



# FROM PLAY TO STRUCTURE: EXPLORING THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF KINDERGARTNERS

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## ABSTRACT

The transition from play-based prekindergarten to structured kindergarten is a significant stage in early childhood education. It shapes the learners' socioemotional development and adjustment to formal schooling. This qualitative case study examined the socioemotional experiences of kindergarten learners who transition from play-based prekindergarten to structured kindergarten environments in select private schools in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, this research addressed a critical gap on how children, who were accustomed to play-based learning, adapt to the formal academic settings. Through purposeful sampling, eight kindergarteners were selected, alongside their parents and current teachers. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and material artifacts. Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative data analysis software. From the data, the following themes emerged: adjustments to academic and behavioral expectations, initial emotional challenges like anxiety and behavioral shifts that subsided over time, strengthened peer interactions, and the vital role of responsive support systems, especially parent-teacher collaboration. Overall, the learners exhibited resilience, with prior play-based experiences fostering confidence, independence, and prosocial behavior. The findings emphasize integrating play-based elements into kindergarten curricula to ease socioemotional transitions, offering actionable insights for educators, parents, and policymakers to promote holistic early childhood development.

**Key Words:** *Play-based, Structured, Transition, Socioemotional Skills and Experiences*

## INTRODUCTION

“Every child deserves the opportunity to play during their preschool years as it contributes to their physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development” (San et al., 2021, p. 16). In early childhood education, play is widely recognized as an essential component of learning because it allows children to explore their environment, express emotions, and interact with others in meaningful ways. Through play, children develop important developmental skills that help them build relationships, regulate their emotions, and understand the world around them. These early experiences are essential in preparing children not only for academic learning but also for social interaction and emotional well-being in formal educational settings.

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 10410 (2013) establishes that Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programs, including center-based services such as child development centers, are designed for children aged 0–4 years, thereby supporting the enrollment of children aged 3–4 in developmental centers. These early childhood centers serve as foundational environments where young learners begin to develop basic cognitive, social, and emotional competencies to prepare them for formal school. However, development centers vary in terms of teaching strategies, curriculum design, and classroom practices. Some institutions emphasize structured academic preparation, while others adopt more flexible and child-centered approaches that encourage exploration and creativity. As new generations of learners continue to emerge, educators are challenged to adopt teaching approaches that are developmentally appropriate and responsive to the needs of young children.

One of the approaches widely adopted in early childhood education is play-based learning. This approach recognizes play as a natural and meaningful way for children to learn and interact with their environment. Through play-based learning activities such as storytelling, role-playing, group games, and hands-on exploration, children are encouraged to actively participate in the learning process. According to Mauro (2024), play-based learning enhances children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development by promoting creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. In addition, this approach allows children to develop socioemotional competencies such as empathy, cooperation, communication, and self-regulation, which are essential for successful learning experiences.

Despite the well-documented benefits of play-based learning, socioemotional development continues to present significant challenges within early childhood education. Young children may experience difficulties in emotional expression, behavioral regulation, communication, and the development of self-confidence. Such challenges are often influenced by a range of factors, including developmental delays, family dynamics, limited opportunities for social interaction, and exposure to adverse environments. Consequently, both educators and parents increasingly recognize the necessity of

intentionally supporting socioemotional development during the formative years of schooling. The cultivation of strong socioemotional competencies is essential, as these skills underpin children's ability to establish positive relationships, regulate stress, and adapt effectively to new and complex environments (UNICEF, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

To address these concerns, pre-kindergarten programs increasingly adopt play-based learning approaches grounded in developmentally appropriate practice, which promote the holistic development of young children. Such approaches foster learning environments that nurture curiosity, autonomy, and collaborative engagement among learners. Through meaningful opportunities for interaction, exploration, and self-expression, play-based experiences contribute to the development of self-confidence and the formation of positive social relationships. Moreover, these early learning experiences facilitate children's readiness for formal schooling by enhancing their emotional resilience and strengthening their interpersonal competencies (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

However, the transition from a play-based prekindergarten environment to a structured kindergarten classroom often represents a major change for young learners (Danniels & Pyle 2022). Kindergarten classrooms typically introduce more formal academic expectations, structured routines, and teacher-directed activities. While structured learning environments provide organization and academic guidance, they may also present adjustment challenges for children who are accustomed to flexible, exploratory learning experiences. Children may initially experience anxiety, hesitation, or behavioral changes as they adapt to new rules, schedules, and classroom expectations.

Transitions between learning environments are recognized as critical experiences that significantly influence children's overall development and academic adjustment. Moving from a child-centered, play-oriented setting to a more structured educational environment can impact children's emotional responses, behaviors, and social interactions. During this period, children must adapt to new routines, form relationships with teachers and peers, and meet evolving academic expectations. Research indicates that when children receive adequate support from educators, parents, and peers, they are more likely to navigate these transitions successfully and develop positive attitudes toward learning (Packer et al 2021).

Although numerous studies highlight the importance of play-based learning in promoting children's socioemotional development, limited research has explored how children actually experience the transition from play-based prekindergarten programs to structured kindergarten classrooms. Research on transitions from play-based early childhood education to formal schooling highlights that children's experiences during this shift can significantly influence their socio-emotional adjustment and school readiness (Degli Esposti & Cigala, 2025). Understanding these experiences is important because it can help educators design strategies that support children's emotional well-being and adjustment during this critical stage of development. It can also provide insights into how play-based learning contributes to children's readiness for more formal educational environments.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the socioemotional experiences of kindergarten learners who previously participated in play-based prekindergarten programs. By examining the perspectives of learners, parents, and teachers, the research sought to understand how children adapted to structured educational environments and what factors supported or challenged their transition. The findings of this study may contribute to improving early childhood education practices by providing educators and parents with insights on how to support children effectively as they move from play-based learning environments to more structured classroom settings.

## Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do the learners demonstrate their socio-emotional skills in a structured kindergarten setting?
2. What are the observable emotional and social challenges experienced by the learners in a structured classroom setting?
3. How are these challenges experienced by the learners addressed to support their socio-emotional needs?

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the socio-emotional experiences of learners who transitioned from a play-based prekindergarten environment to a structured kindergarten educational setting. This approach helps researchers explore the “why” and “how” behind certain behaviors or events, rather than just the “what” or “how many” (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Adebayo, 2025).

This approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how young learners, parents, and teachers perceived and experienced the transition from play-based learning to a more structured academic environment. The case study design was selected because it enables an in-depth investigation of a particular group or phenomenon within its real-life context, which in this study involved examining how selected learners adapted socio-emotionally after completing a play-based prekindergarten program and entering kindergarten.

The study was conducted in selected private elementary schools in Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental. The participating prekindergarten institution was a private play-based center with two branches in the city, known for implementing a creative and developmentally appropriate play-based curriculum for young learners. The kindergarten schools involved in the study were selected based on two criteria: first, they must implement the Matatag Kindergarten Curriculum (MKC), and second, they must accept graduates from the participating play-based prekindergarten center.

It employed a selection that was based on the characteristics that accurately represents the special attributes of the study (Dovetail, 2023). In addition, the selection

process involved individuals or groups who possess extensive knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

The participants of the study included eight (8) kindergarten learners who previously completed the play-based prekindergarten program, seven (7) parents, and the kindergarten teachers of the selected learners. The participants were chosen using purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to intentionally select individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. From a total population of 79 Prekindergarten learners enrolled during the School Year 2024–2025, the selected participants were learners who experienced socio-emotional challenges during prekindergarten but successfully transitioned to kindergarten during the School Year 2025–2026. Additional criteria for participant selection included the following: the child must have completed the private play-based prekindergarten program in School Year 2024–2025, must be enrolled in a private kindergarten school implementing the Matatag Kindergarten Curriculum during School Year 2025–2026, must be five years old upon entry to kindergarten, and both parents and teachers must be willing to participate and provide honest responses during the interviews.

Data for the study were collected primarily through in-depth interviews. This method allowed the researcher to obtain detailed information regarding the experiences, perspectives, and observations of the participants regarding the learners' socio-emotional adjustment in kindergarten. Interview guides, introductory scripts, informed consent forms, and background information sheets were prepared prior to the data collection process. The interviews were conducted individually in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage open and honest responses from participants. Each interview followed four phases: briefing, rapport building, the conduct of interview questions, and debriefing. With the consent of the participants, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation, and the researcher also took field notes during the sessions. Supporting documents and relevant artifacts were also requested when necessary to supplement the interview data.

The data gathering process took place between June and October 2025. The researcher first identified the eligible learners and the participating kindergarten schools, followed by securing permission from parents and school administrators. Orientation sessions were conducted to explain the purpose of the study and the rights of the participants. After obtaining signed informed consent forms, interviews were scheduled and conducted with the participants. All collected data were securely stored to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed through repeated readings to identify meaningful patterns and insights. The researcher then performed coding and categorization of responses, grouping similar ideas and experiences into broader themes that addressed the research questions. An inductive approach was applied, allowing themes and interpretations to emerge directly from the participants' responses rather than being predetermined. The qualitative data were organized and coded using

HyperRESEARCH software, which assisted in identifying patterns and relationships among the participants' responses.

The study ensured trustworthiness through rigorous data collection, analysis, and interpretation to maintain the credibility and reliability of the findings by utilizing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria. The criteria included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through careful data collection, triangulation of responses from learners, parents, and teachers, and verification of interpretations based on the recorded data. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting and participants, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was maintained through thorough documentation of the research procedures and decisions throughout the study. Confirmability was ensured by minimizing researcher bias and focusing on the participants' actual experiences and perspectives.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. The process includes providing an Informed Consent form, ensuring comprehension, and documenting consent appropriately. These processes ensure respect for participants' dignity, rights, and welfare, reflecting current best practices in ethical research conduct consistent with Bryman and Bell's principles (UMak Research Ethics Committee, 2024). Approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Lourdes College Inc. was obtained before the start of data collection. Participants were provided with informed consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding any personal identifying information from the study. All recorded interviews and collected data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. The researcher also ensured that the interview questions focused only on the participants' experiences and perspectives, avoiding any sensitive topics that might cause discomfort. Through these ethical practices, the study aimed to protect the rights, dignity, and welfare of all participants involved.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Research Question No. 1. How do the learners demonstrate their socioemotional skills in a structured kindergarten setting?**

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed three major themes that describe how learners demonstrate socioemotional skills in a structured kindergarten environment: (1) Adapting to Changes in the Academic Environment, (2) Practicing Social Interaction and Self-Regulation, and (3) Expanding Social Interactions. These themes emerged from the narratives of parents and teachers, supported by the coded categories and significant statements gathered during the interviews.

## **Theme 1: Adapting to Changes in the Academic Environment**

The shift from play-based preschool to formal kindergarten is a critical phase in early childhood development marked by emotional, social and behavioral adaptations. Children typically experience a period of emotional stress during the initial transition due to separation anxiety and unfamiliar environments, but gradually develop coping strategies over time.

A 2025 longitudinal study found that the average adjustment period in kindergarten lasts approximately three weeks with difficulties decreasing significantly after the phase. Parents and teachers both report high satisfaction with the transition process, though teachers tend to rate children's socioemotional well-being more moderately than parents, indicating differing perceptions across contexts (Tatalovic & Komadina, 2025). Meanwhile, a relevant research study by L. Fyffe (2022), revealed quick adjustments with children described as responsive learners, curious explorers, skilled communicators, and empathetic peers.

Play-based foundations fostered higher kindergarten competence without academic deficits. There were three (3) categories from this theme namely: Progressive Changes, Initial Emotional Disposition and School Readiness Behaviors.

## **Theme 2: Practicing Social Interaction and Self-Regulation**

Another important theme that emerged from the data was learners' ability to practice social interaction and self-regulation in the classroom. This theme includes categories such as peer relationships, prosocial behavior, and sharing behavior.

The participants reported that learners demonstrated positive peer relationships by interacting with classmates, forming friendships, and developing a sense of belonging in the classroom community. Teachers and parents noted that learners were able to connect with their peers through play and classroom activities. One teacher shared an example of a learner who offered blocks to a shy classmate in order to encourage participation in play.

Learners also exhibited prosocial behaviors such as helping classmates, cooperating during group activities, and expressing care and concern for others. These behaviors were observed when learners shared snacks, assisted classmates with tasks, and comforted peers who were upset. For example, one parent shared that the child willingly shared cookies with a friend, while another teacher described how a learner helped distribute classroom materials.

Furthermore, the learners showed signs of empathy and compassion toward their classmates. Some children demonstrated concern when they saw their classmates crying or experiencing difficulty. These actions reflect the development of emotional awareness and social sensitivity among the learners.

The results indicated that the structured kindergarten environment provided

opportunities for learners to practice cooperation, empathy, and sharing. Through daily interactions and guided activities, learners developed important socioemotional competencies that support positive relationships with others.

### **Theme 3: Expanding Social Interactions**

The third theme describes how learners expanded their social interactions as they became more accustomed to the kindergarten environment. This theme includes behaviors such as handling disagreements and conflicts, communicating school experiences, and demonstrating growing independence.

The participants reported that learners gradually developed strategies for managing conflicts with their peers. Instead of reacting aggressively, some children learned to communicate their concerns verbally or seek assistance from their teachers. For example, one parent described how a child would say “please share” during disagreements over toys, while another learner chose to move away and inform the teacher when conflicts occurred.

Learners also communicated their school experiences with their parents at home. Many parents reported that their children shared stories about classroom activities, friendships, and daily experiences. These conversations allowed parents to better understand their children’s emotional experiences and school adjustment.

Moreover, the learners demonstrated increasing independence as they became more comfortable with their responsibilities. Parents observed improvements in their children’s ability to complete school tasks, follow routines, and take initiative in their activities. For instance, some children became more focused on completing worksheets or began performing tasks independently without asking for help.

Overall, these findings indicate that learners gradually expanded their social skills and emotional regulation abilities as they continued to adjust to the kindergarten environment. Their growing independence and ability to communicate their experiences reflect the development of stronger socioemotional competence.

### **Research Question No. 2. What are the observable emotional and social challenges experienced by the learners in a structured classroom setting?**

The findings revealed that learners experienced several emotional and social challenges during their transition to the structured kindergarten environment. These challenges were summarized under the theme Socioemotional Setbacks, which includes categories such as emotion regulation difficulties and withdrawal or avoidance behaviors. Many learners initially experienced emotional difficulties such as crying, separation distress, irritability, and resistance to classroom participation. Teachers observed that some children frequently cried during the first weeks of school and expressed a strong desire to return home or be with their parents. These behaviors indicate the emotional challenges associated with separation from caregivers and adaptation to new routines.

Another common challenge observed among learners was difficulty regulating emotions when faced with academic tasks or classroom expectations. Some learners became upset when they made mistakes during writing or drawing activities, while others became easily distracted by their classmates. These behaviors reflect the learners' developing emotional regulation skills as they adjust to structured learning tasks.

The data also revealed instances of withdrawal or avoidance behavior. Some learners preferred to interact only with close friends and resisted engaging with other classmates. Teachers also reported situations in which children expressed reluctance to participate in classroom activities or displayed fear toward certain classroom situations. Despite these challenges, teachers and parents noted that most learners gradually improved in managing their emotions and behaviors as they became more familiar with the classroom environment. For example, learners who initially cried frequently eventually became calmer and more cooperative over time.

These findings highlight that emotional setbacks are a natural part of the transition process for young learners entering structured educational settings. However, with appropriate support and guidance, children are able to gradually develop coping strategies and adjust to their new environment.

### **Research Question No. 3. How are these challenges addressed to support the learners' socioemotional needs?**

The analysis revealed that learners' socioemotional challenges were addressed through collaborative efforts between teachers and parents. Three key themes emerged: Practicing Responsive Socioemotional Support, Home-Based Routines and Interventions, and Identifying and Monitoring Socioemotional Needs.

Teachers implemented various classroom routines and interventions to support learners' emotional development. These included differentiated instruction, structured classroom routines, and the use of supportive strategies such as mood checks, storytelling, and play-based activities. Teachers also emphasized the importance of modeling positive behavior, demonstrating patience, and maintaining a calm and supportive classroom atmosphere.

In addition to classroom strategies, parents also played a significant role in supporting their children's socioemotional development at home. Parents described implementing consistent routines, encouraging positive behavior, and maintaining open communication with their children about their school experiences. For instance, some parents made it a daily habit to ask their children about their feelings and experiences in school, which helped them better understand their children's emotional needs.

Another important support mechanism identified in the study was the continuous monitoring of learners' socioemotional development. Teachers maintained communication with parents through anecdotal reports, daily updates, and collaborative discussions regarding the child's progress. Reviewing previous school records and maintaining portfolios also helped teachers better understand each learner's

developmental background.

These findings demonstrate that responsive socioemotional support requires strong collaboration between the school and the family. Through structured classroom practices, positive parenting strategies, and continuous communication, learners receive the support they need to overcome challenges and successfully adjust to the structured kindergarten environment.

## **Theme No. 1: Adapting to Changes in the Academic Environment**

### **Category 1: Progressive Changes**

The findings revealed that children gradually adjusted to the new academic environment as they transitioned from playschool to kindergarten. While the initial days of school brought mixed emotions for both parents and children, most learners eventually showed positive behavioral changes. Parents observed that their children became more comfortable attending school, began interacting with classmates, and demonstrated enthusiasm toward classroom activities. These progressive changes indicate that the transition period allows children to slowly develop confidence and familiarity with the structured learning environment. As learners formed friendships and became accustomed to routines, their willingness to participate and engage in classroom tasks increased.

### **Category 2: Initial Emotional Disposition**

Children exhibited varied emotional responses during the early stage of their transition to kindergarten. Some learners displayed excitement and eagerness to attend school, while others experienced separation anxiety and hesitation when being left in the classroom. These emotional reactions were commonly observed during the first few days of school when children encountered unfamiliar surroundings and routines. However, as they built relationships with peers and teachers, many children gradually overcame these initial emotional challenges. The findings suggest that emotional responses during transition are natural developmental reactions and tend to diminish as children develop a sense of security in the school environment.

### **Category 3: School Readiness Behaviors**

Despite experiencing mixed emotions at the beginning of the school year, children gradually demonstrated behaviors that reflected their readiness to adapt to the structured classroom environment. Learners began following classroom routines such as lining up, participating in group discussions, waiting for their turn, and responding to teacher instructions. These behaviors reflect the development of self-regulation, discipline, and social awareness. The findings highlight that structured classroom practices and consistent routines help children develop the necessary skills to adjust successfully to formal schooling.

## **Theme No. 2: Practicing Social Interaction and Self-regulation**

### **Category 1: Peer Relationships**

Peer interactions played a significant role in helping children adjust to the structured kindergarten environment. During the early weeks of school, some learners found it challenging to initiate friendships, while others naturally engaged with their classmates. Teachers supported the development of peer relationships by organizing play-based activities, group tasks, and collaborative learning opportunities. These interactions allowed children to build connections with their classmates, which contributed to their social competence and emotional comfort within the classroom.

### **Category 2: Prosocial Behavior**

The study revealed that many learners demonstrated prosocial behaviors such as helping classmates, encouraging peers during tasks, and showing concern for others. These behaviors were observed during both structured classroom activities and informal interactions among learners. Prosocial actions reflected children's growing empathy and understanding of social responsibility. Such behaviors contributed to the development of a supportive classroom atmosphere where learners could feel valued and included.

### **Category 3: Sharing Behavior**

Sharing behavior emerged as one of the most common expressions of prosocial interaction among learners. Children frequently shared learning materials, toys, and snacks with their classmates. In several instances, learners intentionally brought extra materials to school so they could help peers who might not have them. These behaviors demonstrate the development of empathy, generosity, and cooperation among children. Sharing not only strengthened peer relationships but also promoted a sense of community within the classroom.

## **Theme No. 3: Expanding Social Interactions**

### **Category 1: Handling Disagreements and Conflicts**

As children interacted with a larger group of classmates in kindergarten, disagreements and conflicts occasionally occurred. The findings revealed that learners employed different strategies in dealing with these situations, such as verbally requesting their peers to share, moving away from the conflict, or seeking assistance from their teacher. Teachers played an important role in guiding children toward constructive conflict resolution through positive discipline strategies, role-playing, and storytelling. These interventions helped learners develop communication skills, emotional control, and problem-solving abilities.

### **Category 2: Communication About School Experiences**

Children frequently shared their school experiences with their parents after class.

These conversations often included stories about classroom activities, interactions with friends, and observations about their teachers and classmates. This communication strengthened the connection between home and school and allowed parents to better understand their children's emotional and social experiences in the classroom. Additionally, discussing school events helped children develop their communication skills and encouraged reflection on their daily experiences.

### **Category 3: Playschool and Kindergarten Behavior**

The transition from playschool to kindergarten resulted in noticeable changes in children's behavior. Parents observed increased independence, improved focus, and stronger self-confidence among their children. Tasks that previously required parental assistance during playschool were now completed independently by learners in kindergarten. The structured nature of the kindergarten environment encouraged children to develop greater responsibility, self-regulation, and perseverance in completing tasks.

### **Theme No. 4: Socioemotional Setbacks**

#### **Category 1: Emotion Regulation Difficulties**

Despite the overall positive adjustments observed among learners, some children experienced difficulties managing their emotions during the transition period. Teachers reported instances of crying, frustration, irritability, and emotional outbursts when children encountered unfamiliar routines or challenges in completing tasks. These reactions often reflected children's struggle to cope with new expectations and the structured classroom environment. Emotional regulation difficulties were particularly evident during the early weeks of school when learners were still adapting to the new academic setting.

#### **Category 2: Withdrawal and Avoidance Behavior**

In addition to emotional outbursts, some learners exhibited withdrawal and avoidance behaviors. These behaviors included isolating themselves during playtime, interacting only with a limited number of peers, or showing reluctance to participate in classroom activities. Such behaviors reflected children's attempts to cope with social and emotional pressures in the new environment. However, with continuous encouragement and support from teachers and parents, many learners gradually became more comfortable participating in classroom interactions.

### **Theme No. 5: Practicing Responsive Socioemotional Support**

#### **Category 1: Identifying and Monitoring Socioemotional Needs**

Teachers and parents played an important role in identifying and monitoring children's socioemotional needs. Teachers observed learners' behaviors closely during daily activities and documented their observations through narrative reports and developmental assessments. Communication between teachers and parents allowed them to validate observations and collaboratively address concerns regarding children's

emotional and social well-being. This monitoring process enabled early identification of socioemotional difficulties and ensured that appropriate support strategies were implemented.

### **Category 2: Classroom Routines and Interventions**

Teachers implemented structured routines and targeted interventions to support children's socioemotional adjustment in the classroom. These strategies included establishing predictable schedules, using visual aids to signal transitions, and incorporating social-emotional learning activities into daily lessons. Teachers also practiced positive discipline, modeling calm behavior and providing clear guidance during social interactions. These classroom practices created a supportive learning environment that helped children develop emotional stability, cooperation, and self-regulation.

### **Category 3: Home-based Routines and Interventions**

Parents reinforced socioemotional support through routines and interactions at home. Consistent schedules, open communication, and emotional coaching helped children manage their feelings and prepare for daily school experiences. Parents also used everyday moments such as bedtime conversations or car rides to discuss school experiences and address their children's concerns. These home-based practices complemented the strategies implemented in the classroom, creating a consistent support system that helped children successfully navigate the transition to structured kindergarten learning.

Based on the themes derived in this study, a model for the Socioemotional Experiences is conceptualized in Figure 1.



Figure 1: From Play to Structure: Exploring the Socioemotional Experiences of Kindergartners Model

## Conclusions

This study explored kindergartners' socioemotional experiences as they transitioned from play-based prekindergarten to a more structured kindergarten environment. Findings showed three ways in which kindergartners demonstrate their socioemotional skills in a more structured set-up; adapting to changes in the environment, practicing social interaction and self-regulation and expanding their social awareness.

The observable challenges seen are the socioemotional setbacks manifested by withdrawal and avoidance behavior and emotion regulation difficulties. The transition period highlighted the critical role of practicing responsive socioemotional support to address the challenges mentioned above.

In sum, the findings aligned with key theoretical lenses. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is supported by evidence that teacher-facilitated activities and scaffolding—especially through active play—helped learners move along the zone of proximal development toward increased prosocial behavior.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory is illustrated through the reinforcing role of stable home routines and open parent–teacher communication in fostering smoother school adaptation. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the Ecological Transition Model emphasize the interconnected, shared responsibilities of home and school; proximal processes at microsystem and mesosystem levels—such as home routines and school structures—drove positive change and reduced challenges.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that early childhood teachers intentionally design structured yet supportive classroom environments that ease children's transition from play-based playschool to the more formal kindergarten setting. Teachers are encouraged to establish predictable daily routines and visual schedules from the first day of school to help learners develop a sense of security and familiarity with classroom expectations. They should also incorporate teacher-facilitated play activities that promote peer relationships, cooperation, and socioemotional development among learners. Furthermore, teachers are advised to systematically monitor children's socioemotional indicators using standardized assessment tools such as the Philippine Early Childhood Development Checklist to ensure that developmental needs across all domains are properly identified and addressed. Continuous professional development is likewise recommended, particularly training and immersion activities that focus on the transition from play-based to structured learning environments, including participation in research initiatives, school immersion programs, study visits, and benchmarking activities that allow educators to adopt effective practices from other institutions.

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to actively collaborate with educators in supporting children's socioemotional adjustment during the transition to kindergarten. Maintaining open and consistent communication with teachers can help ensure alignment between home and school practices that influence children's behavior, routines, and emotional development. At home, parents may establish consistent daily routines and provide advance warnings or timed alerts before transitions between activities to help children manage expectations and regulate their emotions. Engaging children in meaningful conversations during routine moments, such as during meals, travel to and from school, or bedtime, can also strengthen emotional expression and help children process their school experiences.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies that examine the long-term socioemotional outcomes of children who experience the transition from play-based to structured learning environments, particularly to determine whether the observed socioemotional gains are sustained beyond the initial kindergarten year. Further investigations may also explore the integration of digital communication tools that facilitate real-time parent–teacher collaboration during children’s transition periods. Such studies may provide deeper insights into how home–school partnerships and technological innovations can enhance support systems for young learners navigating early educational transitions.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

The study adhered to ethical guidelines in conducting research with human participants and the subjects. Before the data collection process, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the data will be used. The researcher vows the confidentiality of the respondents and respects their rights and dignity as willing responders. The researcher made sure that full consent was given by the respondents to prove that their participation was entirely voluntary. No experiments were conducted; therefore, no harm was caused to both parties involved and assured their safety.

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