

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND EDUCATION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Directed Play Approach in Improving Early Literacy Skills of Children at RA An-Nisa Ternate City

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the application of a directed play approach to improve early literacy skills in children at RA An-Nisa Kota Ternate. This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. The research subjects included the students of RA An-Nisa, classroom teachers, and the head of RA. Data collection techniques were conducted through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and qualitatively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions, with data validity ensured through source and technique triangulation. The results of the study indicate that the directed play approach is implemented through systematic lesson planning by integrating play activities with literacy goals, such as letter recognition, connecting sounds and symbols, enriching vocabulary, and expressing ideas orally. The implementation of this approach can increase children's engagement, motivation, and activity in early literacy learning. Children learn in a fun, stress-free environment that is appropriate for their developmental stages. Thus, the guided play approach has proven effective in improving early literacy skills in young children and is relevant for implementation in learning at RA institutions.

**Keywords:** Guided Play, Early Literacy, Young Children.

## I. Introduction

Early literacy skills are the main foundation for the cognitive and language development of young children, which significantly affects learning success at later educational levels (Tasni et al., 2024). Early literacy is not only understood as the technical ability to read and write but also includes the recognition of letter symbols, phonological awareness, understanding language meaning, and the ability to express ideas orally. Therefore, literacy stimulation in early childhood must be carried out appropriately, contextually, and in alignment with the characteristics of child development (Khaironi 2018). Early literacy skills are the primary foundation for the cognitive and language development of young children, which significantly influences learning success in later educational stages (Tasni et al., 2024). Early literacy is not only understood as the technical ability to read and write, but also includes letter symbol recognition, phonological awareness, comprehension of language meaning, and the ability to express ideas verbally. Therefore, literacy stimulation



in early childhood must be conducted appropriately, contextually, and in accordance with the characteristics of children's development (Khaironi, 2018).

The directed play approach emerges as a relevant pedagogical alternative to bridge the needs of early literacy development with the world of children's play (Pratiwi, 2017). Directed play is a play activity systematically designed by educators with specific learning objectives while still providing space for freedom, exploration, and enjoyment for children. Through this approach, children are not only learning objects but also active subjects directly involved in the learning process through concrete experiences and social interactions (Sutini, 2013). Various studies have shown that play activities positively contribute to children's language and literacy development. However, most of these studies are general in nature, emphasizing free play without a clearly defined literacy goal, or are conducted in the broad early childhood education context without highlighting the distinct characteristics of RA institutions, which have specific religious and cultural traits. In addition, research specifically examining the implementation of guided play as a systematic strategy to enhance early literacy skills in children, especially in the local context of Eastern Indonesia, is still limited.

RA An-Nisa in Ternate City, as one of the early childhood education institutions based on Islam, has great potential in integrating a guided play approach with Islamic values and the local cultural context. This integration can be realized through play activities that include the introduction of Arabic and Latin letters, Islamic stories, and language games relevant to children's daily lives. However, based on the initial observations made by the researcher through direct observation of the learning process and children's interactions in the classroom, it was found that children's early literacy skills still show significant variation. Some children are already able to recognize several letters and state the initial sounds of words, but some children still have difficulty distinguishing letter shapes, connecting sounds with symbols, and expressing ideas or experiences orally in simple sentences. Furthermore, initial observations indicate that literacy activities in the classroom are still dominated by conventional methods, such as assigning students to trace letters on worksheets and memorization activities that are not supported by structured play activities. This situation causes children to be passive, less enthusiastic, and easily lose focus during learning activities. Additionally, opportunities for children to interact verbally, explore play materials, and construct meaning through direct experiences remain relatively limited. In fact, at an early age, children need concrete, interactive, and enjoyable literacy stimulation for the learning process to occur optimally (Agustina et al., 2018).

These initial observations indicate that literacy learning at RA An-Nisa in Ternate City requires an innovative approach that is not only pedagogically effective but also aligned with children's developmental characteristics, the principle of learning through play, and the social, cultural, and religious environment of the RA institution. Therefore, a guided play approach is considered relevant to be studied and implemented as an early literacy learning strategy, as it can integrate clear learning objectives with meaningful play activities and is expected to improve children's early literacy skills more optimally and sustainably. Based on the above description, this study is important to examine in depth how a guided play approach can be implemented in learning at RA An-Nisa in Ternate City and the extent to which this approach can improve children's early literacy skills. The novelty of this research lies in the exploration of guided play as an early literacy strategy that is systematically, contextually, and institutionally based on the characteristics of RA in the local area, which is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of early childhood literacy studies as well as practical contributions for educators in designing more effective and meaningful learning experiences.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development



## 2.1. Early Childhood Development and Play-Based Learning

Early childhood is a phase of rapid development, especially in cognitive and language aspects. According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, early childhood is in the preoperational stage, where a child's thinking is still symbolic and not yet able to think abstractly and systematically. Therefore, the learning process must be adapted to these characteristics, namely, through concrete activities that involve direct experience and interaction with the surrounding environment. Play is the main medium that allows children to naturally build knowledge according to their developmental stage (Piaget, 1952). Vygotsky emphasized that children's cognitive and language development are greatly influenced by social and cultural interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) indicates that a child can reach higher abilities if they receive guidance from adults or more capable peers. In the context of early childhood learning, play accompanied by teacher guidance allows for a scaffolding process in which the teacher provides gradual support until the child is able to learn independently (Ma'mun et al., 2024). The play-based approach to learning also aligns with Montessori's perspective, which emphasizes the importance of children's freedom to learn through structured and meaningful activities. Montessori views that children have an internal drive to learn; therefore, educators play a role in providing a conducive learning environment and materials that match the child's developmental needs (Wulandari et al., 2018). Thus, purposefully designed play can serve as an effective means of optimizing the cognitive and language development of young children. Based on the views of these experts, it can be concluded that play-based learning is not merely a time-filling activity but a pedagogical strategy with a strong theoretical foundation. Play that is designed according to developmental stages and is supported by meaningful social interaction will help children build language and literacy skills optimally.

## 2.2. The Concept of Early Literacy from an Emergent Literacy Perspective

Early literacy is a basic ability that develops as children interact with spoken language and written symbols in their environments. Emergent Literacy theory views reading and writing skills as not suddenly appearing when children enter elementary school, but rather developing gradually from an early age. This process includes letter recognition, phonological awareness, vocabulary mastery, and the ability to understand and express meaning through spoken language (Muakibatul Hasanah, 2015). From the perspective of Emergent Literacy, children learn literacy through meaningful daily experiences, such as listening to stories, playing with letter symbols, singing, and interacting with others. These activities help children understand the function of language as a tool for communication, rather than just as symbols to be memorized. Therefore, early literacy learning needs to be presented in a contextual and enjoyable way to align with a child's world. Both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasized that children's language development is influenced by their interactions with the environment. Piaget views language as a part of cognitive development, while Vygotsky sees language as a primary tool in the process of thinking and social interaction. Both provide the basis that early literacy will develop more optimally if children are actively involved in activities that encourage the communication and exploration of language symbols. Thus, early literacy in young children cannot be taught formally or mechanically. Literacy stimulation must be carried out through concrete and interactive experiences that allow children to gradually build their understanding of the language. Learning approaches that integrate play and literacy are relevant for supporting the process of emergent literacy in children.

## 2.3. Guided Play Approach in Early Childhood Literacy Development

The guided play approach is a learning strategy that combines children's freedom to play with learning objectives designed systematically by educators. In this approach, the teacher acts as a facilitator who provides the environment, media, and play scenarios that allow children to learn actively and independently. Guided play differs from free play because it has specific developmental goals, including the development of early literacy. The guided play approach aligns with Vygotsky's theory (1978), particularly the concept of scaffolding, where the teacher provides guidance and support during the play process. Through this guidance, children are encouraged to recognize letters, connect sounds with symbols, and express ideas verbally in an enjoyable environment. Interaction during play also enriches a child's vocabulary and communication skills. From the Montessori perspective (Wulandari et al., 2018), purposeful play allows children to learn through activities that are meaningful and aligned with their interests. Play materials prepared by teachers, such as letter cards, role-playing games, and picture stories, provide opportunities for children to explore language independently and in a guided manner. This supports early literacy development without causing any academic pressure. Based on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, and Emergent Literacy, the guided play approach has a strong theoretical foundation for the development of early literacy in young children. This approach is not only in line with the characteristics of child development but also allows literacy learning to occur in a contextual, enjoyable, and meaningful manner. Therefore, the guided play approach is considered relevant for application and study in efforts to improve early literacy skills in children at RA An-Nisa, Ternate City.

### III. Research Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive design (Sugiyono, 2017) aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the process of implementing a guided play approach and the changes in children's early literacy skills in the context of learning at RA An-Nisa, Ternate City. The research was conducted at RA An-Nisa Ternate City during the even semester of the current academic year for approximately two months, covering the stages of preparation, data collection and data analysis. The research subjects consisted of students as the main subjects, and class teachers and the head of the RA as key informants chosen purposively according to the research objectives. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, with research instruments consisting of observation sheets for children's early literacy skills, interview guidelines, and documentation formats prepared based on early literacy theory and adjusted to the characteristics of early childhood development. The early literacy indicators observed included the ability to recognize letters, connect sounds with symbols, master vocabulary, and express ideas verbally. The data obtained were analyzed qualitatively and descriptively through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was ensured through source and technique triangulation by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation to obtain valid and credible data. (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### IV. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1. Result

##### 4.1.1. The Implementation of a Directed Play Approach in Early Literacy Learning

The research results show that the implementation of a guided play approach at RA An-Nisa in Ternate City is carried out through learning planning that is systematically arranged by teachers while adhering to the principle of learning through play. Teachers design Daily Learning Implementation Plans (RPPH) that integrate early literacy development goals into various play activities, such as games for

recognizing and naming letters, activities matching sounds with letter symbols, role-playing based on simple stories, and storytelling activities using engaging and contextual picture media. Each play activity is designed not only to entertain children but also to have clear language and literacy development objectives. In its implementation, the teacher acts as a facilitator who creates a conducive learning environment and provides guidance, examples, and support according to the child's needs. The teacher does not dominate the learning process but instead provides gradual scaffolding so that the child can actively and independently engage in play activities. This approach allows children to learn through exploration, interaction, and hands-on experiences, making the literacy-learning process natural and meaningful. Based on the results of the observations, structured play activities have been proven to increase children's engagement and participation in early literacy learning. Children appear more enthusiastic about participating, actively interacting with teachers and peers, and showing a higher interest in literacy activities compared to conventional learning. Children are also more willing to try, ask questions, and verbally express their opinions during play activities. This indicates that a fun learning environment can encourage children to become optimally involved in the learning process. Furthermore, the classroom atmosphere becomes more lively and conducive because children do not feel pressured by academic demands. Literacy learning is not perceived as a difficult or boring activity, but rather as part of a fun play activity. Children learn to recognize letters, sounds, and vocabulary through meaningful contextual play experiences. Thus, the results of this study indicate that a guided play approach can be effectively applied in early literacy learning at RA An-Nisa Kota Ternate and has a positive impact on the learning process and classroom atmosphere for young children.

#### 4.1.2. Children's Early Literacy Skills Before and After the Implementation of a Guided Play Approach

Initial observations showed that children's early literacy skills varied before the implementation of the guided play approach. Some children can recognize several letters and identify the initial sounds of words, but some children still have difficulty distinguishing letter shapes, connecting sounds with symbols, and expressing ideas or experiences orally. In addition, children's participation in literacy activities is still limited, especially when learning is conducted through conventional methods. After implementing the guided play approach, observations showed an improvement in children's early literacy skills. Children began to recognize and name letters more effectively, connect sounds with symbols in a simple way, and use a more diverse vocabulary in oral communication. Children also appeared more confident in expressing their opinions, answering teachers' questions, and participating in storytelling and role-playing activities. These changes indicate that the guided play approach provides a positive stimulus for the development of children's early literacy. The research results also show an increase in children's activity and participation in the learning process. Through guided play activities, children are more active in moving, speaking, and interacting with their learning environments. Children are not just recipients of information but are directly involved in the learning process by exploring play materials and communicating with peers. The interactions that occur during play also enrich children's language experiences.

The teacher conveyed in an interview that a guided play approach makes it easier for children to understand literacy material because it is presented in activities that are close to a child's world. The teacher also felt that children were easier to guide and more focused during learning because play activities provide space for children to learn without feeling forced. This shows that the guided play approach not only impacts early literacy skills but also affects children's attitudes and motivation to learn. The results of interviews with teachers and the head of the RA show that a guided play approach is seen as a learning strategy relevant to the characteristics of young children. Teachers stated that through guided play, children find it easier to understand the concepts of letters and sounds and become more confident in oral communication. Documentation in the form of RPPH, photos of learning activities, and children's work also supports the research findings, showing an improvement in the quality of literacy activities and children's learning

outcomes. Documentation of children's work shows progress in letter recognition and basic storytelling skills. Children begin to correctly name letters, associate pictures with words, and retell play experiences using simple sentences. These findings indicate that a guided play approach positively impacts the gradual and sustained development of early literacy skills in children. Overall, the research results indicate that the implementation of a guided play approach at RA An-Nisa in Ternate City can enhance children's early literacy skills in terms of letter recognition, linking sounds with symbols, vocabulary mastery, and the ability to express ideas orally. In addition, this approach increases children's activeness, motivation, and participation in learning. Thus, the guided play approach has proven effective and relevant for application in early childhood literacy education.

#### 4.2. Discussion

The discussion of the research results shows that the implementation of a guided play approach in early literacy learning at RA An-Nisa Ternate City has a positive impact on the process and outcomes of children's learning. This approach allows teachers to design learning systematically without eliminating the playful characteristics that are the primary needs of young children. Literacy learning is not presented formally and rigidly but is packaged in enjoyable and meaningful play activities, allowing children to learn according to their world and developmental stage (Hudson & Vesta R. WHISLER, 2007).

The findings of this study are in line with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states that early childhood is in the preoperational stage, where children's thinking processes are still symbolic and require concrete experiences to develop further. Through guided play activities, such as learning letters using concrete media, matching sounds and symbols, and role-playing, children have the opportunity to build literacy understanding through direct experiences. This process demonstrates the assimilation and accommodation of knowledge, wherein children gradually associate letter symbols with meanings and language sounds. (Sujiono & Dr. Yuliani Nurani, M.Pd, 2019). In addition, the guided play approach in this study reinforces Vygotsky's theory on the importance of social interaction in children's cognitive and language development. During play activities, teachers provide direction and guidance according to the child's needs, and interactions with peers also serve as an effective learning medium. This process reflects the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where children can achieve higher literacy skills through support and scaffolding from adults as well as their social environment (Anjani et al., 2025). The role of the teacher as a facilitator in a guided play approach is also in line with Montessori's view, which emphasizes the importance of a structured learning environment that still allows children the freedom to explore. The play materials provided by teachers, such as letter cards, picture stories, and language games, give children the opportunity to learn independently according to their interests and learning pace (Wulandari et al., 2018). Thus, children not only follow teachers' instructions but also actively construct literacy knowledge through play activities.

Increased engagement and participation of children during learning indicate that a guided play approach can create a conducive and enjoyable learning atmosphere for children. Children appear more enthusiastic, focused, and willing to express their opinions. This condition supports the development of children's social-emotional aspects, such as self-confidence and communication skills, which are important for early literacy development. From the perspective of Emergent Literacy theory, the findings of this study confirm that literacy skills develop gradually from an early age through children's interaction with the language environment. Directed play activities provide rich language experiences, such as listening to stories, naming letters, and engaging in simple discussions, which support the development of phonological awareness, vocabulary, and children's expressive abilities. In this context, literacy is not understood as formal reading and writing skills but rather as the early process of introducing language and symbols (Islamiyah & Suparno, 2019). The improvement in children's ability to recognize letters and connect sounds with symbols indicates that a guided play approach is effective in stimulating children's reading readiness. Children are not

required to memorize but are encouraged to understand the function and meaning of language symbols through repeated and contextual play experiences. This reinforces the view that early literacy should develop through a natural and continuous process. In addition to cognitive and language aspects, the guided play approach also impacts children's learning motivation (Arsy et al., 2025). Children show a higher interest in literacy activities because learning is presented in the form of engaging games. Children's intrinsic motivation to learn develops when they feel comfortable, valued, and not pressured by academic demands, as observed during the study.

The findings of this study also indicate that a guided play approach is relevant to be applied in RA institutions with certain religious and cultural characteristics. Games associated with Islamic stories and the context of children's daily lives provide deeper meaning to the literacy learning process. Thus, learning not only develops language skills but also instills positive values and attitudes in children. Overall, this discussion emphasizes that the guided play approach has a strong theoretical foundation and has been proven effective in enhancing early literacy skills in children at RA An-Nisa in Ternate City. The integration of Piaget's, Vygotsky's, Montessori's, and Emergent Literacy theories into learning practices demonstrates that early literacy can be optimally developed through guided, contextual, and child-centered play activities. These findings contribute significantly to the development of literacy learning in early childhood education, particularly in RA units.

## V. Conclusion

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the implementation of a guided play approach in early literacy learning at RA An-Nisa, Ternate City can be carried out systematically and effectively. Teachers can design and conduct literacy learning through planned, contextual, and enjoyable play activities, making it appropriate for the developmental characteristics of early childhood. This approach makes literacy learning non-formal and academic, but it occurs naturally through meaningful play experiences. The implementation of a guided play approach has been proven to enhance children's early literacy skills, particularly in aspects such as recognizing letters, connecting sounds with symbols, enriching vocabulary, and expressing ideas and experiences verbally. Furthermore, this approach has a positive impact on increasing children's activeness, motivation, and confidence in participating in learning activities. Thus, the guided play approach is a relevant and effective learning strategy for improving early literacy skills in young children at RA institutions in Indonesia.

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