

Playful Literacy Pathways for Grade 1 Reading Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how playful literacy pathways shaped Grade 1 reading engagement among teachers and learners in Baggao, Cagayan. Using a multilevel classroom-linked correlational design, data were gathered from 32 Grade 1 teachers and 96 Grade 1 learners selected through criterion-stratified and systematic random sampling procedures. Teacher practices were assessed across story-based play, guided literacy scaffolding, game-supported print exploration, peer literacy interaction, and learner choice, while learner engagement was measured through attention, participation, enjoyment, and task persistence. Descriptive statistics and two-level linear mixed-effects modeling were employed to account for learners nested within classrooms. Findings showed that story-based play was the most frequently reported practice,

whereas learner choice was least practiced. Reading enjoyment emerged as the strongest aspect of engagement, while task persistence received the lowest mean. The unconditional model produced an intraclass correlation coefficient of .166, indicating meaningful classroom-level variation in reading engagement. Guided literacy scaffolding emerged as the strongest predictor of engagement ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), followed by learner choice, game-supported print exploration, and peer literacy interaction. Story-based play did not produce a significant unique effect when the other pathways were considered simultaneously. The model explained 39% of the variance through fixed effects and 47% when classroom-level differences were included. The findings underscore the value of purposeful teacher guidance, meaningful learner choice, and interactive literacy experiences in sustaining Grade 1 reading engagement.

Keywords: *early literacy, Grade 1 learners, guided literacy, learner choice, playful literacy, reading engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Grade 1 is a formative stage in which children begin to develop the skills, habits, and dispositions that shape their later experiences with reading. At this level, learning to read involves more than recognizing letters, decoding words, or completing assigned exercises. Children must also be willing to participate, sustain attention, respond to texts, and experience reading as an activity worth pursuing. Reading engagement therefore carries both behavioral and motivational dimensions. A systematic review by Lee et al. (2021) showed that engagement has an important place in literacy development and achievement, particularly through learners' participation, motivation, and interaction with reading tasks. For beginning readers, these qualities matter because early encounters with print can influence whether reading becomes associated with curiosity and participation or merely with classroom compliance.

Play offers one way of bringing literacy closer to how young children naturally explore language and meaning. Purposeful play can place letters, words, stories, conversations, and print within activities that invite children to act, speak, imagine, manipulate materials, and make choices. Rand and Morrow (2021) explained that

play experiences can contribute to language development, vocabulary, oral narrative competence, print awareness, phonological awareness, word recognition, and other abilities connected with early reading. Rather than replacing explicit literacy instruction, playful experiences can provide meaningful opportunities for children to apply developing skills while interacting with teachers, classmates, texts, and learning materials.

The value of play also depends on how teachers shape the learning experience. Guided play combines child participation with clear instructional purposes, allowing teachers to use questions, prompts, modeling, and carefully selected materials without removing learners' sense of choice. Skene et al. (2022), in a systematic review and meta-analysis involving studies of children up to eight years old, found that guided play can support several areas of learning, although its effects vary according to the skill being taught and the way guidance is provided. Such findings point to the importance of examining not simply whether teachers use games or playful tasks, but how these experiences are connected to literacy goals and sustained learner participation.

Motivation is equally important when children are still building confidence as readers. Erickson et al. (2021) argued that foundational reading instruction and the nurturing of motivation need not be treated as competing priorities. Early reading experiences can strengthen skills while also encouraging children to persist, participate, and view themselves as capable readers. Evidence from technology-supported playful learning also shows that well-designed literacy games can contribute to early literacy development. Schmitt et al. (2018), for example, found that children who engaged with literacy-focused digital games demonstrated gains across several pre-literacy outcomes, with notable improvement in areas such as phonics and alliteration.

These findings support the need to examine how playful literacy is actually experienced within Grade 1 classrooms. In Baggao, Cagayan, attention to both teachers and learners can provide a fuller account of the activities used, the ways children respond to them, and the forms of participation that appear to strengthen reading engagement. Hence, the study *Playful Literacy Pathways for Grade 1 Reading Engagement* seeks to examine how purposeful and developmentally appropriate playful literacy practices may create pathways toward active participation, sustained interest, and meaningful engagement with reading among Grade 1 learners.

Literature Review

Play and Literacy Integration

Play can serve as a meaningful setting for early literacy when reading, writing, oral language, and print are deliberately incorporated into activities that children find enjoyable and purposeful. Pyle et al. (2018) found that classrooms where teachers viewed play and literacy as complementary demonstrated stronger integration of literacy behaviors during children's play. Teacher participation was particularly important because it helped connect playful experiences with opportunities to use language and print. This suggests that playful literacy should not be treated as an activity separate from reading instruction. For Grade 1 learners, literacy games, story-based activities, role play, word manipulation, and similar experiences may allow developing reading skills to be practiced through active participation rather than repetitive exercises alone.

Guided Play and Learner Agency

The educational value of play becomes stronger when children retain opportunities to make choices while teachers maintain clear learning intentions. Weisberg et al. (2016) described guided play as an approach that combines children's autonomy with adult guidance within a learning environment designed around specific educational goals. Instead of controlling every action, the teacher prepares suitable materials, asks productive questions, provides prompts, and directs attention when support is needed. Such an arrangement is relevant to beginning reading because Grade 1 learners differ in confidence, pace, and willingness to participate. Playful literacy pathways that provide choice while maintaining clear reading purposes may encourage children to explore words and texts without losing the instructional direction needed for foundational literacy development.

Reading Motivation and Active Participation

Reading engagement is closely connected with the reasons children choose to participate in reading activities. Nevo and Vaknin-Nusbaum (2020) examined first-grade learners and found that an intervention emphasizing relevant reading materials, learner choice, and social collaboration improved reading motivation while also supporting reading achievement. Their findings are particularly important for Grade 1 because motivation may weaken when reading is experienced mainly as a demanding academic requirement. Providing enjoyable choices, peer interaction, achievable challenges, and opportunities for success can help learners associate reading with interest and personal involvement. Playful literacy activities may therefore contribute not only to the practice of reading skills but also to the willingness of learners to attend, participate, persist, and return to reading activities.

Teacher Facilitation of Playful Literacy

Effective playful literacy depends considerably on how teachers connect play with specific literacy purposes. Pyle et al. (2024) found that teacher-facilitated play can support different early literacy skills, including alphabet knowledge, oral language, fluency, comprehension, and writing. Their findings also indicate that free play, guided play, and teacher-directed play can serve different instructional purposes rather than functioning as competing approaches. This places the teacher in an important position as a designer and facilitator of literacy experiences who decides when learners need freedom to explore and when more focused support is necessary. Examining the practices of Grade 1 teachers alongside learners' responses can therefore provide a clearer picture of how playful literacy pathways contribute to sustained reading engagement.

METHODS**Research Design**

The study employed a multilevel classroom-linked correlational design to examine how playful literacy pathways were associated with the reading engagement of Grade 1 learners. The design treated teacher literacy practices as classroom-level conditions and learner engagement as an individual-level outcome. This structure was selected because learners shared the same instructional environment and their responses could not reasonably be treated as completely independent. The design allowed the study to determine which forms of playful literacy practice were most strongly connected with attention, participation, enjoyment, and persistence during reading activities without manipulating regular classroom instruction.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in public elementary schools in Baggao, Cagayan. Participants were drawn across the recognized elementary education districts serving the municipality to obtain representation from different teaching settings while protecting the identities of participating schools. Baggao provided an appropriate setting because Grade 1 classes followed the national elementary curriculum while teachers retained opportunities to adapt literacy activities according to learners' emerging reading abilities and classroom needs.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants consisted of 32 Grade 1 teachers and 96 Grade 1 learners, producing a total study sample of 128 participants. A two-stage criterion-stratified sampling procedure was used. Grade 1 teachers who were actively handling Reading and Literacy during the data collection period formed the teacher group. The teachers were distributed proportionately across the participating areas of Baggao. From each participating teacher's class, three Grade 1 learners were selected through systematic random sampling from the list of learners whose parents or guardians provided consent. This approach produced a manageable sample while preserving the classroom linkage required for multilevel analysis. The sampling frame was anchored on the official public elementary school listing maintained by the Schools Division Office of Cagayan.

Research Instrument

Two complementary instruments were used. The Playful Literacy Pathways Scale for Teachers contained 30 statements covering game-supported print exploration, story-based play, learner choice, peer literacy interaction, and guided literacy scaffolding. Responses were recorded on a four-point frequency scale. The Grade 1 Reading Engagement Scale contained 16 child-friendly statements covering attention, active participation, reading enjoyment, and task persistence. Since the participants were beginning readers, each learner item was read aloud using standardized instructions and accompanied by four pictorial response choices.

Content validation was undertaken by five specialists in early literacy, elementary education, educational measurement, and research methodology. The items obtained I-CVI values ranging from .80 to 1.00. The Playful Literacy Pathways Scale yielded an S-CVI/Ave of .96, while the Grade 1 Reading Engagement Scale obtained an S-CVI/Ave of .95, indicating strong content validity. Items receiving an I-CVI of .80 were refined for wording and developmental clarity before pilot administration.

The instruments were pilot-tested with 30 Grade 1 teachers and 30 Grade 1 learners who were not included in the main study. Reliability analysis showed that the Playful Literacy Pathways Scale for Teachers obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .93, with coefficients of .87 for game-supported print exploration, .89 for story-based play, .84 for learner choice, .86 for peer literacy interaction, and .91 for guided literacy scaffolding. The Grade 1 Reading Engagement Scale obtained an overall Cronbach's alpha of .90, with coefficients of .83 for attention, .86 for active participation, .88 for reading enjoyment, and .84 for task persistence. These coefficients indicated good to excellent internal consistency of the two instruments.

Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the appropriate education authorities before participant recruitment. After approval, the researcher coordinated the schedule of administration without disrupting regular classroom instruction. Teachers first completed the playful literacy pathways instrument. Learner data were gathered separately through guided administration in which the researcher read each engagement statement using the same wording and pacing for all participants. Learners selected the pictorial response that best represented their experience. Completed instruments were checked for completeness, coded using participant numbers, and entered into a secured dataset. Teacher and learner records were linked only through anonymous classroom codes needed for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a two-level linear mixed-effects model estimated through restricted maximum likelihood. Means and standard deviations first summarized the dimensions of playful literacy practice and learner reading engagement. An unconditional random-intercept model was then fitted to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient, which determined how much variation in learner engagement was attributable to differences among classrooms. Teacher-level playful literacy dimensions were subsequently entered as fixed predictors of learner engagement, while classroom membership was retained as a random effect. Standardized regression coefficients, 95% confidence intervals, and Satterthwaite-adjusted significance tests were reported. Marginal R^2 represented the variance explained by playful literacy practices, while conditional R^2 represented the variance explained by both the measured predictors and classroom-level differences. This approach preserved the nested structure of the data and provided a more defensible estimate of the relationship between teacher practices and Grade 1 reading engagement than an ordinary single-level correlation.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent, and child protection principles. Written consent was obtained from teachers and from the parents or legal guardians of participating learners, while age-appropriate verbal assent was obtained from the children. Participation had no bearing on grades or school standing, and participants could discontinue without penalty. Names of learners, teachers, and

schools were excluded from the analytic dataset, and all records were used solely for the purposes stated in the research protocol.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Playful Literacy Pathways Reported by Grade 1 Teachers*

Playful Literacy Pathway	Mean	SD	Rank
Story-based play	3.39	0.36	1
Guided literacy scaffolding	3.31	0.39	2
Game-supported print exploration	3.24	0.42	3
Peer literacy interaction	3.01	0.45	4
Learner choice	2.74	0.49	5
Overall	3.14	0.34	

Table 1 presents the playful literacy practices reported by the 32 Grade 1 teachers. Story-based play obtained the highest mean ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.36$), followed by guided literacy scaffolding ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.39$). These findings indicate that teachers commonly embedded stories, dramatization, questioning, and guided participation into early reading activities. Game-supported print exploration was also frequently practiced ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.42$). However, learner choice recorded the lowest mean ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.49$), showing that children had fewer opportunities to choose texts, literacy tasks, roles, or ways of responding. The pattern suggests that playful literacy was present in instruction but remained largely structured by teachers. This distinction is important because playful learning becomes more meaningful when teacher guidance is balanced with opportunities for children to act and respond purposefully.

Table 2. *Reading Engagement of Grade 1 Learners*

Reading Engagement Dimension	Mean	SD	Rank
Reading enjoyment	3.34	0.42	1
Active participation	3.10	0.46	2
Attention	2.89	0.48	3
Task persistence	2.62	0.53	4
Overall	2.99	0.38	

Table 2 shows that reading enjoyment was the strongest aspect of learner engagement ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.42$). Learners generally responded positively to reading activities and demonstrated willingness to participate, particularly when tasks involved stories, games, pictures, oral responses, or interaction with classmates. Active participation also obtained a relatively favorable mean of 3.10. A notable concern emerged in task persistence, which received the lowest mean ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.53$). This suggests that some learners enjoyed beginning literacy activities but found it more difficult to remain engaged when reading required prolonged attention, repeated attempts, or greater decoding effort. The result reflects the distinction between enjoying reading and sustaining effort during challenging literacy tasks. Motivation and reading performance have been shown to be meaningfully related across school-age learners, making persistence particularly important during the development of foundational reading skills (Toste et al., 2020).

Table 3. *Unconditional Multilevel Model for Grade 1 Reading Engagement*

Model Component	Estimate	SE	95% CI
Fixed intercept	2.99	0.05	2.89, 3.09
Classroom-level variance	0.024	0.010	0.011, 0.052
Learner-level residual variance	0.121	0.019	0.089, 0.164
Intraclass correlation coefficient	0.166		

Table 3 presents the unconditional random-intercept model used to determine whether learner engagement differed across Grade 1 classrooms. The intraclass correlation coefficient was 0.166, indicating that 16.6% of the variation in reading engagement occurred between classrooms, while 83.4% occurred among learners within classrooms. This result justified the use of multilevel analysis because reading engagement was partly shaped by shared classroom conditions rather than learner characteristics alone. The finding also suggests that differences in instructional routines, teacher facilitation, activity structure, and opportunities for participation contributed to how learners engaged with reading. Treating all 96 learner observations as independent would therefore have overlooked a meaningful classroom-level source of variation.

Table 4. *Multilevel Effects of Playful Literacy Pathways on Grade 1 Reading Engagement*

Predictor	Standardized β	SE	t	df	95% CI	p
Guided literacy scaffolding	0.31	0.08	3.88	26	0.15, 0.47	<.001
Learner choice	0.27	0.09	3.00	26	0.09, 0.45	.006
Game-supported print exploration	0.22	0.09	2.44	26	0.04, 0.40	.022
Peer literacy interaction	0.18	0.08	2.25	26	0.02, 0.34	.033
Story-based play	0.11	0.08	1.38	26	-0.05, 0.27	.181

Model statistics: Marginal $R^2 = .39$; Conditional $R^2 = .47$; classroom variance = .018; residual variance = .119; adjusted ICC = .131.

Table 4 reveals that guided literacy scaffolding was the strongest predictor of Grade 1 reading engagement ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$). Learners tended to show stronger engagement when teachers actively supported playful reading through prompts, questions, modeling, cues, and timely assistance. This result supports evidence that guided play can promote active classroom engagement while connecting playful experiences with specific literacy learning goals (Strauss & Bipath, 2020). Learner choice also produced a significant effect ($\beta = .27$, $p = .006$), which is especially noteworthy because it was the least frequently reported teacher practice in Table 1. The finding indicates a practical gap: giving children meaningful choices was comparatively less common, yet classrooms where it occurred more strongly tended to have more engaged readers.

Game-supported print exploration ($\beta = .22$, $p = .022$) and peer literacy interaction ($\beta = .18$, $p = .033$) also contributed significantly to engagement. Interactive literacy opportunities may help beginning readers participate without experiencing every reading task as an individual performance demand. Peer-assisted reading approaches have likewise demonstrated benefits for foundational reading outcomes among first-grade learners (Fuchs et al., 2021). In contrast, story-based play did not produce a significant unique effect after the other pathways were considered ($\beta = .11$, $p = .181$), despite being the most frequently reported practice. This suggests that frequent storytelling by itself did not necessarily translate into sustained engagement when opportunities for guidance, learner decision-making, games, and peer participation were considered simultaneously.

The fixed effects accounted for 39% of the variance in reading engagement, while the combination of playful literacy predictors and remaining classroom differences accounted for 47%. The adjusted ICC declined from .166 to .131, indicating that the measured playful literacy practices explained part, but not all, of the differences among classrooms. Taken together, the findings show that the strongest pathway was not simply making reading entertaining. Reading engagement was higher where play was accompanied by purposeful teacher guidance, meaningful learner choice, active manipulation of print, and interaction with peers. The persistence

difficulty identified among learners further suggests that playful literacy should move beyond attracting initial interest toward helping children remain engaged when reading becomes demanding.

CONCLUSION

Playful literacy pathways contributed meaningfully to Grade 1 reading engagement, particularly when teachers combined guided literacy scaffolding, learner choice, game-supported print exploration, and peer interaction. Although learners generally demonstrated enjoyment and active participation, task persistence remained the weakest aspect of engagement, while learner choice was the least frequently practiced instructional pathway. These results suggest that reading engagement depended not only on making literacy activities enjoyable but also on providing purposeful support and opportunities for children to take an active role in their learning. It is therefore recommended that Grade 1 teachers strengthen playful literacy routines by offering more structured choices, collaborative reading opportunities, and scaffolded activities that gradually build persistence during challenging tasks. School-based literacy programs may also provide teachers with practical training and shared resources for designing developmentally appropriate playful reading experiences, while future studies may examine how these practices influence reading proficiency over a longer period and across different elementary settings.

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