



Fostering Early Childhood Independence through Constructive Play: A Qualitative Study on Behavioral, Emotional, and Attentional Control

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Abstract

Independence is a fundamental developmental competency in early childhood because it enables children to regulate their behavior, emotions, and attention while engaging in learning activities and everyday tasks. Nevertheless, many kindergarten children continue to rely heavily on teachers when making decisions, solving problems, and completing assigned activities. Constructive play has been recognized as a play-based learning approach that encourages children to explore, make decisions, and solve problems independently. This study aimed to analyze children's independence as demonstrated during constructive play activities at Mekar Sari Jambé State Kindergarten by focusing on three dimensions of self-regulation: behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents, and documentation. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while source and technique triangulation were applied to ensure trustworthiness. The findings revealed that constructive play provided meaningful opportunities for children to independently plan activities, make decisions, regulate their emotions when encountering difficulties, and sustain attention until completing assigned tasks. Children demonstrated improved behavioral control by following classroom rules and taking responsibility for their work, emotional control by persisting despite failure, and attentional control by maintaining concentration throughout the learning process. These findings suggest that constructive play functions not only as a medium for cognitive development but also as an effective pedagogical strategy for fostering children's independence through the development of self-regulation. The study contributes empirical evidence supporting the integration of constructive play into early childhood classrooms to promote independent learning and school readiness.

Keywords: Early Childhood Independence; Constructive Play; Behavioral Control; Emotional Control; Attentional Control

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INTRODUCTION

مقدمة

Early childhood education (ECE) represents a critical stage in human development because it provides the foundation for children's cognitive, language, social, emotional, physical, and character development (Blair, 2016; Zelazo et al., 2016). Experiences gained during this developmental period substantially influence children's readiness for formal education and their capacity to adapt to increasingly complex social and academic environments (McClelland et al., 2017). Consequently, learning experiences in early childhood should not merely focus on academic achievement but also facilitate the development of life skills that enable children to become confident, responsible, and independent learners. Among these developmental competencies, children's independence has become one of the most essential outcomes of early

childhood education because it equips children with the ability to make decisions, solve problems, regulate their own behavior, and complete tasks without excessive dependence on adults (Denham et al., 2017; Robson et al., 2020).

Independence is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional developmental construct rather than simply the ability to perform daily routines without assistance. Contemporary developmental psychology considers independence to be closely associated with **self-regulation**, which refers to children's capacity to monitor and regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to achieve specific goals (Robson et al., 2020). Self-regulation enables children to remain engaged during learning activities, persist when facing difficulties, inhibit impulsive responses, and complete tasks independently (McClelland et al., 2017). Children who demonstrate stronger self-regulation generally exhibit greater responsibility, confidence, perseverance, and adaptability within classroom learning environments. Conversely, inadequate self-regulation often results in dependence on teachers, difficulty following classroom rules, poor emotional management, and limited capacity to sustain attention during learning activities (Perry et al., 2018). Therefore, developing self-regulation during early childhood is considered fundamental for fostering children's independence and preparing them for future educational success.

The development of self-regulation is closely linked to executive function, which comprises inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Diamond, 2016; Zelazo et al., 2016). These executive functions enable children to regulate their behavior, control emotional responses, maintain attention, and adapt their actions according to changing learning situations (Blair, 2016). Accordingly, children's independence can be understood through three interrelated dimensions of self-regulation: behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control. Behavioral control reflects children's ability to follow classroom rules, make responsible decisions, and complete activities independently. Emotional control refers to children's ability to recognize and regulate emotional responses when encountering challenges, frustration, or failure during learning activities (Denham et al., 2017; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2018). Meanwhile, attentional control reflects children's capacity to maintain concentration, resist distractions, and remain engaged throughout learning activities (Diamond, 2016; Blair, 2016; Robson et al., 2020). Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding children's independence within authentic classroom contexts.

Play-based learning has long been regarded as one of the most effective pedagogical approaches for promoting holistic development in early childhood because it encourages children to actively construct knowledge through meaningful experiences (Weisberg et al., 2016; Yogman et al., 2018). Unlike teacher-centered instruction, play-based learning creates opportunities for children to explore, experiment, communicate, collaborate, and solve problems while simultaneously developing cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. Among various forms of play, constructive play is particularly valuable because it requires children to plan, organize, manipulate materials, evaluate alternative solutions, and create meaningful products using construction blocks, LEGO bricks, recycled materials, or other manipulatives (Ramani & Zippert, 2017; Zosh et al., 2017). These learning experiences naturally encourage children to initiate actions independently, make decisions, overcome obstacles, and assume responsibility for their own work. Consequently, constructive play provides an authentic learning context in which self-regulation and independence can develop simultaneously.

Several previous studies have demonstrated the educational benefits of constructive play. Fistianti and Hakim (2013) investigated the effectiveness of constructive play in improving

creativity among elementary school students, while Afandi et al. (2023) reported a significant relationship between constructive play and young children's ability to recognize geometric shapes. Similarly, Irawan et al. (2020) found that Tangram-based constructive play significantly enhanced creative thinking skills, whereas Irfan (2024) and Widia (2021) concluded that constructive play effectively promoted creativity among young children. Collectively, these studies consistently indicate that constructive play contributes positively to children's creativity, cognitive development, problem-solving abilities, and learning engagement. Nevertheless, most previous studies have focused primarily on creativity or cognitive outcomes, whereas relatively little attention has been devoted to examining how constructive play supports children's independence through the development of self-regulation.

Although previous studies have acknowledged the importance of constructive play, several research gaps remain. First, existing studies predominantly examine creativity, cognitive achievement, geometric recognition, or problem-solving abilities rather than children's independence as a multidimensional developmental competency. Second, only limited research has simultaneously analyzed behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control as integrated dimensions of children's independence during constructive play (Diamond, 2016; Ursache et al., 2016; Robson et al., 2020). Third, empirical evidence concerning the implementation of constructive play for fostering children's independence in Indonesian early childhood education settings remains scarce. Consequently, a deeper qualitative investigation is required to explain how children's independent behaviors emerge naturally during constructive play activities within authentic classroom environments. Addressing these gaps is important for expanding theoretical understanding of self-regulation while providing practical implications for early childhood educators.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of children's independence from the perspective of self-regulation during constructive play. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasized creativity or cognitive development, this research simultaneously investigates behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control as interconnected dimensions of children's independence. Furthermore, the study provides qualitative evidence from an Indonesian public kindergarten through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation, thereby enriching the limited body of literature concerning constructive play within the Indonesian early childhood education context.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze children's independence through constructive play at Mekar Sari Jambe State Kindergarten by examining behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control as key dimensions of self-regulation (Diamond, 2016; Blair & Raver, 2018; Robson et al., 2020). Specifically, the study seeks to describe how constructive play is implemented in classroom learning and to explore how children's independent behaviors emerge throughout the constructive play process. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical development of constructive play and self-regulation while providing practical recommendations for early childhood educators in designing meaningful play-based learning experiences that effectively promote children's independence (Weisberg et al., 2016; Yogman et al., 2018).

METHOD

منهج

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of children's independence as demonstrated during constructive play activities in an authentic early childhood education setting. A qualitative approach was selected because the

objective of the study was not to measure the effectiveness of an intervention statistically, but rather to explore, describe, and interpret children's naturally occurring behaviors during classroom learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive qualitative design enabled the researcher to capture participants' experiences comprehensively without manipulating the learning environment or the research variables (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2018). Furthermore, this approach allowed the researcher to understand the meanings underlying children's independent behaviors from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and direct classroom observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2020).

The research was conducted at Mekar Sari Jambe State Kindergarten, Indonesia, because the institution routinely implements constructive play as part of its classroom learning activities. The participants consisted of children who actively participated in constructive play sessions, classroom teachers responsible for facilitating the activities, and several parents who were able to provide complementary information regarding children's independent behaviors outside the classroom. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, whereby informants were chosen according to their direct involvement in the learning activities and their ability to provide rich information relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2020). The inclusion of multiple participant groups enabled the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of children's independence from different perspectives.

Data were collected using observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Classroom observations were conducted during constructive play activities to examine how children demonstrated independence while planning, constructing, solving problems, interacting with peers, and completing their work (Flick, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with classroom teachers and parents to explore their perceptions regarding children's behavioral changes and independent learning habits both at school and at home (Tracy, 2020). Documentation, including photographs of learning activities, children's learning products, lesson plans, and school records, was used to complement and verify the observational and interview findings (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The researcher served as the primary research instrument, as commonly practiced in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enhance the consistency of classroom observations, an observation checklist was developed based on three dimensions of children's independence derived from self-regulation theory: behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control (Flick, 2018). Each dimension consisted of several observable indicators that guided the observation process.

For behavioral control, the indicators included children's ability to follow classroom rules, use learning materials appropriately, make independent decisions, complete assigned tasks without excessive teacher assistance, and organize play materials after finishing the activity. For emotional control, observations focused on children's ability to manage frustration when constructions collapsed, demonstrate persistence when encountering difficulties, express emotions appropriately, accept suggestions from teachers or peers, and continue participating despite failure. For attentional control, the indicators included maintaining concentration throughout constructive play, resisting distractions, remaining engaged until the activity was completed, and consistently directing attention toward the learning task. These indicators enabled systematic and consistent observation of children's independent behaviors during classroom activities while ensuring that all dimensions of self-regulation were adequately represented.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles et al. (2018), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, observational notes, interview transcripts, and documentation were organized, coded, and categorized according to the three dimensions of children's independence. Subsequently, the reduced data were displayed in narrative form supported by representative quotations from participants and classroom documentation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring themes, interpreting relationships among categories, and explaining how constructive play contributed to children's independence. The interactive nature of this analytical model enabled continuous movement between data collection and interpretation throughout the research process (Miles et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several strategies recommended in qualitative research. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from classroom teachers, parents, and direct classroom observations, while technique triangulation involved comparing findings from observations, interviews, and documentation (Carter et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, prolonged engagement during classroom observations and repeated examination of field notes were undertaken to improve the credibility of the interpretations (Flick, 2018). The researcher also maintained detailed documentation throughout the research process to strengthen the dependability and confirmability of the findings (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through these procedures, the study sought to ensure that the conclusions accurately reflected children's independent behaviors during constructive play activities.

RESULT | نتائج

Implementation of Constructive Play at Mekar Sari Jembe State Kindergarten



Figure 1. Teacher Assisting Children During Constructive Play Activities

The implementation of constructive play at Mekar Sari Jembe State Kindergarten was designed to provide children with opportunities to actively explore, make decisions, solve problems, and express creativity through meaningful learning experiences. Various learning materials, including construction blocks, LEGO bricks, recycled materials, and other manipulatives, were prepared to encourage children to create different structures according to their own ideas and imagination.

Each learning session began with the teacher introducing the objectives of the activity, explaining classroom rules, and demonstrating the proper use of the materials. Rather than directing every step of the activity, the teacher assumed the role of a facilitator by providing guidance only when children encountered significant difficulties. This instructional approach

encouraged children to initiate their own ideas, select construction materials independently, and complete their projects according to their individual plans.

Classroom observations indicated that children participated enthusiastically throughout the learning process. Most children demonstrated confidence in selecting materials, discussing ideas with peers, modifying their constructions when necessary, and completing their projects without continuous teacher assistance. Interview data also revealed that teachers observed noticeable improvements in children's confidence and willingness to solve problems independently after constructive play had been implemented regularly.

One classroom teacher stated:

"When playing with blocks or LEGO, the children are freer to decide what they want to create. They learn to make their own choices and try to complete their work without always relying on the teacher." (T1)

Another teacher explained:

"The children become more active and more confident during constructive play because they feel they have the freedom to create." (T1)

These findings demonstrate that constructive play creates a child-centered learning environment that encourages exploration, autonomy, and active participation. Rather than simply producing physical constructions, children experience meaningful opportunities to develop decision-making skills and independent learning behaviors.

Children's Independence from the Perspective of Behavioral Control

The observation results showed that constructive play significantly encouraged children's behavioral control. Most children were able to follow classroom rules, use learning materials appropriately, organize equipment after completing activities, and take responsibility for their own work. Children also demonstrated the ability to make independent decisions when selecting construction materials and determining the designs they intended to build. When encountering difficulties, many children attempted alternative strategies before asking the teacher for assistance. Such behaviors indicate the emergence of independent problem-solving abilities and responsible decision-making.

Teacher interviews confirmed these observations.

"Now the children usually try to solve problems by themselves before asking the teacher for help." (T1)

Parents also reported similar behavioral changes at home. Several children had become more willing to organize their toys independently, complete simple household responsibilities, and make decisions without waiting for parental instructions.

These findings indicate that constructive play facilitates the development of behavioral regulation by providing repeated opportunities for children to practice making decisions, following rules, and assuming responsibility for their own actions. From a theoretical perspective, these findings support Piaget's cognitive development theory, which emphasizes that children construct knowledge through direct interaction with their environment. During constructive play, children actively organize experiences, modify existing knowledge, and develop independent thinking through exploration.

Furthermore, the findings align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which proposes that children's development occurs through meaningful social interaction and appropriate

scaffolding. In this study, teachers provided guidance only when necessary, allowing children to complete tasks independently while still receiving support within their Zone of Proximal Development.

The present findings are also consistent with those of Blair and Raver (2018), who argued that behavioral self-regulation serves as a fundamental predictor of children's academic achievement and classroom adjustment.

Children's Independence from the Perspective of Emotional Control

Constructive play also contributed substantially to children's emotional control. During classroom observations, several children experienced frustration when their constructions collapsed or failed to meet their expectations. Nevertheless, instead of abandoning the activity, most children rebuilt their constructions, experimented with different solutions, or sought assistance from peers in constructive ways.

Teachers consistently encouraged children by appreciating every effort rather than focusing solely on successful outcomes. Such positive reinforcement appeared to strengthen children's confidence and willingness to continue learning despite experiencing failure.

One teacher explained:

"When their buildings collapse, the children now prefer to try again instead of giving up immediately." (T1)

Parents likewise reported that children had become more patient, persistent, and emotionally resilient while completing activities at home. These findings suggest that constructive play provides authentic opportunities for children to experience emotional challenges within a safe learning environment. Consequently, children gradually develop emotional regulation, persistence, and resilience, which are essential components of self-regulation.

This finding supports Denham et al. (2017), who emphasized that emotional regulation enables children to cope with frustration and maintain positive engagement during learning. Similarly, Diamond (2016) argued that executive functions—including emotional regulation—are strengthened through activities requiring planning, persistence, and flexible problem solving. Constructive play naturally incorporates these elements, thereby promoting children's emotional independence.

Children's Independence from the Perspective of Attentional Control

Observation findings further demonstrated that constructive play enhanced children's attentional control. Most children maintained concentration throughout the activity while selecting materials, constructing models, evaluating their progress, and completing their projects. Even when various classroom activities occurred simultaneously, children generally remained focused on their own work.

Teachers observed that children sustained attention considerably longer during constructive play than during conventional classroom activities.

One teacher commented:

"The children are more focused during constructive play because they feel challenged to complete the structures they are building." (T1)

Parents also reported improvements in children's ability to concentrate while completing puzzles, assembling LEGO sets, and performing other activities requiring sustained attention at

home. These observations indicate that constructive play promotes attentional regulation by providing intrinsically motivating learning experiences. Because children freely determine their own goals and products, they become more deeply engaged in the learning process.

These findings are consistent with Diamond (2016), who proposed that executive function develops most effectively through meaningful activities requiring planning, sustained attention, and cognitive flexibility. Likewise, Robson et al. (2020) suggested that attentional control constitutes a critical component of children's independence because it enables children to remain engaged and complete learning tasks successfully.

Overall, the findings indicate that constructive play contributes not only to children's creativity and cognitive development but also to the integrated development of behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control. These three dimensions collectively strengthen children's self-regulation, which serves as the foundation of independence in early childhood education.



Figure 2. Interview with Parents of the Participants

DISCUSSION

مناقشة

The findings of this study demonstrate that constructive play contributes positively to the development of children's independence through the enhancement of behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control. These three dimensions represent fundamental components of self-regulation that enable children to become more responsible, confident, and autonomous in learning activities. The integration of observational data, teacher interviews, and parent interviews indicates that constructive play provides meaningful opportunities for children to initiate actions, make decisions, solve problems, regulate emotions, and maintain attention while completing learning tasks. These findings suggest that constructive play functions not only as a recreational activity but also as an effective pedagogical strategy for promoting children's independence in early childhood education.

From the perspective of cognitive development, the present findings are consistent with Piaget's theory, which emphasizes that children actively construct knowledge through direct interaction with their environment. Throughout constructive play activities, children were encouraged to manipulate objects, experiment with different construction strategies, evaluate the outcomes of their actions, and modify their ideas based on previous experiences. Such learning experiences promote active knowledge construction while simultaneously encouraging independent thinking and decision-making. Rather than receiving direct instructions from teachers, children developed solutions through exploration and discovery, reflecting the constructivist principles proposed by Piaget.

The findings also support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which argues that children's learning occurs most effectively through social interaction and appropriate instructional support. During constructive play, teachers acted primarily as facilitators who provided scaffolding only when children encountered difficulties that exceeded their current abilities. This instructional strategy allowed children to complete most tasks independently while still receiving guidance when necessary. Consequently, constructive play created learning opportunities within children's Zone of Proximal Development, enabling gradual improvement in independent learning behaviors through guided participation.

The improvement observed in children's behavioral control further supports previous studies concerning self-regulation in early childhood. Children became increasingly capable of following classroom rules, selecting learning materials appropriately, organizing their work independently, and completing assigned tasks without continuous teacher assistance. These findings are consistent with Blair and Raver (2018), who emphasized that behavioral regulation constitutes one of the strongest predictors of children's academic adjustment and classroom readiness. Similarly, McClelland et al. (2017) argued that children who successfully regulate their behavior demonstrate greater responsibility and persistence during learning activities. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that constructive play provides authentic opportunities for children to repeatedly practice behavioral regulation in meaningful classroom contexts.

Constructive play also appeared to facilitate the development of emotional regulation. During observations, children frequently encountered situations in which their constructions collapsed or failed to match their expectations. Instead of abandoning the activity, most children attempted alternative strategies, rebuilt their constructions, or sought assistance appropriately. These behaviors illustrate the emergence of resilience and emotional regulation during learning activities. According to Denham et al. (2017), emotional regulation enables children to cope effectively with frustration while maintaining positive engagement in learning. Likewise, Trentacosta and Shaw (2018) emphasized that children who successfully regulate emotional responses demonstrate stronger social competence and greater independence. The present findings therefore suggest that constructive play provides emotionally meaningful experiences that strengthen children's capacity to manage failure and persist when facing challenges.

Another important finding concerns the development of attentional control. Children maintained concentration throughout constructive play activities despite the presence of various distractions within the classroom. The intrinsically motivating nature of constructive play appeared to encourage children to remain engaged until completing their projects. These findings correspond with Diamond (2016), who explained that executive function develops through activities requiring planning, sustained attention, and cognitive flexibility. Similarly, Robson et al. (2020) argued that attentional control plays a critical role in children's independence because it enables them to remain focused while accomplishing learning tasks. By allowing children to determine their own learning goals and construction designs, constructive play naturally promotes sustained engagement and independent learning.

Compared with previous studies, this research offers several important contributions. Earlier investigations largely emphasized the effects of constructive play on creativity, cognitive development, geometric recognition, or creative thinking. In contrast, the present study specifically examines children's independence from the perspective of self-regulation by integrating behavioral control, emotional control, and attentional control into a single analytical framework. This comprehensive perspective provides deeper insight into how constructive play

supports not only cognitive development but also broader aspects of children's social-emotional development and independent learning. Consequently, the findings contribute to expanding the theoretical understanding of constructive play within early childhood education while enriching empirical evidence from the Indonesian educational context.

The practical implications of this study suggest that early childhood educators should integrate constructive play systematically into daily classroom instruction. Teachers should provide diverse construction materials, encourage children to explore ideas independently, and adopt the role of facilitators rather than direct instructors. Providing opportunities for children to make decisions, solve problems, collaborate with peers, and reflect on their learning experiences may further strengthen self-regulation and independence. Such child-centered learning environments are expected to promote holistic development and better prepare children for future academic and social challenges.

Although the findings provide valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. This study was conducted within a single kindergarten using a qualitative approach, thereby limiting the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. Future studies are recommended to involve a broader range of participants from different regions and educational institutions, employ longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of constructive play, and investigate additional developmental outcomes such as executive function, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and school readiness.

CONCLUSION

خاتمة

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that constructive play plays a positive role in fostering the independence of young children at Mekar Sari Jambe State Kindergarten. This development is reflected in children's ability to regulate their behavior, manage their emotions, and sustain their attention throughout the learning process. Through constructive play activities, children are provided with opportunities to make decisions, solve problems, complete tasks independently, and take responsibility for the outcomes of their work. These findings indicate that constructive play is an effective instructional strategy for promoting self-regulation and fostering children's independence from an early age.

This study has several limitations. It was conducted over a relatively short period and involved only one early childhood education institution, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more diverse participants, be conducted over a longer period, and investigate the effects of constructive play on other aspects of child development, such as creativity, executive functions, critical thinking skills, and social competence. Furthermore, early childhood educators are encouraged to integrate constructive play into classroom learning in a more systematic and sustainable manner as a strategy for fostering children's independence through active, enjoyable, and meaningful learning experiences.

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