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Play-Based Learning in TK Riyadlul Istiqomah: Enhancing Early Literacy Skills

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of play-based learning to enhance early literacy among children at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah, Indonesia. It aims to explore how play activities that incorporate literacy goals are used to support children's emerging reading and writing skills. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with teachers and the principal, as well as classroom observations. The study found that play-based learning activities, including games, songs, and interactive reading sessions, were reported to foster a positive learning environment and to engage children in the literacy process. However, several challenges were identified, including limited instructional time, varying levels of literacy readiness among children, and inconsistent support at home. The findings provide insights into the practical implementation of play-based learning and offer recommendations for addressing these challenges to support early literacy development in Indonesian kindergartens. This study contributes to the discourse on early childhood education by describing how play-based approaches are planned and carried out to support children's early literacy development.

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1. *Introduction*

Kindergarten education plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for children's cognitive, linguistic, and literacy development (DPFC, 2024). Early literacy, which encompasses skills such as listening, speaking, letter recognition, reading, and understanding information, is a fundamental aspect that prepares children for formal education and future academic life (Nur et al., 2025). According to recent studies, early literacy development is influenced by the learning environment and teaching methods employed in kindergarten settings. Play-based learning has increasingly been recognized as an effective approach to supporting early literacy and children's broader cognitive, social, and emotional development (Aminah et al., 2021). Play-based learning can enhance children's engagement in learning. In particular, guided play can promote higher levels of motivation, emotional involvement, and sustained attention among young children (Latifah et al., 2025). However, integrating specific learning goals into play-based contexts can be challenging and requires appropriate teacher support and scaffolding (Lazzara et al., 2025). Recent research indicates that children exposed to play-based learning tend to show optimal early literacy development, as compared to those who experience more didactic forms of instruction (Kathleen A, 2023). (Toub et al., 2018) found that preschool children who participated in adult-supported play following shared book-reading demonstrated greater gains in target vocabulary than children who engaged in free play. Guided play combines children's active participation in play with intentional adult guidance. (Skene et al., 2022) explain that guided play involves establishing a clear learning goal while allowing children some choice and autonomy during the activity. Teachers can support children's learning by using strategies such as open-ended questions, hints, prompts, and modeling, while responding to children's interests and needs. However, findings from the review indicate that the benefits of guided play vary across learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of considering how it is implemented and which skills are being targeted. For instance, a study found that when children engage in play, both

free and structured, guided by teachers, they demonstrate increased involvement, motivation, and a more profound understanding of basic literacy concepts, including letter recognition and vocabulary acquisition (Cheruiyot, 2024).

In a similar vein, (Kendrick, 2005) explores how play narratives, especially in a multilingual and multi-literate context, contribute to children's literacy development and self-construction. This paper connects play, literacy, and identity, offering an insightful perspective on how young children use play to understand themselves and the world. The themes of play as a narrative tool for literacy development are relevant to the present study, in which play in early childhood is examined as a means of fostering literacy. Research in Indonesia also highlights the positive impact of play-based learning in early childhood education. Several local studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in enhancing early literacy skills. For instance, at PAUD Kenanga in Banaran Village, Sukoharjo, using tools such as letter cards, picture books, role-play, and interactive activities has significantly increased children's engagement and enthusiasm, thus supporting their literacy development (Remawati et al., 2025). Despite the growing support for play-based learning, its implementation is not always consistent. Differences in teachers' experience, professional development, resource availability, and curriculum flexibility can affect the quality and effectiveness of play-based learning (Liwag & Marquez, 2025)

Many studies still emphasize observational methods or classroom documentation without deeply exploring the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as teachers, principals, and parents. This gap in research needs to be addressed to understand how play-based learning works in real-world settings. Furthermore, international literature calls for "intentional play", play that is guided by pedagogical strategies to ensure that literacy and other competencies are not developed randomly but purposefully. However, concrete examples of such intentional play in Indonesian early childhood education settings remain limited, and further exploration is needed on how teachers integrate this method in classrooms (Danniels & Pyle, 2022).

Although numerous studies demonstrate the benefits of play-based learning for early literacy, few have documented its implementation in real Indonesian kindergartens, particularly in qualitative descriptive research that involves the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including principals, teachers, and parents. Local studies tend to focus solely on classroom observations or the documentation of activities without incorporating a holistic understanding of play-based learning from all relevant participants (Asti, et al., 2025) Additionally, the literature stresses the importance of integrating "intentionality" in play-based learning, ensuring that literacy development is purposeful, guided by clear pedagogical objectives. Despite this, limited research has been conducted on how such practices can be successfully implemented in Indonesian early childhood settings. This gap in both the academic literature and practical implementation highlights the need for further investigation.

Building on previous Indonesian studies that have demonstrated the potential of play-based learning to support early literacy, this study extends existing research by examining how play-based learning is implemented in an everyday kindergarten context. Rather than focusing solely on children's literacy outcomes or classroom activities, this study considers the perspectives of the principal, teachers, and parents, as well as the challenges encountered in its implementation. By examining these perspectives alongside the role of intentional and guided play, this study provides a more contextual understanding of how play-based learning can be applied to support early literacy in an Indonesian kindergarten setting.

Playing is a natural activity for young children that plays a crucial role in their development. It is not just a recreational activity but also a means for learning about the world, as well as developing cognitive, motor, language, and social-emotional skills. The concept of learning through play arises from the understanding that children absorb knowledge more easily when they are happy and actively engaged in the process. According to Wulandari (2020), play can bridge the gap between children's need for enjoyment and the educational demands they must meet from an early age. Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes that young children are at the preoperational stage (ages 2-7), where they begin to develop symbolic abilities and imagination. At this stage, children learn through concrete experiences, role play, and direct interaction with their environment. Therefore, the play-based learning approach is highly suitable, as children can better understand abstract concepts through symbols, pictures, and simple games (Gemelly & Hasannah, 2019). In addition to Piaget, Vygotsky made significant contributions with his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He argued that play plays a key role in enhancing children's thinking abilities, as it allows them to engage in activities that are slightly beyond their current capabilities, with support from an adult or peer. Play-based learning can be supported through guided play, in which teachers balance children's freedom to explore with intentional scaffolding and guidance toward specific learning goals(Sanchez, 2025) For example, when a child plays a letter guessing game with a teacher, they may not yet be able to read independently, but with the teacher's guidance, they can reach that stage. This shows that play is an effective means for gradually developing early literacy (Novalia et al., 2025).

This study is both timely and relevant, as it seeks to document the actual practices of play-based learning in TK Riyadlul Istiqomah, a real-world preschool in Indonesia. This research offers a comprehensive analysis of the method's application in a local context, using qualitative descriptive research through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders: the principal, teachers, and parents. This approach will provide new insights into how play-based learning is applied and perceived, its challenges, and its potential for improving early literacy. The research objectives of this study are as follows: 1. To describe how play-based learning is implemented at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah to support early literacy. 2. To explore the perceptions of the principal, teachers, and parents regarding the effectiveness

of play-based learning in stimulating children's early literacy. 3. To identify the challenges and obstacles encountered in its implementation, as well as the strategies used to address them. 4. To generate practical recommendations for improving early literacy practice.. This research aims to contribute empirical evidence to the ongoing discourse on early childhood literacy in Indonesia, offering a detailed account of play-based learning as a viable approach for enhancing literacy in young children.

2. *Methods*

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at exploring and clarifying existing social phenomena or issues. A qualitative descriptive design was chosen because this study focuses on collecting, analyzing, and interpreting findings obtained through direct observation. The research was conducted at TKS Riyadlul Istiqomah in November 2025, located in Kp. Gudang Rt 02/05, Desa Balekambang, Kecamatan Nagrak, Kabupaten Sukabumi. Data in this study were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected directly by the researcher from the first sources, namely the principal, three classroom teachers, and two parents at TKS Riyadlul Istiqomah through classroom observations and interview sessions. Secondary data were obtained from journals, articles, and other relevant sources related to the topic of the study.

The study involved 36 children aged 4-6 years across Groups A and B at TKS Riyadlul Istiqomah. Interviews were conducted with the principal, three classroom teachers, and two parents as data sources. Observations were carried out to identify how play-based learning activities were implemented to stimulate early literacy at TKS Riyadlul Istiqomah. The observations focused on the learning process, including how teachers conducted literacy activities such as storytelling, the use of learning media, teacher guidance and support during activities, and children's participation and responses. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The interview questions addressed the implementation and planning of play-based learning, literacy activities and learning media used, teacher support and scaffolding, children's literacy development, perceptions of the effectiveness of play-based learning, challenges encountered during implementation, and strategies used to address these challenges. The interview guide also included probing questions to obtain more detailed information. For the principal, the questions covered school policies, the use of play-based learning, learning media and digital media, children's literacy development, parental support, learning planning, and implementation challenges. For the teachers, the questions addressed the planning and implementation of literacy activities, learning media, teacher support and scaffolding, children's literacy development, and challenges in implementing literacy activities through play.

Documentation was used to support the observation and interview processes and to record important data collected during the research, including interview instruments, audio recordings of interviews with informants, and photographs taken during the research activities. Data analysis was conducted by organizing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation according to themes related to the research objectives. Data obtained through interviews were compared with information from classroom observations and documentation to examine the consistency of the findings. The findings were then organized into thematic categories related to the implementation of play-based learning, its contribution to early literacy development, and the challenges encountered during implementation.

3. *Results*

This section presents the main findings of the study obtained from observations and interviews with the principal and teachers of TK Riyadlul Istiqomah. The results are organized according to the four research objectives: (1) describing how play-based learning is implemented to support early literacy, (2) exploring stakeholders perceptions of its effectiveness, (3) identifying challenges and strategies, and (4) generating practical recommendations for improving early literacy practice.

3.1. Implementation of Play-Based Learning for Early Literacy

The data show that play-based literacy activities are not incidental or improvised, they are systematically embedded in the daily lesson plan (RPPH). Teachers plan literacy activities in advance by deciding the theme, learning goals, and types of play to be used in each session. The principal explained that literacy components are explicitly written in the RPPH. As Mrs. Ai noted,

> "*Whenever we plan lessons, the activities are always written into the Daily Lesson Plan (RPPH). The teacher has to prepare what will be delivered for the next day's activities, including how the literacy activities, introducing reading, writing, and numbers will be formulated and set out in the RPPH.*"

This implies that the integration of literacy into play is a conscious and structured decision rather than a spontaneous add-on. Building on this, Mrs. Ninih described in more detail how teachers actually design play-based literacy sessions: they begin by determining specific learning objectives (e.g., whether to focus on reading, writing, or understanding a particular concept), then select a theme that is attractive and relevant to the children's interests (such as animals, the environment, or adventure), and choose play-based activities that match the theme and objectives,

such as creating picture stories, role-playing, composing simple poems or songs, drawing or coloring, or playing literacy games like word searches and riddles. Teachers then prepare the necessary materials (paper, pencils, crayons, books), arrange a flexible and enjoyable schedule, and deliberately involve children in the planning and implementation process by asking what they would like to do and how they would like to do it, before finally evaluating which parts of the activity worked well and which aspects need improvement. In this way, planning not only covers the selection of media (books, letter cards, digital content) and the sequence of activities from opening to closing, but also ensures that play-based literacy is purposeful, responsive to children's interests, and continuously refined based on classroom experience.

Observations and interviews indicate that teachers at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah use a range of play-based strategies that centre on games, songs, printed materials, and simple digital media to stimulate early literacy. When introducing reading, teachers rarely ask children to sit and drill letters in isolation; instead, they turn reading into a game by using letter cards, word-guessing activities, and playful competition among the children. As one teacher explained,

> "*when we teach reading, we always turn it into a game. We use letter cards, word-guessing games, and songs; we do the same when introducing numbers.*"

These games are often structured so that children have to recognise letters, match them, or say simple words aloud in order to "win," which makes basic decoding and phonological awareness part of an enjoyable challenge rather than a rigid exercise. Songs and simple chants are another key medium used to support literacy and numeracy. Teachers described how they integrate short, repetitive songs to help children remember letter shapes, sounds, and number sequences. During these activities, children are encouraged to sing together, clap, or move in rhythm, which keeps their attention and allows them to practise language patterns in a relaxed way. In addition to games and songs, printed materials such as storybooks and picture books are routinely present in the classroom. Even though formal storytelling is not the main method, teachers noted that children "*love to open storybooks and 'read' the pictures, even if they cannot yet read all the words*," and that they often see children flipping through pages, pointing at images, and talking about what they see. This indicates that books are treated as familiar objects to explore, not just as assessment tools.



Figure 1. Children participating in a letter recognition activity using cards and letter blocks

Table 1. Summary of Play-Based Literacy Activities at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah

Play-based activities	Instructional media	Literacy indicators targeted
Storytelling	Storybooks/digital projection	Listening, vocabulary, story understanding
Letter games	Letter cards/flashcards	Letter recognition
Word-guessing games	Letter/word cards	Word recognition, vocabulary
Songs and chants	Songs/digital media	Listening, verbal expression
Book exploration	Storybooks/picture books	Print awareness, interest in books
Role-play	Role-play materials	Speaking, vocabulary

The principal, Mrs. Ai, also mentioned the use of simple digital media to enrich these activities. With the help of a laptop or projector, they sometimes show short digital stories or word games that invite children to look, listen, and respond, for example by shouting out letters or words they recognise or by following along with an on-screen activity. Mrs. Ai noted that "*teachers are now encouraged to use digital media to be more creative, using laptops or projectors; the media we show includes games, word-guessing activities, and stories that come from digital sources.*" Digital stories and simple literacy games are used to capture children's attention, provide visual and auditory support when introducing new vocabulary, and make word-recognition practice feel more engaging. These digital tools do not replace traditional materials such as books and letter cards; rather, they complement them by adding movement, colour, and sound, which helps sustain children's interest during literacy sessions. Even though the number of devices is still limited, teachers view digital media as a valuable addition that allows them to present reading-related content in more varied and attractive ways, especially for children who are highly responsive to visual and interactive stimuli.



Figure 2. Children engaging with digital storytelling through classroom projection

3.2. Stakeholder Perceptions of Play-Based Literacy

Stakeholder perceptions of play-based literacy at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah are consistently positive across the principal, teachers, and parents. The principal repeatedly described play-based learning as both suitable and perceived as effective for children aged 4-6, emphasizing that it generates high levels of enthusiasm, active participation, and even a healthy sense of competition in reading-related activities. Mrs. Ai stated,

> "*the impact is truly extraordinary; the children are very enthusiastic about reading literacy, and they even compete with each other, saying 'Bu Guru, I want to be able to read quickly, I want to learn to read,*"'

Indicating that the approach not only supports skill development but also builds strong intrinsic motivation. Teachers also reported that children frequently ask for additional reading time and show visible pride when they can recognise letters or read simple words, which they interpret as clear evidence that the method fosters confidence and a positive emotional relationship with reading.

Mrs. Ai said the play-based approach is seen as fully aligned with the school's long-standing educational philosophy of *belajar seraya bermain* ("learning while playing") and has been in place since the school was established. As the principal explained, the choice of a play-based approach was made "*because it is a method that is suitable for children of this age*," and it "*has been applied since the kindergarten was opened… since 2005*." The principal supports literacy activities by ensuring the availability of basic teaching media such as letter cards, storybooks, and some digital tools, while at the same time stressing that the effectiveness of these resources depends on how creatively teachers use them. In her words, the school "*provides media such as letter cards and books, but it is the teacher's creativity in delivering lessons through these media that makes children happy, enthusiastic, and interested*.". Parents, are described by teachers as generally enthusiastic and supportive of the literacy program. According to Mrs. Ai, "*parents are very happy when their children learn to read, that is what they hope for*," and many parents express pride when their children begin to read simple texts or recite from *iqro'* and particularly in connection with the reading extracurricular program that has been introduced to prepare children for primary school. Taken together, these accounts show that the play-based literacy approach enjoys broad support and legitimacy among the key stakeholders in the school community.

3.3. Children's Literacy Engagement and Emerging Skills

Children's literacy engagement and emerging skills at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah are reflected in a range of observable behaviours that teachers consistently describe in interviews. During literacy activities, children are portrayed as highly engaged and eager to participate; they frequently volunteer to answer, compete to be chosen by the teacher, and call out "*Aku mau, aku mau*" when asked who wants to join in, with teachers noting that seeing a friend succeed often motivates others to want to try as well. This pattern suggests that the play-based approach has succeeded in creating a classroom climate where literacy is experienced as enjoyable and socially rewarding rather than as a burden. At the same time, teachers report a growing interest in books, even among children who are not yet fluent readers. They observe that children "want to open storybooks" and that, because "reading does not only mean reading letters," many children happily "read the pictures" and flip through pages, gradually building the habit of handling and exploring books independently. This behaviour is interpreted as an important early step in developing positive attitudes toward texts and information. In addition, the school has formalised reading practice into an extracurricular program held before or after regular lessons, explicitly aimed at preparing children for the demands of primary school. As Mrs. Ai explained,

> "*starting this year we have made the reading program an extracurricular activity… the children do reading activities before or after class because it is preparation for entering elementary school*,"

Teachers perceive that children who regularly participate in this program demonstrate better basic reading and writing readiness when transitioning to Grade 1. Together, these observations show that the combination of play-based activities, accessible print materials, and structured reading opportunities contributes not only to children's enthusiasm and engagement, but also to the gradual emergence of foundational literacy skills and school readiness.



Figure 3. Reading books and storytelling activities

3.4. Challenges and Obstacles

Despite the positive outcomes observed, the implementation of play-based literacy at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah is constrained by several challenges that affect how consistently and equitably the approach can be applied. First (1), teachers highlighted limited instructional time and class size as a major issue, explaining that "*because of time constraints, we cannot have every child read every day, so we take turns… sometimes not all children get a turn.*" As a result, some children receive less frequent individual practice, which may slow their progress compared to classmates who are able to read more often with the teacher.

Second (2), teachers reported substantial variability in children's literacy readiness and learning pace. Mrs. Ai described how "*some children absorb the lesson very quickly, while others are slower; some can do it after one time, while others need to repeat it several times,*" requiring them to continually adjust their expectations, explanations, and levels of support. This need for ongoing differentiation is demanding in a setting where both time and resources are limited. Third (3), the inconsistency of literacy reinforcement at home further complicates implementation. The principal stressed that when children do not continue practising at home, they "*tend to forget over time*," so lessons must be repeated and progress becomes fragile; as one teacher put it, "*if at home they do not study as well, then they will eventually forget, so learning has to happen both at school and at home*." Together, these three constraints, (1) limited time and class size, (2) heterogeneous literacy readiness, and (3) uneven support at home underscore that the success of play-based literacy in this context depends not only on classroom practices, but also on the broader structural and familial conditions surrounding children's learning. To involve parents in children's practice at home, teachers used evaluation books and informal reminders.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that play-based learning at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah is not an informal or incidental practice, but a deliberately structured approach to early literacy. Planning literacy goals, embedding them in the Daily Lesson Plan (RPPH), and realising them through games, songs, book exploration, and simple digital media shows that the school treats play as a primary pedagogical vehicle rather than a "reward" after academic work. This aligns with broader evidence that when literacy is integrated into developmentally appropriate play, children's early reading and writing skills tend to develop more strongly than under purely drill-based methods. Recent work in other contexts has shown that systematic play-based models can significantly promote early literacy skills and interest when they are planned purposefully rather than left to spontaneous play (Cheruiyot, 2024; Latifah et al., 2025). In this sense, TK Riyadlul Istiqomah's practice can be seen as locally grounded confirmation of these international trends, adapted to the constraints and culture of a small community kindergarten.

Children's high levels of enthusiasm, willingness to participate, and pride in being able to read or recognise letters suggest that the approach is perceived as effective by the school community and appears to foster positive attitudes toward reading a positive literacy identity. Instead of experiencing reading as a source of anxiety or failure, children in this study appear to experience it as a game, a challenge, and a source of social recognition ("*Aku mau, aku mau*"). This is important because children's motivation and emotional engagement are associated with later literacy outcomes; children who enter primary school believing that reading is enjoyable and achievable are more likely to persist when tasks become more complex. Implementing play-based learning requires teachers to balance children's freedom to explore with intentional guidance that keeps activities connected to learning objectives (Grieshaber et al., 2021). Empirical work on early literacy has increasingly highlighted that play-based and game-based formats can raise engagement and self-confidence, especially when teachers provide clear goals and feedback (Utami & Purwanta, 2025). However, the benefits of guided play vary across learning outcomes, making it important to distinguish children's engagement from measurable learning gains (Skene et al., 2022)

Stakeholder perceptions reinforce this interpretation. Teachers, school leadership, and parents share a broadly positive view of the play-based literacy program and see it as both appropriate for the age group and effective for preparing children to enter Grade 1. This convergence is not trivial. Studies of early childhood reform often show

that innovative approaches fail when they clash with parental expectations or institutional cultures. Here, by contrast, the philosophy of "*belajar seraya bermain*" has been part of the school's identity since its founding, and parents explicitly express satisfaction when their children begin to read and handle books confidently. This alignment between school and home expectations increases the likelihood that the approach will be sustained and gradually improved, rather than abandoned when pressures for "more serious" teaching arise.

The gradual integration of digital media represents another point of connection with current research. Although devices are limited, TK Riyadlul Istiqomah's use of laptops, projectors, and digital stories or word games to support literacy mirrors a broader shift toward "digital play" in early childhood education. Research have found that digital play, when carefully chosen and guided by teachers, can enhance engagement and support early literacy learning rather than displace it (Chu et al., 2024; Rina et al., 2025). Research conducted in Indonesia has also explored the use of digital picture books to support young children's digital literacy, providing a relevant local context for considering digital media in early childhood education (Rizkiyah, 2022). Research on e-book interventions has identified potential benefits for aspects of emergent literacy, including vocabulary and phonological awareness, although outcomes depend on the characteristics of the digital materials and the learning activities in which they are used (López-Escribano et al., 2021). The findings therefore illustrate how digital and physical materials can be combined within existing classroom practices, rather than demonstrating that digital media itself produces better literacy outcomes. Recent Indonesian studies likewise report that interactive digital media and digital learning tools can strengthen early literacy skills among children aged 4-6 when integrated into hybrid or classroom-based activities, particularly in recognising letters, vocabulary, and simple word reading. (Anggraini et al., 2025) The present study adds nuance by showing how such tools are blended with physical media (books, cards) and play-based methods in a faith-based school with limited infrastructure, suggesting that digital integration does not require abandoning traditional materials but can instead complement them.

At the same time, the challenges identified time constraints, heterogeneous readiness, and inconsistent home reinforcement echo issues documented in other early childhood settings, including Islamic early childhood institutions (Raudhatul Athfal). Research on early language and literacy in Islamic preschools in Indonesia has pointed to similar tensions between ideal pedagogical models and structural realities such as large class sizes, limited teacher preparation, and curriculum pressures (Ratnasih & Garnasih, n.d.). The need to rotate children in reading practice because "*not all children can read every day,"* and the descriptions of some children absorbing material quickly while others require repeated exposure, underline that even well-designed play-based activities do not eliminate inequalities in opportunity and pace. Rather, they make the quality of teacher scaffolding and classroom organisation even more crucial. The finding that children who receive less practice or weaker support at home tend to "forget" more quickly is particularly consistent with long-standing evidence that the home literacy environment is associated with language and reading development (Hamilton et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2024). The implementation of play-based literacy also requires teachers to connect learning objectives, play activities, and observations of children's participation, rather than treating play and learning assessment as separate processes (Pyle et al., 2020)

Indonesian studies have likewise found that home literacy activities such as shared book reading, storytelling, and letter playare associated with stronger early reading skills and language development in preschoolers (Kusumawardhani et al., 2025). A meta-analysis covering studies from low- and middle-income countries also found a small but significant association between the home language and literacy environment and children's language and literacy skills, with adult literacy practices and the availability of books showing particularly relevant associations (Nag et al., 2024). In this light, teachers' concern about uneven home support can be understood as a local instance of a widely documented structural factor.

These patterns suggest that the main constraints identified in this study should not be interpreted simply as weaknesses of the school, but as manifestations of broader conditions that shape early literacy development in many low- and middle-resource contexts. Limited instructional time and large groups make fine-grained differentiation difficult; heterogeneous readiness requires teachers to balance the needs of quick and slow learners; and unequal home literacy environments risk amplifying existing differences. What this study shows, however, is that teachers and school leaders are not passive in the face of these constraints. Through rotational reading, deliberate scaffolding, the creative use of media, and attempts to involve parents via evaluation books and informal reminders, they are already enacting a set of compensatory strategies. These responses resonate with best-practice recommendations in the early literacy literature, which stress the importance of targeted small-group work, responsive scaffolding, and active home–school collaboration as levers to mitigate structural inequalities (Nazara et al., 2025).

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed to improve early literacy practice in similar early childhood settings. First, schools can strengthen the planning dimension of play-based literacy by documenting existing practices at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah such as the use of games, songs, books, and simple digital media into a clear internal guideline or program document, so that the approach becomes more visible, easier to share with new teachers, and more systematically monitored over time. This is in line with evidence from structured professional development programmes such as SEEDS of Early Learning, which shows that clearly articulated early literacy frameworks and ongoing support for teachers can lead to measurable gains in children's language and emergent literacy skills in preschool settings (Hermandez et al., 2025). Differences in teachers' approaches to play-

based learning may also shape how they observe and respond to children's learning, highlighting the importance of aligning classroom activities with appropriate forms of assessment (Pyle et al., 2022).

Second, professional development for teachers should focus not only on designing attractive activities, but also on differentiated scaffolding, small-group organisation, and responsive feedback, so that children who develop literacy skills more slowly or receive less support at home still have access to meaningful, individualised practice within the limited classroom time. Rather than concentrating only on designing attractive activities, training could help teachers identify when children need additional prompts, repeated opportunities, or alternative ways to participate. Evidence suggests that coaching situated in real teaching contexts can support improvements in teachers' instructional competencies and children's developmental outcome (Yang et al., 2022).

Third, the findings underline the need to formalise home–school collaboration around literacy. Schools could design simple, low-cost strategies to encourage families to continue literacy activities at home, such as rotating take-home storybooks or "literacy bags," short parent guides on how to talk about pictures and stories, and periodic information sessions that highlight the importance of shared reading and everyday talk. Research on the home literacy environment consistently shows that the quantity and quality of literacy-related interactions at home are significantly associated with children's early language and literacy development, including in preschool populations and in early childhood contexts similar to Indonesia (Zhang, et. al., 2023). Home–school literacy initiatives should account for differences in families' access to books, available time, and capacity to participate, rather than assuming that all caregivers can provide the same level of support(Nan & Tian, 2025). Studies on take-home literacy bags and book-in-a-bag programmes also report increases in parent–child reading, parental confidence, and children's engagement with books when schools provide structured materials and guidance for families (Díaz et al., 2024). Finally, digital media, although currently limited could be used more strategically by selecting a small set of high-quality, age-appropriate interactive reading applications and digital storybooks that directly support letter recognition, vocabulary development, and story comprehension, and by explicitly linking them to classroom themes. A recent systematic review concludes that well-designed interactive reading apps can positively support young children's emergent literacy, particularly vocabulary, story comprehension, and engagement, when they are used thoughtfully within a multimedia learning environment. Together, these recommendations aim to build on the strengths already present at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah structured play-based planning, high child engagement, and strong stakeholder support while addressing the identified challenges of limited time, heterogeneous readiness, and uneven home reinforcement, so that early literacy development can be supported more equitably and sustainably in future practice.

5. *Conclusion*

This study concludes that play-based learning at TK Riyadlul Istiqomah is perceived as an effective approach for supporting early literacy development in early childhood. The findings show that literacy activities integrated into games, songs, book exploration, and simple digital media are reported to help children recognise letters, become familiar with print, and develop confidence as emerging readers, while at the same time maintaining a joyful and engaging learning atmosphere. Children's enthusiasm, willingness to participate, and pride when they can read or identify letters suggest that the approach may support not only builds early literacy skills but also fosters positive attitudes toward reading. However, the implementation still faces challenges, particularly limited instructional time, differences in children's literacy readiness, and inconsistent practice at home, which can affect the equity and continuity of learning gains. These results highlight the importance of deliberate planning, continuous teacher support, and stronger collaboration with families to ensure that play-based literacy practices can be sustained and further developed in early childhood education settings.

6. *References*

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