



Play-based pedagogical interventions to foster socio-emotional and cognitive development in early childhood education

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Abstract

Despite the emphasis on intentional, play-based pedagogies in the Portuguese OCEPE framework, little empirical evidence describes how these practices operate in rural preschool settings. This study examined how a sequence of intentional, play-based activities could support preschool children's socio-emotional development, emergent literacy, environmental awareness, and healthy habits. A qualitative descriptive design informed by action-research principles was conducted with 18 children (ages 3–5) in a rural preschool in northern Portugal. Data consisted of classroom observations, field notes, reflective journals, and photographic records collected over ten weeks. Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of engagement and behavioral change. Findings indicated increased emotional expression, cooperation, and autonomy, alongside greater motivation for literacy-related play, early letter-sound awareness, and more environmentally responsible and health-promoting behaviours. These themes were consistently supported across qualitative data sources. The study provides practice-based evidence showing that integrating curricular guidelines with intentional, play-based pedagogies can foster holistic development in early childhood education, particularly in rural contexts.

Keywords: early childhood education; emergent literacy; play-based learning; socio-emotional development

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in fostering children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. High-quality early learning environments contribute to the construction of positive identities, autonomy, and essential life skills (OECD, 2022). Despite broad international consensus on the importance of child-centered and play-based pedagogies, a persistent gap remains between theoretical principles and daily practices in many early childhood education settings (Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009). Research has repeatedly shown that educators often struggle to translate child-centered frameworks into concrete pedagogical actions, particularly in under-resourced or rural contexts, where limited training opportunities and structural constraints may hinder innovation (UNICEF, 2023).

This study emerged from a supervised practicum conducted in an early childhood

education setting in a rural community in northern Portugal, undertaken within the Higher Technical Course in Child and Youth Care at the School of Education of Fafe (ESEF-IEES). The practicum offered the opportunity to observe children aged three to five years in their daily routines and to design targeted pedagogical interventions. Across several weeks, recurrent difficulties were identified in socio-emotional regulation, peer interaction, and the development of autonomy—domains widely recognized as foundational to holistic child development. These observations mirror challenges documented internationally, suggesting that the disconnect between theory and practice is not only a local issue but part of a broader pattern affecting early childhood settings.

Although the literature consistently advocates for play-based, exploratory, and socio-emotionally responsive approaches, fewer studies have examined how such principles can be operationalized through context-specific, small-scale interventions developed within rural preschool settings (Selepe et al., 2024). Moreover, existing research rarely explores the role of reflective practicum-based pedagogical design as a mechanism for bridging the gap between theoretical guidelines and daily practice. This study contributes to the field by providing empirical insights into how intentionally designed play-based interventions can address developmental challenges in real classroom contexts, particularly in rural environments that remain underrepresented in early childhood education research.

The purpose of this article is not only to describe but to critically analyze the implementation and effects of a series of play-based and exploratory pedagogical interventions developed during the practicum. The study aims to illuminate how these interventions can support children's holistic development and how reflective practice can serve as a tool for aligning pedagogical theory with everyday educational practice.

To guide this qualitative inquiry, the study addresses the following questions: (1) How do intentionally designed play-based interventions influence children's socio-emotional regulation, autonomy, and social interaction in a rural Portuguese preschool? (2) How does reflective practice during a practicum contribute to bridging the gap between child-centered theoretical frameworks and daily classroom routines?

By articulating these questions, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing international discussions on strengthening the link between theory and practice in early childhood education and to highlight the potential of reflective pedagogical design as a pathway to improving teaching quality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Early childhood education is grounded in the understanding that young children learn through active engagement with people, materials, and environments. This study draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively support the pedagogical interventions implemented during the practicum: sociocultural theory, guided play, experiential and nature-based learning, and the reflective practitioner model. These perspectives align with the Portuguese Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines (OCEP; Ministério da Educação, 2016) and the National Health Education Framework (RES; Direção-Geral da Educação, 2017), both of which emphasize children's agency, holistic development, and the educator's mediating role.

Sociocultural theory, particularly Vygotsky's emphasis on the co-construction of meaning within socially and culturally situated activities, provides a foundation for understanding the educator's central role as mediator. Concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development and mediated learning illuminate how interactions, language, and shared problem-solving support children's emotional regulation, autonomy, social participation, and emergent literacy (Zhou, 2024). The OCEP explicitly draws from this perspective by advocating for intentional observation, documentation, and responsive intervention as essential dimensions of professional practice.

Guided play theory further refines the pedagogical approach underpinning this practicum. Guided play blends children's intrinsic motivation and exploratory tendencies with adult-scaffolded learning intentions, allowing children to remain active agents while the educator introduces prompts, questions, modeling, and structures that enrich learning opportunities. Research shows that guided play supports gains in language development, cognitive flexibility, socio-emotional competence, and early literacy (e.g., Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2016). This pedagogical orientation is also central to the OCEP, where play functions as the primary medium through which learning unfolds. In this study, daily emotional check-ins, literacy games, outdoor explorations, and collaborative tasks were structured according to these principles of guided engagement.

Experiential learning theories, including Kolb's cyclical model of learning, emphasize action, hands-on engagement, and reflection as key learning mechanisms. When applied to early childhood, experiential learning often intersects with nature-based education, which demonstrates that direct contact with natural environments enhances motivation, creativity, social cooperation, and environmental awareness. These ideas are particularly relevant to the rural context of the practicum, where natural and cultural community resources provided a rich foundation for exploration, outdoor creative expression, gardening, and environmental inquiry.

The OCEP similarly encourages educators to integrate indoor and outdoor experiences and to value sensory-based and culturally responsive learning environments.

The development of socio-emotional learning (SEL) constitutes another essential dimension of the theoretical basis for this study. SEL frameworks emphasize skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and cooperative interaction (Cavioni et al., 2024). The RES positions SEL as a core component of health education in preschool, and extensive meta-analytic evidence shows that SEL programs embedded in daily routines support positive classroom climates, reduce behavioral challenges, and strengthen peer relations (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2017). The practicum's interventions—morning emotion identification routines, cooperative games, conflict-resolution strategies, and storytelling with emotional vocabulary—were aligned with these recommendations and designed to be naturally integrated into the classroom's everyday flow.

Emergent literacy research also informs the present study. Evidence demonstrates that early oral language, vocabulary development, phonological awareness, and print knowledge are strong predictors of later reading proficiency (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). The OCEP positions literacy as an integrated, meaning-centered process that develops through interaction, communication, and playful engagement with language. The practicum's activities—such as sorting games for phonological elements, storytelling circles, and letter-sound manipulation using playful materials—reflect this integrated view, combining meaning-making with code-related skills in developmentally appropriate formats.

Health-related learning, likewise grounded in the RES, forms another dimension of the practicum's theoretical foundation. Research shows that hands-on, visually supported, and participatory activities related to oral hygiene, nutrition, and active lifestyles encourage children to develop long-lasting healthy habits from an early age. Activities such as food classification, shared cooking experiences, and oral health routines in the practicum exemplify this experiential approach.

Underlying all these perspectives is the reflective practitioner model, which provides the overarching conceptual anchor of the study. Schön's (1983) framework highlights cycles of observation, interpretation, planning, action, and re-evaluation as central to professional learning. Both the OCEP and RES stress the importance of reflective practice for aligning educational intentions with children's needs and for ensuring that pedagogical decisions remain responsive and contextually grounded. In this study, reflective journaling and ongoing documentation allowed the interventions to be adjusted iteratively, strengthening the connection between theoretical principles and daily practice.

Taken together, these theoretical and policy frameworks form a coherent conceptual model for understanding the practicum's interventions. Sociocultural theory explains how learning emerges through interaction; guided play provides the pedagogical mechanism for structuring learning experiences; experiential and nature-based perspectives situate the work within a rural community context; SEL and emergent literacy research justify the developmental domains targeted; and reflective practice structures the ongoing process of pedagogical decision-making. Integrating these perspectives supports the broader aim of bridging research, curriculum guidelines, and everyday practice in early childhood education, particularly in rural settings where contextualized, holistic, and play-based approaches can significantly enrich children's learning opportunities.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, informed by principles of reflective practice and action research in early childhood education. Rather than implementing a full multi-cycle action research project, the practicum followed an iterative cycle of observation, planning, action, and reflection over a ten-week period, with the aim of improving daily pedagogical practices in a naturalistic classroom context.

The research took place in a public preschool located in a rural community in northern Portugal. The classroom enrolled children aged three to five years and followed the Portuguese Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines (OCEP; Ministério da Educação, 2016), which emphasize child-centered, play-based pedagogies. The participant group comprised all 25 children (13 girls and 12 boys) in the mixed-age classroom. This whole-group inclusion reflects the ecological and inclusive nature of the study, which sought to understand and support the dynamics of the classroom as a natural unit rather than to select individual cases. No children had formally identified special educational needs during the period of the practicum.

The intervention was conceived and implemented by the student intern, in close collaboration with the classroom's lead teacher and teaching assistant. The cooperating teacher acted as a pedagogical mentor and critical friend: she co-constructed weekly plans, participated in classroom activities, and engaged in regular debriefing meetings, but the intern was primarily responsible for data generation and the first cycle of analysis.

Play-based and exploratory activities were integrated into the regular classroom schedule using low-cost and recycled materials. In emergent literacy, examples included a vowel-sorting game built from cardboard tubes and coloured caps, and a "letter wheel" used with picture cards to explore sound-letter associations. Socio-emotional learning was supported through a daily "How do you feel today?" chart with visual emotion cards combined

with short moments of calm music for self-reflection. Health and environmental education were addressed through activities such as classifying foods on “happy tooth” and “sad tooth” displays, preparing pancakes collectively to discuss healthy eating, constructing a simple basketball game from recycled materials to promote teamwork and physical activity, observing how flowers absorb coloured water, and building a beehive model to learn about pollinators. Creative expression was further fostered through outdoor painting sessions using large sheets of paper and paints in a natural space. All materials and procedures complied with the centre’s health and safety guidelines and were previously discussed with the cooperating teacher.

Data were generated over approximately ten weeks, following a cyclical process. In the initial two weeks, systematic non-participant observations and informal conversations with the teacher were used to identify developmental priorities (socio-emotional expression, peer cooperation, autonomy in daily routines, sustained attention, and emergent literacy skills). In the subsequent eight weeks, play-based activities were implemented and adjusted based on continuous observation and reflection.

Three main sources of qualitative data were collected:

- 1) Reflective practicum journal: after each planned activity or significant classroom episode, the intern produced a written entry (two to four pages) describing the activity, children’s participation and interactions, and the educator’s reflections and emerging questions. Over the ten weeks, this resulted in approximately 20 dated entries that documented the full cycle of planning, action, and reflection.
- 2) Field notes and observational records: during whole-group and small-group sessions, the intern kept brief field notes focusing on children’s socio-emotional expression, collaboration, autonomy, engagement, and early literacy behaviours. For key activities, simple observation grids were used to note which children participated, how they engaged (e.g., verbal contributions, helping peers, persistence in tasks), and salient interaction episodes.
- 3) Planning and debriefing documents: weekly activity plans and notes from debriefing conversations with the cooperating teacher were collected as contextual data. These documents recorded the rationale for selecting activities, agreed adjustments, and shared interpretations of classroom events.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach inspired by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines. First, all reflective journal entries, field notes, and debriefing notes were transcribed or typed and repeatedly read to achieve familiarization with the material. Second, the intern conducted initial open coding manually, highlighting segments related to children’s

socio-emotional expression, collaboration, autonomy, engagement with play materials, and emergent literacy behaviours, as well as reflections on pedagogical decisions. Third, codes were compared and grouped into preliminary themes that captured recurring patterns across different activities (for example, “using peers as emotional regulators,” “autonomy supported by material organization,” “play frames sustaining attention,” “literacy learning embedded in play scripts”). Fourth, these candidate themes were reviewed against the entire dataset to check coherence and distinctiveness, leading to the refinement, merging, or renaming of some themes. Fifth, themes were defined and described in analytic memos that linked children’s observed behaviours and interactions with the objectives of the interventions and with the principles of the OCEP and the National Health Education Framework. Finally, thematic narratives were constructed to illustrate how the play-based interventions supported (or struggled to support) socio-emotional learning, autonomy, and emergent literacy in this rural preschool context.

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Triangulation was achieved by comparing insights from different data sources (reflective journals, observation grids, and debriefing notes). Peer debriefing occurred in regular meetings with the cooperating teacher, in which emerging interpretations and themes were discussed, questioned, and refined. Periodic supervision meetings with a university mentor provided additional critical feedback on the coding and thematic structure. A simple audit trail was maintained through dated journal entries, saved versions of weekly plans, and analytic memos, documenting the evolution of the researcher’s thinking. Throughout the process, the intern engaged in reflexive writing, noting personal assumptions, emotional responses, and positionality as a student teacher, in order to distinguish descriptive accounts of children’s actions from interpretive judgments.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in line with institutional and national guidelines for research in educational settings, including the Ethical Charter of the Portuguese Society of Educational Sciences, which outlines principles of anonymity, confidentiality, respect for participants, and researcher responsibility (SPCE, 2020). No identifying information about individual children is reported in this article; pseudonyms or generic labels are used when referring to specific episodes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The practicum generated a series of play-based, exploratory, and integrated learning experiences implemented across the ten-week period. Across these activities, observations revealed progressive changes in children’s engagement, autonomy, socio-emotional

competence, collaboration, and emergent literacy skills. While each activity offered specific learning opportunities, several cross-cutting patterns became visible throughout the intervention.

Socio-Emotional Learning: “How Do You Feel Today?”

The daily routine invited each child to identify and share their current emotion by selecting a pictorial symbol after a short moment of calm reflection. Over the weeks, children showed increasing confidence and precision in naming feelings. For example, one child stated, “I’m sad because my block tower fell” illustrating a growing capacity to connect affect with context (field note, week 4). Another child remarked, “He’s angry – let’s wait,” showing early empathy and peer awareness (journal, week 6).

Improved turn-taking during group tasks accompanied these developments, and episodes of conflict became less frequent. Nevertheless, participation was uneven: a few children still hesitated to choose an emotion or tended to select the same symbol daily, suggesting that emotional awareness was still emerging for some.



Fig 1: Daily “How Do You Feel Today?” chart used in the socio-emotional routine

Emergent Literacy Activities

Two structured yet playful games were used: a *Vowel-Sorting Game* made from recycled cardboard tubes and colored caps, and a *Spinning Letter Wheel* combined with picture cards.



Fig 2: Children engaged in the Vowel-Sorting Game

Children with early difficulties received targeted scaffolding, and several demonstrated visible improvement, such as correctly identifying initial sounds after repeated opportunities. Even so, attention varied across sessions: some children performed confidently one day and struggled the next, reflecting the non-linear nature of early literacy development.

The games captured the children's interest and promoted letter-sound recognition, phonological awareness, and fine-motor coordination. Participation was enthusiastic; children at first needed adult prompting but gradually became more autonomous in matching sounds and letters. Children with initial difficulties in identifying letters were supported individually and showed visible improvement over the practicum period.



Fig 3: Example of the Spinning Letter Wheel with picture cards

Health and Well-Being Education

Nutrition and oral health were explored through the "Happy Tooth" and "Sad Tooth" displays. Children successfully classified foods and began spontaneously using the associated vocabulary ("This is good for our teeth"), particularly during snack routines. Occasional misclassifications, such as placing cheese on the "sad" tooth, provided opportunities for

clarification and reinforced conceptual understanding.



Fig 4: Children classifying foods on the “Happy Tooth” and “Sad Tooth” displays
The collaborative cooking activity strengthened cooperation and language use related to ingredients and sequential actions. Some children demonstrated strong initiative (“I’ll mix now!”), while others required frequent reminders to wait their turn, revealing both progress and remaining social challenges.



Fig 5: Fruit pancakes prepared by the children

Environmental and Science Exploration

Inquiry-based learning activities supported curiosity and early scientific reasoning. During the Flower-and-Food-Coloring Experiment, children observed and verbally described changes (“The blue is going up!”), showing an emerging understanding of cause-and-effect. Not all children sustained attention over the multiple days required, indicating variability in engagement with long-term investigations.



Fig 6: Observation of flower colour-change experiment over several days

The project on Life Cycle of the Bee encouraged teamwork and environmental awareness. Children negotiated roles (“You cut, I glue”), though disagreements occasionally surfaced about who would complete the more desired tasks.



Fig 7: Collaborative beehive model created from recycled tubes and corks

The Earth Day poster further demonstrated children’s grasp of environmentally friendly actions, although some children needed verbal prompts to articulate their ideas.



Fig 8: Collective poster prepared for Earth Day.

Play-Based Gross-Motor and Artistic Activities

A homemade Basketball Game using recycled materials encouraged cooperation, respect for rules, turn-taking, and gross-motor coordination while also raising awareness about recycling and re-use.



Fig 9: Children collaborating in the homemade Basketball Game

The homemade Basketball Game fostered cooperation, rule-following, and gross-motor skills. As noted in the journal, some children encouraged peers ("Your turn now!"), while others occasionally resisted waiting, showing the dual presence of progress and ongoing challenges.

Outdoor Painting provided a highly motivating context for creative expression (Wang et al., 2024). Children displayed increasing independence in choosing materials and techniques. Some produced detailed, intentional representations, while others engaged primarily in sensory

exploration, both valid forms of artistic expression reflecting individual developmental trajectories.

The results of this practicum-based study align with and reinforce both national curricular frameworks and contemporary international research in early childhood education. The observed improvements in emotional expression and empathy among children participating in the daily socio-emotional routine resonate with evidence from recent meta-analyses demonstrating that embedded SEL practices in preschool settings reduce conflict and foster a positive classroom climate (Hosokawa et al., 2024). The emphasis on children's agency in naming and discussing their feelings also reflects the vision of the Portuguese Health Education Framework (Direção-Geral da Educação, 2017).

The emergent literacy gains noted with the vowel game and letter wheel support findings that play-based, code-focused activities, when combined with oral language development, produce meaningful early gains in phonological awareness and letter recognition (Cusiter et al., 2025). These results illustrate how playful, manipulative tasks can bridge the gap between conceptual knowledge and practical application, particularly for children who initially struggle with sound-letter correspondence.

The success of health-promotion activities, especially the visual classification of foods and the shared cooking experience, highlights the power of active and participatory learning for consolidating knowledge and attitudes regarding healthy habits (Varman et al., 2021). Such approaches reflect recommendations of both the national health-education framework and contemporary research on promoting healthy behaviors in early childhood.

Activities linked to nature and environmental awareness, such as the flower-coloring experiment, the beehive project, and the Earth Day poster, exemplify the integration of scientific inquiry, sustainability education, and collaborative work. These experiences also demonstrate the potential of rural contexts to provide authentic outdoor and community-based learning opportunities. Findings from recent reviews on nature-based education support the conclusion that regular engagement with natural elements enhances curiosity, problem-solving, and cooperative behaviours (Fröberg et al., 2025).

Finally, the overall increase in autonomy, cooperation, and engagement reflects the cyclical approach of observation-planning-implementation-reflection recommended by the OCEP (Ministério da Educação, 2016) and underscores the centrality of the teacher's role as a reflective mediator. These patterns affirm that intentional, play-based interventions can effectively bridge theoretical guidelines and daily classroom practice, particularly in rural early-childhood settings.

CONCLUSION

This practicum-based study illustrates how play-based and exploratory interventions, embedded in the daily routines of a rural Portuguese preschool, can foster children's holistic development. Across the ten-week implementation, the children demonstrated visible progress in socio-emotional awareness, peer cooperation, autonomy, engagement in learning tasks, emergent literacy skills, and environmental and health-related understanding. These achievements were observed not as isolated outcomes of individual activities, but as the cumulative effect of a consistent pedagogical approach that placed the child at the center of the learning process.

The experience highlights the value of integrating national curricular and health-education frameworks—particularly the Portuguese Guidelines for Pre-School Education and the Health Education Framework—with evidence-based international practices such as socio-emotional routines, playful phonics-based literacy tasks, outdoor inquiry, and participatory health-promotion activities. By doing so, the practicum bridged the gap between theory and practice, showing that intentional uses of play and exploration can be powerful drivers of meaningful learning, even in resource-limited rural contexts.

A key implication emerging from this work concerns the role of the teacher as a reflective practitioner and mediator. The cyclical process of observing, planning, implementing, documenting, and adapting activities was essential to responding to children's evolving needs. This underscores the importance of curriculum approaches that explicitly integrate reflective practice and of teacher-training programs that prepare educators to design, guide, and evaluate play-based learning in authentic classroom contexts. For rural education in particular, the findings suggest that local cultural and environmental resources can be leveraged as rich pedagogical assets.

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations. The small sample size, single-classroom context, and short duration of the practicum restrict the generalizability of the findings. Data were also limited to observational and reflective sources, which, while rich for qualitative interpretation, do not allow for broader comparative analysis. These contextual constraints should be considered when interpreting the outcomes.

Future research could build on this work by examining the long-term effects of play-based and exploratory interventions on children's development, comparing outcomes across different socioeconomic or cultural contexts, or employing mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to deepen understanding of how such practices evolve over time. Studies involving

multiple rural schools could also illuminate how contextual factors facilitate or constrain the implementation of child-centered, exploratory pedagogies.

In sum, the practicum reinforces the principle that quality early childhood education emerges from the dynamic interaction between curriculum, teacher intentionality, and the lived experiences of children. By valuing play, exploration, and reflective practice, educators can create inclusive and engaging learning environments that nurture children's capacities to grow, learn, and thrive from their earliest years.

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