

Play-based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom



Table of Contents

Play-based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom.....	2
Creating Inclusive Play-Based Learning Opportunities Using EYE-TA Data.....	2
Key Takeaways.....	2
Designing Purposeful and Responsive Learning Centres in Kindergarten	3
Key Takeaways.....	4
Differentiating Instruction Within a Play-Based Curriculum.....	5
Classroom Data Example.....	5
Key Takeaways.....	5
Supporting FI and ESL Learners in a Play-Based Kindergarten Environment.....	6
Key Takeaways.....	6
Assessing Student Learning in Play-Based Centres.....	7
Key Takeaways.....	7
Fostering Student Agency in Kindergarten Through Play-Based Learning	8
Overview	8
Why Play Matters for Agency	8
Key Play-Based Strategies That Build Agency.....	8
Classroom Supports That Enhance Agency	8
Designing Responsive and Inclusive Kindergarten Learning Environments.....	9
Key Design Principles.....	9
Resources	10
Sample Lesson Plan.....	11

Play-based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom

Over the years, extensive research has highlighted the critical role of brain development and the importance of play in a child's growth and educational journey. Studies consistently show that purposeful play during the early foundational years has long-lasting positive impacts.

As Maria Montessori famously stated, "Play is the work of the child." Through play, children engage in problem-solving, cooperative learning, and social negotiation. They nurture their creativity, develop fine and gross motor skills, and make sense of the world around them—all in a fun and meaningful way.

Creating Inclusive Play-Based Learning Opportunities Using EYE-TA Data

Maintaining a play-based environment that is responsive to EYE-TA data involves striking a balance between curriculum outcomes, student interests, and areas of need identified through assessment. Effective centre planning takes these factors into account to ensure that learning remains purposeful and engaging for **all students**, regardless of their EYE RTI result. Centres offer rich opportunities to develop a range of skills, particularly in language, communication, and social interaction.

At the beginning of the year, many educators establish predetermined groups, time limits, and caps on the number of students per centre to build routine, support focus, and develop stamina. As students become more independent and assessment data provides greater insight, groupings and expectations can be adjusted. This may include increasing student choice, allowing flexible movement between centres, or varying levels of support to meet individual needs.

Each class is unique, and a responsive, adaptive approach ensures that play-based learning remains inclusive, differentiated, and aligned with developmental and instructional goals. Thoughtfully structured centres grounded in data allow all students to access meaningful learning experiences while receiving targeted support when needed.

Key Takeaways

Balance Curriculum, Interest, and Data: Centre planning should be guided by curriculum goals, student interests, and assessment data (e.g., EYE-TA) to ensure purposeful and targeted learning.

Support Whole Child Development: Centres offer opportunities to develop social, emotional, language, and communication skills in addition to academic outcomes.

Start with Structure: Early in the year, use predetermined groups, set times, and student limits per centre to build routine, focus, and stamina.

Adapt Based on Student Needs: As the year progresses, groupings and expectations can become more flexible based on student readiness, independence, and learning needs.

Differentiate Through Play: Vary centre activities and support levels to engage all learners, including those needing EYE-TA Tier 2 or 3 support, within a shared play-based environment.

Maintain a Responsive Approach: Centre design and grouping should evolve continuously in response to student growth, developmental needs, and instructional goals.

Foster Inclusive Participation: Thoughtfully structured centres ensure that all students can access meaningful, engaging learning experiences while receiving appropriate supports.

Designing Purposeful and Responsive Learning Centres in Kindergarten

Well-designed centres are dynamic, purposeful, and responsive to both curricular outcomes and student interests. They serve as rich environments where children can explore, create, collaborate, and make meaning through hands-on learning experiences. Effective centres often include **multiple entry points**, allowing all learners to find success regardless of their developmental level or learning profile.

Centre planning begins by considering curricular goals, assessment data (such as EYE-TA), and student interests. A powerful starting point is a high-quality piece of literature that connects to cross-curricular outcomes —this might inspire dramatic play, literacy, science, art, or math-based centres. For example, a story like *"The Mitten"* by Jan Brett can spark retelling activities using puppets or props, inspire small-world re-creations with animals, or lead to engineering challenges, such as designing bridges for forest animals. Each centre has a clearly defined purpose, often introduced through a student-friendly question such as, "Can you act out the story of *The Mitten*?" or "How can we help the animals cross the pond?"

Effective centres support oral language, social skills, and communication, and are rich in opportunities for fine motor development, problem-solving, and inquiry. For example, dramatic play might evolve into a veterinarian's clinic when students show interest in animals. By responding to this curiosity, educators can build a centre that integrates literacy (clipboards and whiteboards), role play (lab coats, labelled cages), science (animal x-rays, nonfiction texts), and collaboration. Similarly, math centres might invite students to create patterned mittens, which are then laced and displayed, combining number sense, art, and fine motor work.

Intentional centre design also includes visual prompts, key vocabulary, and guiding questions (e.g., "What stories can we tell?", "What unique pattern can you create?"). It's important to leave space for centres to evolve based on student voice and classroom conversations, ensuring that learning remains relevant and engaging. Providing time for students to share their creations or discoveries at the end of centre time reinforces purpose and builds communication skills.

In this context, "**multiple entry points**" refers to the idea that an effective learning environment or activity is designed to be accessible and engaging for learners with diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles.

For example, in a centre focused on storytelling:

- One student might draw a comic strip.
- Another might write sentences.
- Another might act out a scene.
- Another might use assistive technology to record their voice.

All of these are valid "entry points" into the same learning goal – storytelling – but they allow learners to access it in ways that work best for them.

Educators may have different learning goals for each centre —some connected to whole-class outcomes, others tailored to support individual student needs. The use of inviting materials, authentic tools (e.g., menus, signs, nonfiction books), and student-driven inquiry creates a classroom where centres are not only aligned to curriculum but are also spaces of joy, wonder, and deep learning.

Key Takeaways

Responsive Planning: Centres are grounded in curriculum, student interest, and assessment data (e.g., EYE-TA), allowing for multiple entry points and differentiated support.

Cross-Curricular Integration: Literature often serves as a springboard for centres that incorporate literacy, science, math, art, and social studies.

Student Voice Shapes Learning: Centres evolve based on student curiosity and classroom conversations (e.g., a vet clinic emerging from dramatic play).

Clear Purpose and Intentions: Each centre includes a focus question, key vocabulary, and an instructional goal —clear to both students and adults.

Embedded Skills: Centres build oral language, communication, problem-solving, fine and gross motor skills, and social-emotional development.

Visual and Verbal Prompts: Use “I see...” or “I wonder...” prompts to foster collaboration and inquiry.

Showcase Time: Allow students to share their learning or creations to reinforce purpose and peer learning.

Environment as a Tool: Centre materials, signage, and authentic resources (e.g., menus, construction signs, x-rays) enrich the play experience.

Differentiating Instruction Within a Play-Based Curriculum

Differentiation within a play-based kindergarten program involves designing inclusive, purposeful learning activities that respond to both developmental needs and assessment data. For students with Tier 2 and Tier 3 results, effective support begins with understanding your learners, the curriculum, and leveraging data to design intentional, hands-on experiences that meet students where they are.

The EYE-TA and classroom observations provide insight into areas where students may need targeted support. For instance, if the data shows that many students are unfamiliar with community roles (e.g., firefighters, dentists, teachers), the educator might plan a series of scaffolded experiences to build this knowledge. These could include a community walk where students take photos of local landmarks, followed by printing and labelling these images for discussion. Visual cues and real-world connections deepen engagement and build background knowledge.

Classroom Data Example

Domain						Responsive Tiered Instruction (RTI) Category	Age
Awareness of Self and Environment	Social Skills and Approaches to Learning	Cognitive Skills	Language and Communication	Physical Development			
				Fine Motor	Gross Motor		
● 1.75	■ 3.00	■ 2.60	● 1.20	■ 2.67	■ 2.25	● 2	5 yr 6 mo
■ 2.25	■ 3.00	■ 2.80	■ 2.00	■ 2.67	■ 2.75	■ 1	5 yr 11 mo
● 1.25	■ 2.33	■ 2.20	▲ 0.80	● 1.67	■ 2.25	▲ 3	5 yr 8 mo
● 1.00	■ 2.33	● 1.80	▲ 0.60	■ 2.33	■ 2.25	▲ 3	5 yr 9 mo

To further differentiate, classroom centres can be transformed to support focused learning goals. A dramatic play centre can become a dentist's office or fire station, stocked with related books, props, vocabulary cards, and costumes. Educators can scaffold student play by introducing role-play prompts and discussing key vocabulary before or during play. This approach ensures students are not only participating but also developing their oral language, social interaction skills, and conceptual understanding in developmentally appropriate ways.

Importantly, differentiation does not mean separate programming—it means intentional, responsive teaching that integrates support into everyday classroom experiences, so all students can thrive in inclusive environments. With thoughtful planning, play becomes a powerful vehicle for delivering the individualized support many students need.

Key Takeaways

Differentiation Within Play: Use hands-on, meaningful, and conversation-rich activities that include multiple entry points for all learners.

Data-Informed Instruction: Use EYE-TA data and classroom observations to identify learning needs and plan intentional experiences.

Inclusive Centre Design: Embed targeted support within classroom centres (e.g., dramatic play tied to community helpers), using props, vocabulary prompts, and role play.

Connect to Real Life: Use photos, walks, and community-based experiences to make abstract concepts more accessible.

Supporting FI and ESL Learners in a Play-Based Kindergarten Environment

In a play-based kindergarten setting, oral language is at the heart of learning - especially for French Immersion (FI) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Centres provide rich, low-stakes opportunities for children to engage in authentic, language-rich interactions with peers and educators. Through play, students hear, rehearse, and use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts, helping them build comprehension, confidence, and fluency.

Intentional centre design can support vocabulary development and language acquisition. Activities that incorporate visuals, props, and gestures help scaffold understanding and promote participation. For example, pairing verbal instructions with hand signals or picture cues reduces cognitive load and allows students to more easily follow routines and engage with peers. Read-alouds and repeated exposure to patterned or predictable books give FI and ESL learners the opportunity to internalize sentence structures and build fluency. Acting out stories further deepens comprehension while supporting oral expression.

To maintain an instructionally rich environment that also fosters curiosity and wonder, educators can creatively utilize the resources available to them. This might include reimagining how classroom materials are used or incorporating recycled and found materials into STEM, art, or dramatic play centres. Simple shifts, like rearranging the learning space or rotating materials, can breathe new life into existing resources and spark new opportunities for exploration.

In resource-constrained contexts, collaboration becomes key. Teachers can establish resource-sharing systems within schools or across learning communities to maximize access to books, manipulatives, and tools. Community partnerships—whether through guest speakers, local experts, or virtual field trips—can further enrich the play-based environment and provide meaningful connections to real-world learning.

When learners are engaged in authentic, oral language-rich environments that reflect their interests and needs, language development happens naturally—and play becomes the most powerful form of instruction.

Key Takeaways

Oral Language Is Foundational: Centres offer daily opportunities to build oral language, which is essential for all learners as they develop vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills. While oral language plays a particularly critical role in supporting FI and ESL students, it also forms the basis for literacy, collaboration, and critical thinking for every child in the classroom.

Use of Visuals and Gestures: Pair verbal instructions with pictures and physical cues to support understanding and engagement.

Repeat, Rehearse, and Reinforce: Use patterned texts, repeated read-alouds, and dramatic play to reinforce language structures and vocabulary.

Leverage and Adapt Materials: Use recyclable and existing classroom items creatively for STEM, dramatic play, and art centres.

Maximize Collaboration: Share resources across classrooms or schools; build community partnerships to enrich student experiences.

Invite the World In: Use digital tools (e.g., Zoom, online field trips) to expose students to real-world language and cultural experiences.

Assessing Student Learning in Play-Based Centres

Assessment in play-based kindergarten environments is ongoing, responsive, and deeply rooted in observation and interaction. Rather than relying solely on formal assessments, educators actively engage with students during centre time to capture authentic evidence of learning. This includes listening to student conversations, asking intentional questions, and documenting learning in real-time.

Capturing student voice is central to understanding how children think, what they are curious about, and how they express their ideas. Through anecdotal notes and thoughtful questioning, educators can document emerging skills and understandings. Sitting at the child's level and participating in their play offers rich insight into their developmental progress, social interactions, and application of new concepts.

A variety of tools can support assessment in centres. Checklists help track specific skill development, while student-created products, work samples, and visual documentation (photos, videos, or audio recordings) provide tangible evidence of learning. These artifacts can be collected in portfolios and revisited to support planning, reflection, and communication with families.

Centre organization also plays a role. Early in the year, centres may be more structured with predetermined groups and additional adult support. As students grow in independence and routines become more established, educators can increase flexibility and choice—allowing children to explore more deeply and demonstrate their learning in varied ways.

Ultimately, assessment in centres should reflect the whole child—fostering agency, honouring voice, and supporting responsive instruction grounded in real-time observation and connection.

Key Takeaways

Capture Student Voice: Use anecdotal notes and open-ended questions to gain insight into student thinking and understanding.

Be an Active Participant: Join students in their play to observe learning as it unfolds in authentic contexts.

Ask Meaningful Questions: Use intentional, open-ended prompts to encourage deeper thinking and reflection.

Use Multiple Tools: Document learning through checklists, work samples, and multimedia artifacts (photos, video, audio).

Adapt Centre Organization Over Time: Begin with more structure and adjust as students become more independent.

Keep Centres Fresh and Purposeful: Rotate materials, embed new vocabulary, and ensure opportunities for skill development.

Celebrate Learning: Use portfolios and documentation to share student growth with families and colleagues.

Fostering Student Agency in Kindergarten Through Play-Based Learning

Overview

Student agency, the capacity to regulate one's own thinking, motivation, and behaviour, is foundational to lifelong success. In kindergarten, **agency emerges through play**. This section, based on ideas from *Measuring Student Success Skills: A Review of the Literature on Student Agency* (Brandt, 2024), outlines how play-based learning supports the development of intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection in young learners, the four core properties of agency, and offers actionable strategies for educators.

Why Play Matters for Agency

Play is how young children naturally learn, explore, and express themselves. Through play, they develop decision-making, planning, emotional regulation, and critical thinking skills essential for agency.

Key Play-Based Strategies That Build Agency

Imaginative play involving pretend scenarios, such as playing “store” or “family,” prompts children to set goals, plan roles, and adhere to self-imposed rules. This process involves intentional planning and forethought, as well as self-regulation to maintain roles and collaborate with others.

Structured games, such as “Simon Says” or board games, provide opportunities for practicing impulse control and adherence to rules. These activities encourage children to pause, think, and act deliberately, which can support the development of self-regulation skills.

Problem-solving play, such as building bridges or puzzles, encourages children to plan, adapt, and reflect. Teachers can support this by asking open-ended questions to facilitate planning and reflection.

Collaborative play includes group projects and shared storytelling, which involve negotiation, shared decision-making, and peer feedback. These activities provide opportunities for children to express their ideas and adjust to others, supporting the development of both agency and social skills.

Reflection routines, such as end-of-day discussions or drawing journals, provide children with opportunities to recall and describe their actions, supporting the development of self-reflection and ownership in learning.

Classroom Supports That Enhance Agency

Choice-rich environments: These settings enable children to develop decision-making skills by offering a variety of materials, activities, and roles from which to choose.

Warm relationships: When teachers provide responsive support, children are able to manage their emotions and continue working through challenges, demonstrating self-regulation and resilience.

Clear routines and expectations: Predictable structures enable children to operate within established boundaries. This approach encourages purposeful and goal-oriented behaviour.

By making play central to learning, kindergarten educators empower children to become confident, independent learners prepared for future success.

Source: Brandt, W. C. (2024). *Measuring Student Success Skills: A Review of the Literature on Student Agency*. National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment.

Designing Responsive and Inclusive Kindergarten Learning Environments

Adapted from *Joyful Literacy Intervention Early Learning Classroom Essentials* by Dr. Janet Nadine Mort (2014)

A well-designed kindergarten environment is co-created with children to reflect their interests, support engagement, and foster holistic development through meaningful, playful learning opportunities. The physical setup of the classroom communicates respect for individual learners and meets the diverse needs of all students, including their emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development.

Key Design Principles

Respect for Individual Differences:

Spaces are intentionally arranged using shelves or dividers to create areas for:

- Quiet, calming activities
- Collaborative play and work
- Independent exploration

Cultural Responsiveness & Family Connections:

- Displays reflect the identities of families through photographs and student work
- Learning is documented with photos, learning stories, and panels that highlight process over product
- Communication with families is supported through visible documentation and learning stories

Environmental Print to Support Literacy:

- Use of visual schedules (whole-class and individual)
- First/then boards, choice boards, and clearly labelled materials
- Print-rich environments that reinforce language and routine

Child-Centred Atmosphere:

- Inclusion of natural materials and family contributions
- Displays and materials that stimulate curiosity and belonging
- Rotated toys and uncluttered open spaces that invite creativity

Flexible Layout and Organization:

- Spaces designed to accommodate various learning styles and developmental levels
- Areas for large and small group work, sensory play, gross motor activity, and quiet reflection
- Clearly defined zones that remain visually accessible to staff while allowing children to feel secure

Active, Hands-On Learning:

- Structures and materials that invite discovery, problem-solving, and experimentation
- Opportunities for inquiry-based learning using real-world materials and play contexts

Encouragement of Independence:

- Storage solutions that make materials visible, accessible, and easily cleaned up by students
- Materials presented in ways that spark interest and promote ownership

Aesthetic and Sensory Appeal:

- Use of calming colours, soft or natural lighting, and thoughtfully arranged materials
- Natural textures, mirrors, and intriguing objects that invite exploration

Connection to the Outdoors and Natural Materials:

- Classroom learning intentionally linked to outdoor play and sensory experiences
- Natural items (stones, pinecones, water, wood) used for building, sorting, and exploration

Adaptability:

- Furniture and learning areas designed to be flexible and easily rearranged based on emerging interests
- Materials that can support various group sizes and be repurposed across contexts

Ultimately, a thoughtfully designed kindergarten classroom sends a strong message: “You belong here. Your curiosity matters.” When physical spaces are intentionally structured and enriched with natural, sensory, and literacy-focused elements, children are empowered to explore, engage, and thrive in developmentally responsive ways.

Resources:

Brandt, A. (2024). *Measuring student success skills: A review of the literature on student agency*.

Mort, J. N. (2014). *Joyful literacy intervention: Early learning classroom essentials*.

Seitz, H. (n.d.). *The child's right to play*. International Play Association. <https://ipaworld.org/childs-right-to-play/the-childs-right-to-play/seitz.pdf>

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. (2012). *Play-based learning statement*. https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/282/play-based-learning_statement_EN.pdf

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will learn about different community workers and their roles through play-based activities that encourage social interaction, language development, and hands-on learning.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Picture books about community workers (e.g., "Whose Hat Is This?" by Sharon Katz Cooper)
- Props and costumes (e.g., firefighter hats, doctor's coats, mail carrier bags)
- Vocabulary cards with pictures and names of community workers
- Art supplies (e.g., paper, crayons, markers)
- Building blocks, cardboard boxes, and construction toys
- Visual prompts and key vocabulary displayed around the classroom

KEY VOCABULARY

1. **Doctor:** A person who helps us when we are sick and gives us medicine.
2. **Nurse:** A person who assists the doctor and takes care of patients.
3. **Firefighter:** A person who puts out fires and helps in emergencies.
4. **Police Officer:** A person who keeps us safe and enforces the law.
5. **Mail Carrier:** A person who delivers our mail and packages.
6. **Teacher:** A person who helps us learn new things.
7. **Librarian:** A person who helps us find books and learn about reading.
8. **Chef:** A person who cooks food for us.
9. **Construction Worker:** A person who builds houses, buildings, and roads.
10. **Farmer:** A person who grows food and takes care of animals.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. **General Questions:**
 - a. "What does this community worker do?"
 - b. "How do they help people in our community?"
 - c. "What tools or equipment do they use?"
2. **Role-Play Questions:**
 - a. "Can you show me how this community worker does their job?"
 - b. "What would you say if you were this community worker?"
 - c. "How do you think this community worker feels when they help people?"
3. **Exploration Questions:**
 - a. "What do you notice about this community worker's uniform or tools?"
 - b. "Why do you think this job is important?"
 - c. "What would happen if we didn't have this community worker?"
4. **Interaction Questions:**
 - a. "How can you work together with your friends to act out this community worker's job?"
 - b. "What questions would you ask this community worker if you met them?"
 - c. "Can you think of a story about this community worker helping someone?"

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes):

1. Begin with a group discussion about community workers. Ask students questions like, "Who helps us when we are sick?" or "Who delivers our mail?"
 2. Read a picture book about community workers to the class, emphasizing key vocabulary.
-

ACTIVITY 1: Dramatic Play Centres (20 minutes):

1. Set up different dramatic play centres around the classroom, each representing a different community worker (e.g., a doctor's office, a fire station, a post office).
 2. Provide props, costumes, and vocabulary cards at each centre.
 3. Allow students to choose a centre and engage in role-play, using the props and costumes to act out the roles of community workers.
 4. Encourage students to use key vocabulary and interact with their peers during play.
-

ACTIVITY 2: Art and Writing (20 minutes):

1. Have students draw a picture of their favourite community worker and write a sentence about what they do.
 2. Provide visual prompts and key vocabulary to support students in their writing.
 3. Display the students' artwork and writing around the classroom.
-

ACTIVITY 3: Building and Construction (20 minutes):

1. Set up a construction centre with building blocks, cardboard, boxes and/or construction toys.
 2. Challenge students to build structures related to community workers (e.g., a fire station, a hospital).
 3. Encourage students to work together and discuss their creations.
-

ACTIVITY 4: Literacy Activity (20 minutes):

1. Introduce a simple poem or song about community workers. For example, "The People in Your Neighbourhood" song.
 2. Read or sing the poem/song together as a class, emphasizing the rhythm and rhyming words.
 3. Provide students with a copy of the poem/song and have them highlight or circle the names of community workers.
 4. Encourage students to practice reading the poem/song aloud with a partner, focusing on fluency and expression.
-

CONCLUSION (10 minutes):

1. Gather the students for a group discussion to share what they learned about community workers.
 2. Ask students to share their drawings and sentences with the class.
 3. Reinforce key vocabulary and concepts discussed during the lesson.
-

ASSESSMENT:

- Observe students during dramatic play and note their use of key vocabulary and social interactions.
 - Review students' drawings and sentences to assess their understanding of community workers and their roles.
 - Use anecdotal notes and checklists to document students' participation and engagement in the activities.
-

ADDITIONAL NOTES:
