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IMPLEMENTATION OF THEME-BASED PLAY LEARNING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Learning in early childhood education must be designed according to the characteristics of child development, especially through play-based activities that are integrated into thematic learning. This study aims to analyze the implementation of play-based thematic learning and its contribution to early childhood cognitive development. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with classroom observation techniques, teacher interviews, and documentation analysis in an early childhood education institution. The results showed that thematic play activities stimulate children's logical thinking, simple problem solving, number recognition, pattern formation, and understanding of cause and effect in a meaningful way. Children participate actively, show curiosity, and are able to relate the experience of play to the concept of learning. Therefore, play-based thematic learning is an effective learning strategy to foster early childhood cognitive development in a natural, meaningful, and sustainable way.
Keywords: Implementation of Theme-Based Play Learning, Early Childhood, Cognitive Development

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is an early education level that has a fundamental role in developing all children's potential (Suyanto, S., 2005). Early childhood is the first laying of the foundation for developing children's development (Purwanti, R., 2020; Sopiah, M., et al., 2022).

Sujiono, Y. N. (2013) stated that in the golden age, brain development takes place very rapidly, so the right stimulation needs to be given so that children's basic abilities develop optimally. One of the important aspects of children's development is cognitive ability, namely the ability to think, remember, understand cause and effect, group objects, and recognize the concepts of numbers, patterns, and space. This development is the basis for learning at the next level.

Sujiono (2019) cognitive development will not develop optimally if the learning process does not consider the characteristics of children who like concrete activities, movement, and play. In line with this view, Aisyah et al. (2020) stated that play is the main need of children. Through play, children gain meaningful experiences to build concepts and knowledge independently. Play helps children construct new experiences that are in harmony with their stages of cognitive development.

The results of various studies show that cognitive development has an important role in helping children understand the environment, develop logical thinking skills, solve problems, and build new concepts of knowledge. This ability is the basis for children's success in participating in various learning activities and supporting the development of other

aspects such as language, creativity, social-emotional, and independence. Therefore, cognitive development needs to be provided through active, innovative, and appropriate learning in accordance with the characteristics of early childhood (Fatimah et al., 2021; Amelia et al., 2025; Abidah & Purwanti, 2025). In line with the study of Sumriah and Purwanti (2022), it is shown that the ability to recognize objects based on their function is part of cognitive development that needs to be stimulated from an early age. Therefore, learning that integrates elements of play becomes very relevant applied to early childhood education.

Cognitive development not only affects children's thinking skills, but also supports the development of other aspects. Good cognitive abilities help children develop creativity in generating new ideas (Indah & Purwanti, 2022), understanding instructions in fine motor activities (Hafidzah & Purwanti, 2025; Oktasya et al., 2025), as well as supporting children's ability to interact and solve social problems effectively (Diningsih & Purwanti, 2025). Therefore, cognitive development is the main foundation that influences the success of child development holistically.

Play-based thematic learning is one of the alternative approaches that is able to answer these needs. Thematic learning presents concepts in an integrated manner through themes that are close to the child's experience, thus allowing children to connect abstract concepts with real experiences through play.

The results of a study by Wulandari and Sitorus (2021) show that theme-based play learning encourages children to actively explore, ask, try, and discover concepts independently. Then in line with the findings that play-based learning increases active involvement and problem-solving skills (Mawardah, M., 2025; Mukaromah, R, 2024; Zosh, J. M., et al., 2022).

However, the reality on the ground shows that learning practices in early childhood education still tend to be mostly academic, teacher-centered, and dependent on worksheets. This kind of learning limits the child's opportunities to explore and discover knowledge through hands-on experience. The implementation of this learning is still uneven. Rahma and Kurniawan (2024) found that there are still PAUD institutions that implement academically oriented learning and do not provide a planned play space. This condition has the potential to inhibit children's cognitive development optimally.

Based on this phenomenon, this study was conducted to describe how play-based thematic learning is applied in early childhood institutions, as well as how it contributes to early childhood cognitive development. This research is important to provide a comprehensive overview of learning practices that are in accordance with the characteristics of children and relevant to be developed in other PAUD institutions.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, which aims to describe in detail and in depth the implementation of play-based thematic learning and its impact on early childhood cognitive development. The qualitative approach was chosen because it was considered the most appropriate to understand the learning phenomenon in a real context, without manipulation or treatment of variables. Through this approach, researchers can capture the dynamics of interaction between teachers, children, media, and the play environment holistically according to the actual situation in the classroom. Qualitative research also allows researchers to photograph children's learning experiences naturally, including spontaneous responses, expressions, and cognitive

behavioral changes that occur in the process of play.

The selection of research locations was carried out purposively based on the consideration that the PAUD institution has implemented a theme-based curriculum and consistently integrates play activities in learning. This institution is considered relevant because it provides a varied playing environment, adequate learning media, and teachers who have an understanding of play-based learning.

The subjects of the study include classroom teachers who act as implementers of thematic learning, children aged 4–6 years who participate in play activities as students, and the physical environment of the classroom which is the context of the learning process through games. The selection of subjects was made taking into account their direct involvement in the learning interactions.

Data collection is carried out in stages through three main techniques, namely observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation is carried out in a participatory manner to observe the process of play activities, interaction between children, children-teacher interactions, and how teachers provide cognitive stimulation through questions, direction, assignments, and the provision of play media. Observation also includes observation of the use of play corners in the classroom, such as block corners, art, thematic mathematics, and science corners. In-depth interviews were conducted with classroom teachers to obtain data on learning planning, the selection of themes and types of games, the learning strategies applied, and the obstacles faced in its implementation.

Documentation was collected to complement the data from observations and interviews, in the form of teaching tools such as RPPH, photos of the learning process, video recordings of children's play activities, and children's works. This documentation data is used as visual evidence and supports data interpretation, resulting in valid and accountable research findings.

The data was analyzed through several stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). At the data reduction stage, the researcher sorts out the relevant data and organizes them in thematic categories. The presentation of data is carried out in the form of a systematic narrative description to make it easier for researchers to understand the relationship between data. Furthermore, conclusions are drawn gradually through the interpretation of the relationship between the learning process and the observed cognitive development of the child. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation is used both through sources, techniques, and time, namely by comparing observational data, interview results, and documentary evidence as a whole.

Procedurally, this research was carried out through a series of stages as follows: (1) conducting preliminary studies through literature review and initial observations to understand the context of play-based thematic learning; (2) carry out observation of the learning process to obtain a real picture of learning implementation; (3) conducting in-depth interviews with teachers as learning implementers; (4) collect relevant documentation data to strengthen the findings; and (5) analyze all data in a structured manner to compile a comprehensive description of the implementation of play-based thematic learning and its contribution to early childhood cognitive development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Implementation of theme-based play learning

Based on the results of observations and interviews with classroom teachers, the implementation of

theme-based play learning begins with the preparation of a daily activity plan that combines cognitive development goals with relevant play activities. Teachers determine one theme that is close to the child's life, such as animals, family, transportation, and the environment. The theme is then translated into play activities that contain elements of exploration, problem-solving, and hands-on experience.

The designed play activities are not monotonous, but varied in such a way that each child can be involved according to their interests and abilities. For example, through manipulative games using blocks, puzzles, and concrete objects; constructive games such as building a house using lego; role-playing games such as playing doctor or merchant; to simple science experiments such as observing the mixing of colored water. A variety of game forms allow children to access a rich and multimodal learning experience.

This is in line with the findings Sari, S. A., & Fauziyah, P. Y. (2022) stated that constructive play and science experiments increase creativity, active engagement, and early childhood exploration. Hikam, F. F., & Nursari, E. (2020) stated that simple experiments help children understand the concept of cause and effect through direct experience. Azizah, E. N., Koesmadi, D. P., & Widyaningsih, I. (2021) stated the use of concrete objects and real media in early childhood science learning.

Fauziyah, A. I., & Hasibuan, R. (2020) stated that experimental activities improve children's logical thinking and problem-solving skills. Then Norhikmah, N., & Rini, T. P. W. (2022) stated that the variety of project and experimental activities creates a more active and meaningful learning experience.

Handayani, N. S. (2023) stated that experiment-based learning makes children actively explore and increase curiosity. Nuraeni, S. (2023) stated that games in science learning help children learn in a fun and interactive way.

Harahap, Z. I., Isnani, R. A., Fadhil, N., & Rahmi, P. (2024) stated that simple experiments can improve children's problem solving, observation, and critical thinking skills.

The learning environment is arranged thematically by providing organized play corners, such as block corners, art corners, language corners, science corners, and math corners. This arrangement aims to give children the opportunity to choose games and move between activities flexibly, while facilitating a more directed thinking process. The learning media provided is concrete, easy for children to reach, and supports exploratory activities. This is in line with the findings of Yuniatari, Y. (2020) stated that the corner learning model provides various corners of activities such as mathematics, language, art, and science corners based on children's interests and gives children the opportunity to choose activities flexibly.

Hasanah, L., Alfilail, S. N., Rahmawati, R., Khairunnisa, A., & Munawaroh, S. (2024) stated that the area and center learning model helps children's holistic development through block areas, art areas, mathematics areas, science areas, and play-based exploratory activities. Hibana, H., & Surahman, S. (2021) stated that area learning gives children the freedom to choose activities according to their interests and abilities. Ningrum, Y. H. C. (2021) stated the importance of classroom arrangement and play corners to support children's comfort and learning exploration.

In the learning process, teachers play the role of facilitators who create meaningful educational interactions. Teachers provide stimulus through open-ended questions, ask challenges, and encourage children to take the initiative to make decisions in play.

Teacher intervention does not dominate, but helps children build understanding through hands-on experience. This practice shows that theme-based play learning is not just about playing games, but is systematically designed to achieve cognitive development goals. The implementation of the activity showed that most children seemed to be actively involved, showed curiosity, and developed thinking competence through interaction with the play environment. Flexible and contextual learning makes it easier for children to express ideas, share opinions, and work together in small groups. This is in line with the findings of Hewi, L., & Asnawati, L. (2021) stated that PAUD teachers play the role of facilitators who provide stimulus and meaningful learning experiences for children.

Rismayanti, E., Hidayat, S., & Ratna, S. D. (2022) stated the role of teachers as facilitators who support the active involvement of students. Aniza, N. N. (2024) stated that PAUD teachers play a role as learning facilitators who give children the freedom to explore their interests and abilities. Then Vitriana, B. (2024) stated the importance of teacher creativity in creating a fun, interactive, and child-friendly learning atmosphere. Thus, the implementation of play-based thematic learning has been proven to provide wide opportunities for children's mental activity to emerge naturally through play.

2. The contribution of learning to children's cognitive development

The findings of the study showed an improvement in children's cognitive development after participating in play-based thematic learning activities. This improvement is seen in the child's ability to recognize the concepts of numbers, sequences, and patterns through the activities of arranging blocks, counting objects, or grouping objects based on color and size. In thematic science activities, children are able to try and test their ideas through simple experiments, such as observing the process of melting ice or mixing colored water, so that children learn to understand the concept of cause and effect concretely.

In addition, children seem to be able to design simple strategies to complete tasks, such as looking for ways to prevent block buildings from collapsing or looking for alternative tools when the media used is not for the purpose. The ability to solve these problems develops because children are given space to explore and experience failure naturally. The teacher only gives light direction, so that the child learns to make decisions and find solutions on his own.

The development of memory and concentration also seems to increase. Children are able to follow the rules of the game more consistently and are able to stated the steps taken while playing. Children's language and communication skills are further developed when they are asked to share the results of experiments or tell their teachers and friends about their playing experiences. This shows that play-based thematic learning has an impact not only on cognitive aspects, but also on social-emotional and linguistic aspects. This is revealed by a study that found that it is important to improve children's development through learning activities (Purwanti, R., 2020). The results of this study are also in line with the findings of Suryaningsih and Rimpiati (2018), who stated that game-based thematic learning provides a positive stimulus for the development of logical thinking.

Azhara, D., & Purwanti, R. (2025) stated that the combination of the Project Based Learning learning model, demonstrations, and flannel media was able to significantly increase children's activity and fine motor development.

Novitawati, et all (2020) stated that traditional game-based learning models contribute to children's language and cognitive development through concrete

and fun play activities. Then Indah, I., & Purwanti, R. (2022) showed that the use of varied learning models can increase children's creativity, learning activities, and involvement in learning. Putri, E. A., Suriansyah, A., & Purwanti, R. (2024) stated that the right learning strategies and models can increase students' activities, motivation, and involvement in the learning process.

Wulansari, B. Y., & Sugito, S. (2016) stated that the nature-based learning model improves the quality of children's learning process because it is in accordance with the characteristics of early childhood learning. This article is also connected to other publications by Ratna Purwanti in the field of early childhood learning development. Nisa, I. K., Suriansyah, A., & Purwanti, R. (2025) stated that learning model innovation contributes to increasing student activities, critical thinking skills, and cooperation.

These findings are also in line with findings that prove that learning to play helps improve children's problem-solving skills, curiosity, and creativity through hands-on experience. This learning contribution can be explained through the perspective of constructivism which states that children build knowledge through active interaction with the environment and play experiences. When children explore, experiment, and make interpretations of objects and events around them, children construct new cognitive schemas in their minds (Fitriani and Mulyani, 2023; Nurhayati, Rahmawati, 2022).

Thus, theme-based play learning is an effective means to stimulate cognitive development naturally and meaningfully because the learning process takes place in a real and relevant context for children.

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