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INTERPLAY OF PEER INTERACTION DIVERSITY, TEACHER'S SOCIO EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE, PLAY-BASED SOCIAL INTERACTION EXPOSURE AND YOUNG LEARNER'S EXECUTIVE FUNCTION COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

Executive function competence is important to learners' ability to remember information, regulate responses, and adapt to changing academic and social demands. Although previous studies have examined peer relationships, teacher interactions, and play experiences, limited research has investigated peer interaction diversity, teacher socio-emotional competence, and play-based social interaction exposure simultaneously in relation to executive function, particularly among early-elementary learners. This study examined the associations between these three classroom factors and executive function competence in terms of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. A quantitative correlational design was employed involving 130 Grade 2 learners and six teacher-advisers at an elementary school in Cagayan de Oro City during School Year 2026–2027, with data collection completed in October 2026. Total enumeration sampling was utilized. Data were gathered through researcher-developed questionnaires and a teacher-rated executive function instrument and were analyzed using descriptive statistics and canonical correlation analysis. Findings revealed that learners generally had moderate peer interaction diversity and play-based social interaction exposure, while their teachers were perceived to have high socio-emotional competence. The learners also demonstrated moderate competence in working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. Canonical correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between peer interaction diversity and the set of executive function dimensions, and none between teacher socio-emotional competence and that set. A significant multivariate relationship was established between play-based social interaction exposure and executive function competence, carried primarily by cognitive flexibility. The findings suggest that the contribution of classroom social experiences to executive function is specific to certain dimensions rather than uniform across all three, and that broader developmental and contextual factors are also involved. There is a need to expand purposeful, generative play opportunities and allow learners to independently practice remembering instructions,

controlling responses, adapting strategies, and solving problems. Future research may employ longitudinal or experimental designs and examine additional individual, family, classroom, and environmental factors.

Keywords: *executive function, peer interaction diversity, teacher socio-emotional competence, play-based social interaction, cognitive flexibility, young learners*

INTRODUCTION

Executive function (EF) refers to a set of higher-order cognitive processes that enable children to plan, monitor, and regulate their own thinking and behavior. Its three widely accepted components are working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Miyake et al., 2000; Diamond, 2013). These capacities develop rapidly during the early elementary years and form the foundation not only for academic readiness but also for social adjustment, behavioral regulation, and long-term well-being (Spataro et al., 2023; Robson et al., 2020). Because executive function is highly malleable at this stage, the quality of the social and instructional environments that surround young learners becomes a matter of considerable consequence (Doebel, 2020).

Three features of the classroom environment have been repeatedly associated with executive function development. The first is peer interaction diversity, understood not as the sheer frequency of contact with classmates but as exposure to peers who differ in ability, interests, communication style, and social behavior. Such diversity places heavier demands on children, who must interpret varied social cues, negotiate meaning, and revise their strategies in real time (Gull et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). The second is teacher socio-emotional competence, that is, the teacher's capacity to regulate emotion, respond with empathy, and sustain a supportive classroom climate; observational research links high-quality teacher–child interaction to stronger working memory and reduced problem behavior (Bukhalenkova et al., 2022; Sankalaite et al., 2021). The third is play-based social interaction exposure, since cooperative and rule-governed play obliges children to hold roles in mind, suppress prepotent responses, and adapt when rules change (Carlson, 2023; Zhao & Dan, 2025).

In the Philippine setting, local studies report growing adoption of play-based pedagogy in kindergarten and early primary classrooms, together with increasing attention to teachers' socio-emotional competencies and to peer dynamics as determinants of engagement and learning (Macabodbod & Bercero, 2024; Gamao & Napiere, 2025; Molina et al., 2025; Riño et al., 2025). Despite this, existing research has rarely examined the three factors simultaneously. Most studies investigate one variable at a time, address general socio-emotional outcomes rather than executive function specifically, or treat executive function as a unitary construct without distinguishing its components. Reviews of early childhood interventions identify this fragmentation and call for multidimensional designs that integrate cognitive, social, and emotional variables (Pastena et al., 2025).

This study addresses that gap. It is anchored on the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978), which explains where and with whom executive functions develop through guided interaction in culturally meaningful activity; the executive function framework of Miyake et al. (2000) as elaborated by Diamond (2013), which specifies what develops; and the Social Information Processing Theory of Crick and Dodge (1994), which clarifies the moment-to-moment processes through which children encode social cues, regulate emotional reactions, and select responses. Taken together, these frameworks support the examination of peer interaction diversity, teacher socio-emotional competence, and play-based social interaction exposure as correlates of young learners' executive function competence.

Research Questions

This study determined the influence of peer interaction diversity, teacher socio-emotional competence, and play-based social interaction exposure on the executive function competence of Grade 2 learners in a public elementary school in Cagayan de Oro City. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the participants' assessment of the diversity of their peer interactions?
2. What is the participants' assessment of their teacher's socio-emotional competence?
3. What is the participants' assessment of their exposure to play-based social interaction?
4. As assessed by the teachers, what is the level of the learners' executive function competence in terms of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility?
5. Do the assessment of their peer interaction diversity, teacher's socio-emotional competence, and play-based social interaction exposure significantly influence their executive function competence?

Null Hypothesis

To answer the research question, the following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

HO1: The participants' assessment of peer interaction diversity is not significantly associated with their executive function competence in terms of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility.

HO2: The participants' assessment of teachers' socio-emotional competence is not significantly associated with their executive function competence in terms of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility.

HO3: The participants' assessment of their exposure to play-based social interaction is not significantly associated with their executive function competence in terms of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility.

METHODOLOGY

Research Instruments

The variables of this study were measured using researcher-developed instruments constructed in accordance with the study's objectives and theoretical framework and designed to be developmentally appropriate for Grade 2 learners. The three learner-administered questionnaires used a 5-point frequency, presented in child-friendly language and administered in a guided, test-like setting to ensure comprehension. Learner self-report was considered appropriate at the Grade 2 level because children of this age could reflect on their social experiences, peer interactions, and play activities when the items were clearly worded and the administration was researcher-guided.

Locale of the Study

The study will be conducted at an Elementary School at Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental, Philippines. The school will serve as the research locale, focusing on Grade 2 learners and their teachers. It provides an appropriate setting for examining peer interaction diversity, teachers' socio-emotional competence, play-based social interaction exposure, and their relationship with learners' executive function competence.

Respondents and Sampling Method

The study involved 130 Grade 2 learners from six sections of Bayabas Elementary School, Cagayan de Oro City, during School Year 2026–2027. The six class advisers also served as teacher-raters in assessing the learners' executive function competence. Total enumeration sampling was employed, covering all eligible learners who met the inclusion criteria and secured the required parental consent and learner assent.

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental predictive-correlational research design. The descriptive component determined the level of each of the four variables, while the predictive-correlational component determined whether the three independent variables are significantly associated with, and predictive of, the learners' executive function competence. Because the variables occur naturally in classrooms and cannot ethically or practically be manipulated among young learners, a non-experimental design was the most suitable means of investigating their relationships.

Four researcher-made instruments were used, all rated on a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The Peer Interaction Diversity Questionnaire, the Teacher Socio-emotional Competence Questionnaire, and the Play-based Social Interaction Exposure Questionnaire were answered by the learners, each consisting of eleven indicators. The Executive Function Competence Questionnaire was completed by the teachers and covered the three dimensions of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. The learner questionnaires were administered in the classroom during regular school hours, with the items read aloud to ensure comprehension.

The instruments underwent content validation by a panel of specialists in early childhood education, developmental psychology, and educational measurement, who evaluated them for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives and theoretical framework. Construct and face validity were likewise examined. Pilot testing was conducted with 30 Grade 2 learners and their teachers from a comparable school not included in the main study. Internal consistency was computed using Cronbach's alpha, with .70 set as the minimum acceptable coefficient. All scales met this criterion: the three learner-administered questionnaires obtained coefficients of .866, .870, and .876, while the three teacher-rated executive function scales obtained .789, .877, and .815.

Mean scores were interpreted using the ranges 4.51–5.00 (Very High), 3.51–4.50 (High), 2.51–3.50 (Moderate), 1.51–2.50 (Low), and 1.00–1.50 (Very Low). Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to answer the first four problems. Canonical correlation analysis was used to examine the multivariate association between each independent variable and the set of executive function dimensions, and multiple regression analysis was used to test the joint predictive contribution of the three composite variables in answering the fifth problem. All inferential tests were conducted at the 0.05 level of significance. Consistent with the decision rule adopted for this study, results exceeding this criterion are reported as non-significant and are not described as approaching significance.

RESULTS

Table 1 Peer Interaction Diversity

Range	Description	Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
4.51 – 5.00	Always	Very High	1	0.77
3.51 – 4.50	Often	High	64	49.23
2.51 – 3.50	Sometimes	Moderate	58	44.62
1.51 – 2.50	Rarely	Low	7	5.38
1.00 – 1.50	Never	Very Low	0	0.00
Total			130	100.00
Mean			3.42	
SD			0.57	
Interpretation			Moderate	

Table 2 Teacher Socio-emotional Competence

Range	Description	Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
4.51 – 5.00	Always	Very High	13	10.00
3.51 – 4.50	Often	High	75	57.69
2.51 – 3.50	Sometimes	Moderate	41	31.54

1.51 – 2.50	Rarely	Low	1	0.77
1.00 – 1.50	Never	Very Low	0	0.00
Total			130	100.00
Mean			3.79	
SD			0.57	
Interpretation			High	

Table 3 Play-based Social Interaction Exposure

Range	Description	Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
4.51 – 5.00	Always	Very High	6	4.62
3.51 – 4.50	Often	High	51	39.23
2.51 – 3.50	Sometimes	Moderate	52	40.00
1.51 – 2.50	Rarely	Low	21	16.15
1.00 – 1.50	Never	Very Low	0	0.00
Total			130	100.00
Mean			3.34	
SD			0.72	
Interpretation			Moderate	

Table 4 Summary of Executive Function Competence

Executive Function Competence	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Working Memory	3.44	0.42	Moderate Competence
Inhibitory Control	3.36	0.43	Moderate Competence
Cognitive Flexibility	3.38	0.44	Moderate Competence
Overall	3.39	0.27	Moderate Competence

Table 5 Canonical Correlation Analysis Between Independent Variables and Executive Function Competence

Variable Set	Cross loading	Rc	Rc^2	F(3,126)	p
Peer Interaction Diversity	-0.23	0.23	0.05	2.345	.076
Working Memory	0.22				
Inhibitory Control	-0.01				
Cognitive Flexibility	-0.03				

Teacher Socio-emotional Competence	-0.10	0.10	0.01	0.411	.745
Working Memory	-0.09				
Inhibitory Control	-0.05				
Cognitive Flexibility	-0.04				
Play-based Social Interaction Exposure	-0.36	0.36	0.13	6.250*	<.001
Working Memory	0.08				
Inhibitory Control	0.05				
Cognitive Flexibility	-0.35				

Note. Values reported are cross-loadings, that is, correlations between each observed variable and the canonical variate of the opposite set. *Significant at the 0.05 level.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the participants' assessment of the diversity of their peer interactions. The overall mean of 3.42 (SD = 0.57) is interpreted as Moderate, although it lies at the upper end of that band and only slightly below the 3.51 cut-off for High. Sixty-four learners (49.23%) rated this variable High and 58 (44.62%) rated it Moderate, with the two adjacent categories together accounting for 93.85% of the sample.

At the item level, the highest-rated indicator was “I feel comfortable interacting with classmates who are different from me” (M = 3.55), the only indicator to reach the descriptive rating of Often, while the lowest was “I play or work with classmates who are good at different things” (M = 3.18). The highest-rated indicators were attitudinal, describing how comfortable a learner feels in the presence of difference, whereas the lowest were behavioral, describing actual collaboration across difference. Learners' openness toward diverse peers therefore exceeds their reported frequency of sustained collaborative engagement. This is consistent with literature indicating that diverse peer contexts support executive function primarily through negotiation, perspective-taking, and joint problem solving rather than through proximity or acceptance alone (Gull et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023).

Table 2 presents the participants' assessment of their teacher's socio-emotional competence, which obtained an overall mean of 3.79 (SD = 0.57), interpreted as High. All eleven indicators were described as Often, and this variable obtained the highest rating among the three independent variables.

The highest-rated indicator was “Treats all students fairly and without favoritism” (M = 3.90), while the lowest was “Listens carefully to students' concerns and feelings” (M = 3.73). Although the numerical differences are small, their direction is consistent: indicators describing the teacher's publicly observable stance toward the class as a whole were rated higher than those describing individualized emotional attentiveness. A High overall mean should not be read as indicating that every socio-emotional practice is uniformly strong, since nearly a third of the learners (31.54%) rated their teachers only

Moderate. It should also be noted that this variable reflects learners' perceptions of teacher behavior rather than observed behavior. The results are nonetheless consistent with studies reporting that emotionally supportive and well-organized teaching is associated with children's regulatory development (Bukhalenkova et al., 2022; Sankalaite et al., 2021).

Table 3 presents the participants' assessment of their exposure to play-based social interaction, which obtained an overall mean of 3.34 (SD = 0.72), interpreted as Moderate. This variable obtained the lowest mean, the largest standard deviation, and the largest proportion of learners in the Low category (16.15%) among the three independent variables, indicating that play experiences are unevenly distributed within this population.

Two indicators were tied for the highest rating at 3.42, namely “I play games that require taking turns and sharing with others” and “I help my classmates when they have a hard time during play activities,” while the lowest was “I enjoy teaching classmates how to play a new game” (M = 3.22). The highest-rated items describe responsive participation within an existing play structure, whereas the lowest describe generative or initiating forms of play such as teaching a classmate a new game, working jointly on group tasks, and using imagination to solve challenges. Learners therefore take part in play more readily than they initiate it, lead it, or use it as a vehicle for joint problem solving. This distinction is consequential, because it is the generative dimensions of play that most directly engage working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Carlson, 2023; Zhao & Dan, 2025).

Table 4 summarizes the learners' executive function competence as assessed by their teachers. The overall mean of 3.39 (SD = 0.27) is interpreted as Moderate Competence, and all three dimensions fell within the same band.

The three dimensions should not be ranked as though the differences among them were meaningful. The interval separating the highest from the lowest is only 0.08 of a scale point, which is smaller than the standard deviation of any individual dimension; for practical purposes the three are equivalent. What the summary establishes is that executive function competence in this population is uniformly moderate rather than uneven across dimensions. A consistent item-level pattern is nevertheless evident within each dimension: indicators describing structured, teacher-directed tasks were rated substantially higher than the indicator describing self-directed or peer-mediated application. Executive function at this stage therefore appears to be supported by external structure rather than independently sustained, which is developmentally plausible and consistent with evidence that early executive function is highly context-dependent (Doebel, 2020; Thériault-Couture et al., 2025). It should also be noted that the overall standard deviation of 0.27 on a five-point scale represents a narrow spread of scores, a consideration relevant to the inferential analyses that follow.

Table 5 presents the canonical correlation analyses between each independent variable and the set of executive function dimensions. No significant multivariate

association was established between peer interaction diversity and executive function competence, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.947$, $F(3, 126) = 2.345$, $p = .076$, nor between teacher socio-emotional competence and executive function competence, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.990$, $F(3, 126) = 0.411$, $p = .745$. A significant weak association was established between play-based social interaction exposure and executive function competence, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.870$, $F(3, 126) = 6.250$, $p < .001$, $Rc = 0.36$.

The magnitude of the significant association requires precise statement. The squared canonical correlation of 0.13 represents the variance shared between the two canonical variates and does not mean that 13 percent of the variability in executive function competence is explained by play-based social interaction exposure; the redundancy index derived from these values is approximately 0.04. Applying a conventional interpretive threshold of 0.30, only play-based social interaction exposure (-0.36) and cognitive flexibility (-0.35) reached interpretable magnitude, while working memory (0.08) and inhibitory control (0.05) were negligible. Because the sign of a canonical variate is arbitrary, the shared negative sign of the two interpretable cross-loadings indicates a positive association between the underlying constructs: learners who reported greater exposure to play-based social interaction tended to be rated by their teachers as more cognitively flexible. The relationship identified is therefore specific rather than general, and it converges with the descriptive results, in which the play indicators requiring negotiation and joint problem solving and the cognitive flexibility indicator describing responsiveness to classmates' ideas were both rated lowest.

Conclusions

The social and instructional environment surrounding the young learners is functioning at a moderate rather than an optimal level. Only teacher socio-emotional competence reached the High range, while both peer interaction diversity and play-based social interaction exposure remained Moderate. Across both peer interaction and play, the highest-rated indicators described willingness, comfort, and participation, while the lowest described sustained collaboration, teaching, leading, and joint problem solving. The disposition necessary for enriching social experience is present among the learners, but the structured opportunity to act upon it appears limited.

The learners' executive function competence is uniformly moderate and remains dependent upon external structure. The three dimensions are separated by an interval smaller than their own standard deviations and are for practical purposes equivalent, so that no dimension may be described as a relative strength or weakness. What is consistent across all three is that competence appears stronger in structured, teacher-directed contexts and weaker where the learner must apply the same ability independently or in response to peers.

The null hypothesis is partially rejected. A significant multivariate association was established between play-based social interaction exposure and executive function competence, and the null hypothesis is rejected with respect to this variable. It is retained with respect to peer interaction diversity and teacher socio-emotional competence and

likewise retained for the joint regression model. The relationship that was established operates at the dimension level rather than the composite level, linking play-based social interaction exposure primarily to cognitive flexibility, and it is one of association rather than causation. The findings accordingly provide partial rather than complete confirmation of the study's theoretical foundations.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions, the following are recommended. For school administrators, a program expanding the generative dimensions of play may be institutionalized within the early primary level, since play-based social interaction exposure registered the lowest mean among the three independent variables while carrying the only significant association established in this study. Such a program may include protected time and space for cooperative play, materials that invite rule-making and role-taking, and professional development enabling teachers to scaffold play without directing it.

For teachers, structured opportunities for mixed-ability collaboration may be provided so that the learners' evident openness toward diverse classmates is translated into regular joint work. Teachers may also complement their established fairness toward the class as a whole with practices supporting individualized emotional attentiveness, and may design activities that gradually release responsibility to learners, requiring them to hold instructions, restrain impulses, and adapt to a classmate's ideas without external prompting.

For future researchers, separate analyses for each executive function dimension rather than for a composite score are recommended, given the present finding that composite averaging obscured a relationship that the canonical analysis detected. Longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs are recommended to determine whether changes in play-based social interaction precede changes in cognitive flexibility, as the present design cannot address questions of causation. Larger samples drawn from multiple grade levels and schools would reduce the restricted range observed in these data, while performance-based measures of executive function and observational measures of teacher practice would address the limitations of rating-based assessment.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was reviewed and issued ethical clearance by the Lourdes College Research Ethics Committee (LC-REC). It adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Belmont Report and the National Ethical Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. Because the participants were minors, written informed consent was obtained from each child's parent or guardian, and age-appropriate assent was obtained from the child. The questionnaires used simple, age-appropriate language, were read aloud, and contained no sensitive or distressing items. Data collection took place in the learners' own classrooms during regular school hours without disrupting lessons, and participants were free to skip any item or withdraw at any time without consequence. No

personal identifiers were recorded; each questionnaire was assigned to a numeric code, consent forms were stored separately from the data, and all results are reported in aggregate form only.

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