. [doi: 10.3102/0034654314540477](https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314540477).
- [18] Lindsay, G. (2020). Visual arts pedagogy in early childhood contexts: The baggage of self-efficacy beliefs, pedagogical knowledge, and limited pre-service training. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 46(1), 80-92. [doi: 10.1177/1836939120979061](https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120979061).
- [19] Luo, G. (2024). The contributions of John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism to understanding education and its reform. *Journal of Education and Educational Research*, 10(2), 224-228. [doi: 10.54097/8evhak06](https://doi.org/10.54097/8evhak06).
- [20] Miseliūnaitė, B., Kliziene, I., & Cibulskas, G. (2022). Can holistic education solve the world's problems: A systematic literature review. *Sustainability*, 14(15), article number 9737. [doi: 10.3390/su14159737](https://doi.org/10.3390/su14159737).
- [21] Pepler, K., Dahn, M., & Ito, M. (2022). Connected arts learning: Cultivating equity through connected and creative educational experiences. *Review of Research in Education*, 46(1), 264-287. [doi: 10.3102/0091732X221084322](https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X221084322).
- [22] Prins, J., Van Der Wilt, F., Van Der Veen, C., & Hovinga, D. (2022). Nature play in early childhood education: A systematic review and meta-ethnography of qualitative research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, article number 995164. [doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.995164](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.995164).
- [23] Rathunde, K., & Isabella, R. (2020). Incorporating the creative arts in an educational presentation about play: A novel strategy for enhancing communication and engagement with parents. *International Journal of Play*, 9(4), 457-468. [doi: 10.1080/21594937.2020.1843807](https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2020.1843807).
- [24] Švábová, B., & Dolinská, E. (2024). Play as a means of communication for the child with art. *International Review for Human and Natural Sciences*, 14(1). [doi: 10.59505/irhns.22352007.2024.1.04](https://doi.org/10.59505/irhns.22352007.2024.1.04).
- [25] Vasiuk, O.V., & Vyhovska, S. (2023). Organization of teacher education (comparative analysis). *Humanities Studies: Pedagogy, Psychology, Philosophy*, 11(3), 24-31. [doi: 10.31548/hspedagog14\(3\).2023.24-31](https://doi.org/10.31548/hspedagog14(3).2023.24-31).

Мартін Чуквуді Екех

Кандидат наук у галузі дошкільної освіти, старший науковий співробітник постдокторантури
Йоганнесбурзький університет
2019, вул. Бейт, 157, м. Йоганнесбург, Південна Африка
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7799-9885>

Чібузор Глорія Мартін-Екех

Магістр театрального мистецтва, асистент викладача
Федеральний університет освіти імені Алвана Ікоку
P.M.B. 1033, вул. Орлу-Роуд, м. Оверрі, Нігерія
<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5529-7247>

Танець педагогіки: інтеграція гри у творчу мистецьку освіту дітей раннього віку

Анотація. Це дослідження мало на меті з'ясувати, як педагоги концептуалізують, впроваджують та рефлексують ігрові педагогічні практики в контексті навчання творчих мистецтв. Використовуючи якісну феноменологічну методологію, дослідження включало напівструктуровані інтерв'ю з сімома дошкільними педагогами, які проводилися протягом п'яти тижнів. Дані були проаналізовані за допомогою інтерпретаційного феноменологічного аналізу та підкріплені рефлексивним веденням щоденників, щоб відобразити глибину досвіду учасників. Це дослідження вивчало інтеграцію ігрового навчання в дошкільну мистецьку освіту, зосереджуючись на його впливі на когнітивну гнучкість, розв'язання проблем і творче самовираження. Результати продемонстрували, що ігрові стратегії значно сприяють художньому самовираженню та когнітивному розвитку дітей молодшого віку. Освітняники повідомили, що адаптували структуровані навчальні програми, включивши до них відкриті та дослідницькі завдання, які сприяють активності та залученню учнів. Незважаючи на ці переваги, учасники визначили кілька бар'єрів на шляху до ефективного впровадження, серед яких жорсткі навчальні графіки, обмежений доступ до матеріалів і недостатні можливості для професійного розвитку. Це дослідження підкреслило важливість узгодження педагогічних практик з потребами розвитку за допомогою гнучких та ігрових підходів. Дослідження також наголосило на необхідності системної підтримки, зокрема цілеспрямованої підготовки вчителів та коригування політики, для подолання практичних обмежень. Ці висновки роблять внесок у дискусію про дошкільну освіту, пропонуючи практичні рекомендації щодо ефективної інтеграції ігрового навчання в навчальні програми з образотворчого мистецтва. Це дослідження закликає до переоцінки існуючих освітніх систем з метою кращої підтримки інноваційних, орієнтованих на дитину методик викладання, які відповідають сучасному розумінню раннього навчання та розвитку

Ключові слова: мистецька інтеграція; мистецька навчальна програма; когнітивний розвиток; ігрове навчання; міжнародні педагогічні практики; дошкільна освіта; педагогічні інновації