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Play-Based Readiness Pathways and Socioemotional Learning Transitions in Kindergarten Education

Shirly G. Dawala[1*] and Anthony N. Ualat[1,2]
[1]*Northeastern College*
[*]*sgdawala1@gmail.com*, [2]*anthonyualat@northeasterncollege.edu.ph*

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ABSTRACT

This study traced how play-based readiness pathways shaped socioemotional learning transitions among kindergarten learners as observed by teachers in Solana, Cagayan. Using a cross-sectional predictive pathway design, data were gathered from 24 kindergarten teachers through the 32-item Play-Based Readiness Pathways and Socioemotional Learning Transition Scale. Descriptive statistics and partial least squares regression with leave-one-out cross-validation and 5,000 bootstrap resamples were used for analysis. Results showed that play-based readiness pathways were often practiced, with guided play obtaining the highest mean, while transition-supportive play routines received the lowest rating. Socioemotional learning transitions were generally favorable, particularly in social participation and adaptive classroom behavior, although emotional regulation and transition confidence were comparatively weaker. The predictive model explained 63% of the variance in overall socioemotional learning transition and demonstrated acceptable predictive relevance. Transition-supportive play routines emerged as the strongest overall predictor and showed the greatest contribution to transition confidence, emotional regulation, and adaptive classroom behavior. Cooperative play was the strongest predictor of social participation, while exploratory play showed limited unique predictive contribution when the other pathways were considered simultaneously. The findings indicate that kindergarten readiness is strengthened not simply through frequent play but through purposeful play experiences that support emotional adjustment, peer interaction, classroom adaptation, and confidence during transitions. Greater instructional attention to transition-supportive and cooperative play is therefore recommended.

Keywords: *cooperative play, kindergarten education, play-based learning, school readiness, socioemotional learning, transition support*

INTRODUCTION

Kindergarten marks a formative period in which children begin to negotiate the demands of structured learning while continuing to depend on exploration, interaction, movement, and play as natural ways of making sense of experience. Readiness at this stage is broader than the acquisition of early literacy and numeracy skills. It also involves the capacity to participate in classroom routines, regulate emotions and behavior, communicate needs, cooperate with others, sustain attention, and approach new learning experiences with confidence. For this reason, play occupies an important place in early childhood education because it allows developmental and learning goals to unfold within experiences that are meaningful to young children. A broad review of kindergarten research found that play-based pedagogy contributes to developmental and academic learning, although the ways teachers' structure and participate in play influence the kinds of learning that emerge (Pyle et al., 2017).

Play-based learning does not require a choice between unrestricted play and formal instruction. Rather, effective practice can move across forms of child-directed, mutually directed, and teacher-guided activity

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depending on the learning purpose. This distinction is important because kindergarten teachers make daily decisions about when to observe, when to join children's play, and when to provide prompts that extend thinking without removing children's agency. Evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis indicates that guided play can support particular areas of children's learning, including early mathematics, spatial vocabulary, and aspects of executive functioning, while also showing that its effects vary according to the outcome being measured and the way play is implemented (Skene et al., 2022). Such findings place the teacher at the center of how play becomes a purposeful pathway toward readiness rather than simply a period of recreation within the school day.

The value of play is also closely connected with children's socioemotional development. Entering kindergarten brings children into situations that require sharing, waiting, following routines, managing frustration, expressing feelings appropriately, resolving disagreements, and forming relationships beyond the family. These abilities shape how children participate in learning and adjust to classroom expectations. A systematic review and meta-analysis involving 79 studies and more than 18,000 children found that early childhood social and emotional learning interventions were associated with gains in social competence, emotional competence, behavioral self-regulation, and early learning outcomes, as well as reductions in emotional and behavioral difficulties (Blewitt et al., 2018). Social and emotional capacities therefore function not as secondary outcomes of kindergarten education but as part of the foundation that enables children to engage productively with school.

Within play, these capacities are practiced in concrete and recurring ways. Children negotiate roles, follow shared rules, cope with winning and losing, communicate intentions, take turns, solve interpersonal problems, and adjust their behavior in response to others. Teachers can strengthen these experiences by creating responsive play environments and by providing support when children need help managing emotions or participating with peers. Research examining self-regulation in play-based kindergarten classrooms further shows that teachers use different forms of child-led and guided play to support emotional, behavioral, and broader self-regulatory development (Pyle et al., 2022). This makes teacher practice particularly important in understanding how play experiences are translated into readiness for the social and emotional demands of schooling.

The Philippine kindergarten curriculum likewise recognizes developmentally appropriate and play-based experiences as essential to children's holistic growth and preparation for formal schooling. The Department of Education emphasizes exploration, creativity, meaningful experiences, and varied play-based activities as means through which young learners acquire competencies and develop readiness for succeeding school tasks (Department of Education, n.d.). The challenge for classroom practice lies in understanding how these principles are experienced and enacted by teachers as they respond to differences in children's readiness, behavior, emotional expression, peer interaction, and adjustment to school routines.

This study examines the perspectives and practices of kindergarten teachers in Solana, Cagayan. It focuses on how play-based experiences serve as pathways for developing children's readiness and how these practices relate to socioemotional learning transitions during kindergarten. By drawing on the experiences of teachers who directly observe children's participation, adjustment, and development in daily classroom life, the study seeks to clarify how play can be organized not only for enjoyment and engagement but also for the gradual development of the social, emotional, behavioral, and learning capacities needed for successful participation in school.

Literature Review

Play-Based Learning as a Readiness Pathway

Play-based learning depends not only on the presence of games and playful activities but also on how teachers connect play with intentional learning. Kindergarten teachers often recognize play as valuable for children's development, yet their understanding of when to intervene, guide, observe, or allow children to direct an activity differs considerably. In a systematic review of 62 studies across 24 national settings, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) found that early childhood educators generally viewed play positively but differed in how they understood the relationship between play and learning. Teachers also reported uncertainty about their appropriate role during play and pressures arising from curriculum expectations. These findings suggest that play becomes a

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readiness pathway when teachers deliberately organize experiences that preserve children's participation while guiding them toward skills needed for classroom learning.

Multidimensional Nature of Kindergarten Readiness

School readiness extends beyond knowing letters, numbers, shapes, or other pre-academic content. It includes physical well-being, communication, approaches to learning, social competence, emotional development, and the ability to function within the routines and expectations of school. Williams and Lerner (2019) explained that readiness should not be treated solely as a characteristic of the child because schools, families, and communities also influence whether children are prepared to participate successfully in education. This broader view is important in kindergarten because children enter classrooms with varying developmental experiences and capacities. Readiness pathways therefore require teachers to recognize differences among learners and provide experiences that strengthen participation, independence, communication, cooperation, and adjustment alongside emerging academic abilities.

Socioemotional Learning in Early Childhood

Socioemotional learning encompasses several closely connected capacities that allow children to understand themselves, relate to others, and regulate their responses during everyday experiences. Darling-Churchill and Lippman (2016) identified social competence, emotional competence, behavior, and self-regulation as central areas within early childhood social and emotional development. These abilities become visible in kindergarten when children manage frustration, communicate feelings, wait for turns, cooperate with peers, respond to classroom expectations, and recover from difficult experiences. Philippine evidence also points to the educational value of these capacities. Bloem and Wydick (2023) found that socioemotional characteristics, including self-control, openness, and conscientiousness, partly explained the positive educational effects associated with kindergarten participation. This supports the view that socioemotional learning is intertwined with children's readiness for sustained participation and later academic learning.

Socioemotional Transitions and Teacher Support

The movement toward more structured schooling can bring excitement and curiosity, but it can also expose children to unfamiliar routines, interpersonal demands, frustration, worry, and expectations for greater independence. Teachers are particularly important during this transition because they observe how children respond emotionally and socially within daily classroom situations. Pirskanen et al. (2019), drawing on interviews with 112 teachers from Australia, China, Finland, Japan, and Spain, found that teachers regarded emotional expression, regulation, empathy, and problem solving with peers as important during the transition to formal schooling. Teachers also observed stress, anxiety, and difficulty coping with disappointment among some children. Such findings emphasize that successful kindergarten transitions involve more than preparing children for academic tasks. They require classroom experiences in which children gradually develop emotional security, self-regulation, peer relationships, and confidence in navigating the demands of school.

METHODS

Research Design

The study used a cross-sectional predictive pathway design to examine how play-based readiness practices corresponded with socioemotional learning transitions observed in kindergarten classrooms. Rather than treating play merely as a classroom activity, the design considered its different forms as readiness pathways that could contribute to children's emotional regulation, social participation, adaptive behavior, and confidence during school adjustment. Data were collected from teachers at one point in time, with no manipulation of instructional conditions. The design allowed both the strength of individual readiness pathways and their combined predictive contribution to socioemotional transitions to be examined.

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Research Locale

The study was conducted in Solana, Cagayan, where kindergarten classes operated within the public basic education system under the Schools Division of Cagayan. The locale provided an appropriate setting because kindergarten instruction incorporated play, structured routines, peer interaction, exploration, and teacher-guided activities as part of children's preparation for subsequent formal learning. Differences in community setting and classroom conditions also allowed teacher observations to reflect varied experiences of kindergarten adjustment.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were 24 kindergarten teachers from Solana, Cagayan. Criterion-based purposive sampling was employed because the study required respondents with sustained and direct experience observing young children's learning behavior and socioemotional adjustment. Teachers qualified when they were officially handling a kindergarten class during data collection and had completed sufficient classroom interaction with their learners to assess patterns of participation, emotional responses, peer relationships, and adjustment to routines. Teachers who were serving only as temporary substitutes were excluded.

Research Instrument

Data collection utilized the researcher-developed Play-Based Readiness Pathways and Socioemotional Learning Transition Scale (PRP-SLTS). The 32-item instrument was organized into two complementary scales. Eighteen items assessed play-based readiness pathways through guided play, exploratory play, cooperative play, and transition-supportive play routines. The remaining 14 items measured socioemotional learning transition through emotional regulation, social participation, adaptive classroom behavior, and transition confidence. Kindergarten teachers responded to each statement using a five-point frequency scale from 1, *never*, to 5, *consistently*.

Prior to administration, the PRP-SLTS was examined by five experts with backgrounds in kindergarten education, child development, educational measurement, and research methodology. Their evaluation focused on item relevance, clarity, developmental appropriateness, and correspondence with the identified constructs. The validation yielded Aiken's V values from .84 to .98 and an S-CVI/Ave of .94, supporting the content adequacy of the instrument. Recommendations concerning wording, behavioral specificity, and suitability for kindergarten settings were incorporated into the final draft.

The refined instrument was subsequently pilot tested with 25 kindergarten teachers from schools outside the study locale who were excluded from the main sample. Internal consistency analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .90 for Play-Based Readiness Pathways and .88 for Socioemotional Learning Transition. For the entire 32-item instrument, the overall Cronbach's alpha was .92. Reliability coefficients for the individual dimensions were .85 for guided play, .83 for exploratory play, .87 for cooperative play, .82 for transition-supportive play routines, .86 for emotional regulation, .84 for social participation, .88 for adaptive classroom behavior, and .83 for transition confidence. The obtained coefficients demonstrated satisfactory to strong internal consistency, supporting the use of the finalized PRP-SLTS in the main data collection.

Data Gathering

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the appropriate education authorities before data collection. Eligible kindergarten teachers received an explanation of the purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality provisions of the research. After informed consent was secured, the questionnaires were administered during periods that did not interfere with classroom instruction. Teachers were instructed to respond according to their regular classroom practices and sustained observations of their learners rather than isolated incidents. Completed instruments were reviewed for completeness, coded anonymously, and entered into a secured dataset for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

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Descriptive analysis used the median, interquartile range, mean, and standard deviation to summarize teacher responses across the eight dimensions of the instrument. To determine how the play-based readiness dimensions collectively accounted for socioemotional learning transitions, partial least squares regression with leave-one-out cross-validation was applied. This procedure was selected because the predictor dimensions were conceptually related and the respondent group was relatively small. Standardized weights and variable importance in projection values were used to identify the play-based pathways carrying the greatest predictive contribution. Stability of the estimates was examined through 5,000 bootstrap resamples with 95% confidence intervals. This approach provided a more suitable assessment of predictive contribution than relying only on conventional pairwise correlation.

Ethical Consideration

Participation was voluntary and proceeded only after informed consent. No learner names, teacher identifiers, or individually identifiable information were included in the research dataset. Respondents could decline or discontinue participation without penalty. Information was stored securely, analyzed only in aggregate form, and used solely for the purposes stated in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Play-Based Readiness Pathways Reported by Kindergarten Teachers*

Dimension	Mean	Median	IQR	SD	Interpretation	Rank
Guided Play	4.23	4.25	0.40	0.37	Consistently Practiced	1
Exploratory Play	4.11	4.13	0.46	0.41	Often Practiced	2
Cooperative Play	4.05	4.08	0.51	0.44	Often Practiced	3
Transition-Supportive Play Routines	3.78	3.75	0.62	0.53	Often Practiced	4
Overall	4.04	4.06	0.43	0.39	Often Practiced	

Note. n = 24. IQR = interquartile range.

The overall mean of 4.04 showed that play-based readiness pathways were regularly incorporated into kindergarten instruction. Guided play obtained the highest mean at 4.23, indicating that teachers commonly used structured yet playful activities in which they provided prompts, directions, materials, or questions while allowing children to remain actively involved. Exploratory play followed at 4.11, suggesting considerable opportunities for discovery and child-initiated engagement. Cooperative play also remained strong at 4.05, reflecting the regular use of activities requiring sharing, turn-taking, interaction, and joint participation.

The comparatively weaker area was transition-supportive play routines, with a mean of 3.78 and the largest variability among the four dimensions, SD = 0.53. Although still practiced often, the result indicated that routines specifically designed to help children move between activities, tolerate changes, separate from caregivers, manage waiting time, or prepare for more structured classroom expectations were less consistently embedded in play. This distinction is important because strong play-based instruction does not automatically ensure that play is deliberately used to prepare children for transitions. Fyffe et al. (2024) similarly showed that play-based experiences can foster readiness through children's development as learners, explorers, communicators, and empathizers. The present pattern suggests that teachers had established a generally strong play-based environment, but the intentional use of play for transition preparation remained an area for improvement.

Table 2. *Socioemotional Learning Transitions Observed by Kindergarten Teachers*

Dimension	Mean	Median	IQR	SD	Interpretation	Rank
Social Participation	4.12	4.14	0.48	0.43	Frequently Manifested	1

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Adaptive Classroom Behavior	3.94	4.00	0.55	0.47	Frequently Manifested	2
Transition Confidence	3.82	3.86	0.61	0.51	Frequently Manifested	3
Emotional Regulation	3.68	3.71	0.66	0.55	Frequently Manifested	4
Overall	3.89	3.91	0.49	0.44	Frequently Manifested	

The overall socioemotional learning transition mean of 3.89 indicated generally favorable adjustment among kindergarten learners as observed by their teachers, although the results also revealed areas where adjustment was less stable. Social participation ranked highest at 4.12, showing that learners generally interacted with classmates, participated in group experiences, and engaged socially during classroom activities. Adaptive classroom behavior followed at 3.94, indicating that most children were able to respond to common routines, directions, and behavioral expectations.

Greater difficulty was observed in transition confidence and particularly emotional regulation. Emotional regulation recorded the lowest mean, 3.68, as well as the largest IQR, 0.66, suggesting wider differences among classrooms in children's ability to manage frustration, disappointment, waiting, changes in activity, and other emotionally demanding situations. Transition confidence was also comparatively lower at 3.82, indicating that some children continued to require reassurance and adult support when approaching unfamiliar tasks or changes in classroom routines. This result prevents the overall favorable rating from being interpreted as an absence of transition problems. Jiang et al. (2021) found that kindergarten transition difficulties can remain common even when children function successfully in other areas, particularly when they must follow schedules, work within groups, remain organized, and respond to new demands. The present findings therefore indicate that social participation developed more readily than emotional control and confidence during adjustment.

Table 3. *Cross-Validated PLS Regression Models for Socioemotional Learning Transitions*

Outcome Variable	Latent Components	R^2	Q^2	RMSECV
Emotional Regulation	2	0.52	0.34	0.37
Social Participation	2	0.61	0.45	0.30
Adaptive Classroom Behavior	2	0.57	0.40	0.32
Transition Confidence	2	0.64	0.48	0.29
Overall Socioemotional Learning Transition	2	0.63	0.47	0.27

Note. R^2 = variance explained; Q^2 = cross-validated predictive relevance; RMSECV = root mean square error of cross-validation.

The PLS regression models showed that play-based readiness pathways accounted for meaningful variation across all four socioemotional transition dimensions. Predictive strength was highest for transition confidence, for which the model explained 64% of the variance, followed by social participation at 61%, adaptive classroom behavior at 57%, and emotional regulation at 52%. The composite model explained 63% of the variation in overall socioemotional learning transition.

The cross-validated results also supported the predictive usefulness of the models. All Q^2 values were positive, ranging from 0.34 to 0.48, while the overall socioemotional model produced a Q^2 of 0.47 and the lowest RMSECV of 0.27. Thus, the relationship between play-based readiness and socioemotional transitions was not confined to the fitted observations but remained evident during leave-one-out prediction. The comparatively lower predictive value for emotional regulation also suggested that emotional control was influenced by factors beyond classroom play practices alone. This pattern is compatible with Vitiello et al. (2022), who found that changes in teacher-child interactions and classroom experiences across early educational transitions were associated with children's social competence, learning behavior, and self-regulation.

Table 4. *PLS Regression Coefficients, Variable Importance, and Bootstrap Confidence Intervals*

Socioemotional Outcome	Play-Based Pathway	β	VIP	95% BCa CI	Interpretation

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Emotional Regulation	Guided Play	0.27	1.09	[0.02, 0.49]	Important
	Exploratory Play	0.08	0.70	[-0.11, 0.27]	Limited
	Cooperative Play	0.21	1.01	[0.01, 0.42]	Important
	Transition-Supportive Play Routines	0.35	1.24	[0.10, 0.58]	Strongest
Social Participation	Guided Play	0.28	1.11	[0.05, 0.49]	Important
	Exploratory Play	0.09	0.72	[-0.11, 0.27]	Limited
	Cooperative Play	0.39	1.31	[0.16, 0.60]	Strongest
	Transition-Supportive Play Routines	0.22	1.03	[0.01, 0.42]	Important
Adaptive Classroom Behavior	Guided Play	0.22	1.02	[0.01, 0.42]	Important
	Exploratory Play	0.12	0.82	[-0.08, 0.31]	Limited
	Cooperative Play	0.29	1.16	[0.06, 0.50]	Important
	Transition-Supportive Play Routines	0.34	1.22	[0.10, 0.55]	Strongest
Transition Confidence	Guided Play	0.18	0.96	[-0.01, 0.37]	Limited
	Exploratory Play	0.10	0.69	[-0.09, 0.28]	Limited
	Cooperative Play	0.30	1.15	[0.08, 0.50]	Important
	Transition-Supportive Play Routines	0.41	1.35	[0.19, 0.61]	Strongest
Overall Socioemotional Transition	Guided Play	0.22	1.04	[0.03, 0.42]	Important
	Exploratory Play	0.10	0.75	[-0.08, 0.28]	Limited
	Cooperative Play	0.33	1.20	[0.09, 0.52]	Important
	Transition-Supportive Play Routines	0.37	1.28	[0.13, 0.57]	Strongest

Note. β = standardized PLS regression coefficient; VIP = variable importance in projection; BCa CI = bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence interval based on 5,000 resamples. VIP values above 1.00 were treated as comparatively important.

The pathway analysis revealed a clearer explanation of how play contributed to different aspects of socioemotional transition. Transition-supportive play routines emerged as the strongest overall predictor, with β = 0.37, VIP = 1.28, and a bootstrap confidence interval that remained above zero. It was also the strongest predictor of emotional regulation, adaptive classroom behavior, and transition confidence. The largest pathway coefficient in the analysis was found for transition-supportive play routines predicting transition confidence, β = 0.41, VIP = 1.35. This result is particularly important when read alongside Table 1. The practice that teachers reported using least consistently was the practice carrying the strongest predictive value for several transition outcomes. The principal problem identified by the study was therefore not an absence of play-based learning, but insufficient emphasis on the type of play most closely connected with children's adjustment to classroom transitions.

Cooperative play was the strongest predictor of social participation, β = 0.39, VIP = 1.31, and remained important across all other outcomes. Activities that required children to negotiate roles, take turns, share resources, respond to peers, and work toward common play goals appeared especially relevant to social adjustment. Guided play also contributed to several outcomes, although its effects were smaller. In contrast, exploratory play produced VIP values below 1.00 across all models, and each bootstrap interval crossed zero. This did not indicate that exploratory play lacked educational value. Rather, after the other play pathways were considered simultaneously, exploration did not make a strong unique contribution to the socioemotional transition outcomes measured in the study. Larsen et al. (2025) likewise found that teachers' facilitation within play was particularly important for relationship and self-management competencies and that socioemotional skills were more frequently addressed during teacher-facilitated play. The present results therefore favored a balanced model in which child exploration remained part of kindergarten learning while purposeful cooperative and transition-oriented play received stronger instructional attention.

Taken together, the findings showed that kindergarten teachers in Solana maintained generally strong play-based readiness practices and observed favorable socioemotional transitions among learners. However, the

results exposed an important imbalance. Guided and exploratory forms of play were more firmly established, while transition-supportive routines received less consistent attention despite their stronger predictive contribution to emotional regulation, adaptive behavior, and transition confidence. The findings therefore positioned intentional transition-supportive and cooperative play as the principal pathways through which existing kindergarten practice could be strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Play-based readiness pathways were strongly embedded in kindergarten practice, with guided, exploratory, and cooperative play frequently used by teachers, while transition-supportive play routines were comparatively less consistent. Socioemotional learning transitions were generally favorable, particularly in social participation and adaptive classroom behavior, although emotional regulation and transition confidence remained more challenging. The predictive analysis further showed that transition-supportive play routines and cooperative play contributed most strongly to socioemotional adjustment, especially in strengthening confidence, emotional regulation, and social participation. These findings indicate that kindergarten readiness should not depend mainly on exposure to play, but on how deliberately play is structured to support children's movement across routines, relationships, and emotional demands. It is therefore recommended that kindergarten teachers strengthen transition-supportive and cooperative play through predictable play routines, role-based activities, peer interaction tasks, emotion-focused games, and gradual preparation for changes in classroom activities. School-level professional development may also focus on helping teachers integrate socioemotional goals more intentionally into daily play experiences, while future studies may examine the same pathways using learner observations, longitudinal tracking, or larger samples to determine how these patterns develop across the kindergarten year.

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