

Understanding how play and teacher scaffolding shape emotional resilience among preschool learners in Namibia

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Abstract

This qualitative embedded case study examined how play-based approaches and teacher scaffolding supported emotional resilience among the preschool learners in four pre-primary classrooms of Origo primary school in Oanob circuit in the Hardap region. Guided by an integrated sociocultural and resilience framework, the study used classroom observations, learner resilience checklists, teacher interviews, and document analysis involving 129 preschool learners and four (4) teachers. Reflexive thematic analysis, supported by descriptive statistics, explored how play experiences contributed to children's coping, persistence, and emotional recovery. Findings showed that free indoor play, free outdoor play, and guided games created regular opportunities for children to experience and manage emotions such as joy, frustration, anger, and disappointment. Most learners demonstrated adaptive resilience through behaviours such as negotiating turns, seeking assistance, trying alternative approaches, and re-engaging after setbacks. Teacher scaffolding was central to this process, with teachers supporting resilience by naming emotions, validating children's experiences, mediating conflicts, and modelling coping strategies. Peer interactions also contributed to resilience, although teasing and exclusion occasionally increased emotional distress. However, large class sizes, limited play materials, restricted space, and time pressures constrained opportunities for deeper emotional support. The study recommends allocating sufficient time for daily play, training teachers on supporting children's emotions during play, encouraging positive and inclusive interactions among learners, and equipping classrooms with adequate play materials to strengthen preschool learners' emotional resilience.

Keywords: *play-based learning, emotional resilience, preschool learners, teacher scaffolding, peer support*

Introduction

Background and rationale

Researchers increasingly agree that social and emotional skills in the early years are central for children's mental health, school participation, and long-term wellbeing (Hosokawa et al., 2024). Extensive reviews show that preschool children who recognise emotions, regulate feelings, and build positive relationships usually display better classroom behaviour and higher academic engagement in the early grades (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2025). Systematic and meta-analytic studies report that high-quality early childhood social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes can improve emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour, and early learning outcomes when implemented with fidelity (Djamnezhad et al., 2021; Murano et al., 2020). In this literature, emotional resilience is described as young children's

capacity to cope with everyday stressors, recover from difficulties, and remain engaged in learning and relationships rather than withdrawing or giving up (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2020). Evidence from resilience-focused preschool programmes shows that when teachers explicitly support coping and problem-solving, children show higher levels of positive coping, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (Wu et al., 2020; Hosokawa et al., 2024). Play-based learning is widely recognised as a developmentally appropriate pedagogy in the early years because it integrates cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development in meaningful activities (Sitorus et al., 2025; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025). Recent empirical work shows that both guided and free play provide frequent chances for young children to practise turn-taking, negotiation, frustration

management, and shared decision-making with peers, which are core processes in social and emotional competence (Mondi et al., 2021; Arda Tuncdemir, 2025). Studies from Zambia and Indonesia indicate that play-based pedagogies can enhance social-emotional skills when teachers design activities with clear developmental goals and actively scaffold participation (Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025; Sitorus et al., 2025). At the classroom level, teachers are key actors who decide how often and in what ways play is used to support social and emotional growth (Blewitt et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2024). Qualitative and mixed-method studies show that teachers who view play as a serious context for learning are more likely to design activities that intentionally foster communication, empathy, and self-regulation, rather than treating play only as free time or reward after academic work (Acevedo, 2022; Arda Tuncdemir, 2025). However, many teachers feel pressure to prioritise early literacy and numeracy and struggle to describe how particular play activities support SEL and resilience, which can reduce the amount of planned play for wellbeing (Acevedo, 2022; Klemme, 2024).

Regional and Namibian context

In low and middle-income countries, including those in sub-Saharan Africa, early childhood development is now recognised as important for human capital formation, yet systems still face inequalities in access and quality (UNESCO, 2021; Banda et al., 2025). Reviews show that many early childhood centres in African countries operate with overcrowded classes, limited materials, and underqualified staff, which restrict opportunities for rich play and close attention to children's emotional needs (UNESCO, 2021; Banda et al., 2025). A scoping review on play-based pedagogies in African contexts found that play-based learning is feasible and promising for holistic development. However, implementation is often constrained by inadequate teacher training, rigid curricula, and scarce resources (Nampijja et al., 2024). Studies from Kenya and Tanzania report that teachers welcome learning through play but face barriers such as lack of materials, large groups and pressure from parents and school leaders to emphasise formal instruction (Otwate et al., 2025; Wilinski et al., 2025). In Namibia, policy and curriculum documents for pre-primary education highlight holistic development and

recommend child-centred, play-based approaches (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2015). Recent budget and policy briefs, however, show that pre-primary education still receives a relatively small share of the education budget and that expansion must be matched with attention to quality, especially for children from low-income communities (UNICEF, 2024). Empirical work from the Zambezi Region indicates that public pre-primary teachers frequently work with high pupil-teacher ratios, limited classroom space, and shortages of age-appropriate play materials, which make it challenging to consistently implement learner-centred play-based curricula (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023). A recent case study further suggests that some Namibian pre-primary grades do not fully realise the intended teaching and learning activities because teachers struggle to balance curriculum expectations with contextual limitations (Nzwala & Mukwambo, 2024). Despite these contributions, little research has examined how play-based approaches are explicitly used to support emotional resilience in ordinary Namibian government schools that serve socio-economically diverse communities.

Context and setting of Origo primary school

In Namibia, pre-primary education is usually attached to government primary schools as Grade 0 and serves children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, including many who grow up in low-income urban and peri-urban settlements (Gobena, 2024; Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023). National reports show that such schools often experience overcrowded classes, limited learning materials, and high repetition in the early grades, which place pressure on teachers and learners in the foundation phase (UNICEF, 2024; Banda et al., 2025). Studies from the Zambezi Region document that many pre-primary classrooms operate above recommended pupil-teacher ratios and with shortages of play equipment, which affects how teachers organise play and interaction time (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; Nzwala & Mukwambo, 2024). Origo primary school is a government school within this system and is treated in this study as a semi-urban public school that implements national curriculum expectations under constrained space, resources, and time (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Research on similar schools shows that children often arrive with

diverse language backgrounds, varied early learning experiences and exposure to household stress, which may influence emotional vulnerability and coping strategies (Gobena, 2024; Banda et al., 2025). In such circumstances, everyday classroom practices, including how teachers organise and guide play, become especially important for supporting young children's social and emotional adjustment to school (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025).

Namibia has adopted an integrated early childhood development approach that brings together learning, health and protection, and this is reflected in strategies for pre-primary education (UNICEF, 2024). The new Pre-Primary Information Guide states that pre-primary education aims to support holistic development across the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive domains, and that children are expected to learn through play, exploration, and active participation (NIED, 2023). The guide describes play, indoor and outdoor learning corners, and the teacher's role in facilitating play, yet national budget briefs note that pre-primary spending remains a small share of the education budget, raising concerns about the resources available to implement these ideals consistently (UNICEF, 2024).

Aim and research questions

This study aimed at examining how play-based approaches were used to support emotional resilience among preschool learners in the pre-primary classrooms at Origo primary school. Specifically, the study explored the types of play provided, the ways learners demonstrated coping, persistence, and recovery during play, and the strategies teachers used to support children's emotional development. To address this question, the study asked three sub-questions:

1. What types of play-based approaches do pre-primary teachers at Origo primary school use with preschool learners during the school day?
2. In what ways do preschool learners at Origo primary school show emotional resilience, such as coping, persistence, and recovery after difficulties, during these play activities?
3. How do teachers at Origo primary school describe their intentions, beliefs, and strategies when they use play to support children's emotional development?

Significance and contribution of the study

This study contributes to international research on early childhood social-emotional learning, resilience, and play-based pedagogy by providing a detailed classroom case from sub-Saharan Africa that focuses specifically on emotional resilience rather than broader social-emotional skills (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Nampijja et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2020; Banda et al., 2025). In terms of its contribution to Namibia, it provides practice-based evidence on how pre-primary teachers interpret and implement play-based curriculum principles under resource and classroom constraints, and how these practices relate to children's observable emotional responses. The findings may inform professional development, classroom support, and resource allocation for play-based learning (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Conceptually, the study presents a framework linking types of play, teacher scaffolding strategies, and children's observable indicators of emotional resilience. This framework supports efforts to integrate social-emotional learning with play-based pedagogy in preschool settings, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Parker et al., 2022; Arda Tuncdemir, 2025; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025; Nampijja et al., 2024).

Literature review

Emotional resilience and social-emotional learning in early childhood

Social-emotional learning in early childhood is usually defined as the process through which young children learn to understand emotions, build relationships, and manage behaviour in socially appropriate ways (Hosokawa et al., 2024). SEL programmes in the early years are linked to better emotional regulation, social skills, and school readiness, which provide foundations for later learning and wellbeing (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Martinez, 2024). Emotional resilience is described as children's capacity to cope with adversity, recover after setbacks, and remain engaged in learning and relationships rather than withdrawing (van Pham, 2024). Studies of preschool SEL interventions show that when teachers explicitly support coping and problem solving, children display more adaptive coping, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (Wu et al., 2020; Hosokawa et al., 2024). Resilience researchers emphasise that resilience is not a fixed trait within the child, but a dynamic process that emerges from interactions

between individual skills, relationships, and environmental conditions (Hooper et al., 2025). Educational resilience frameworks highlight supportive classroom relationships, predictable routines, and opportunities to face manageable challenges as key protective factors for young children (Hooper et al., 2025; Masten, 2021). Reviews of SEL with preschool-aged children indicate that many gains arise from everyday classroom practices, such as how teachers talk about feelings, structure peer interaction, and respond to conflict, rather than only from standalone lessons (Social Emotional Learning and Skills Development Review Team, 2024). This suggests that ordinary classroom activities, especially play, can be powerful contexts for building emotional resilience when teachers act intentionally.

Play-based learning as a context for social-emotional development and resilience

Play-based learning is widely regarded as developmentally appropriate because it aligns with children's natural ways of exploring the world and integrates cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development in meaningful activities (Sitorus et al., 2025; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025). Empirical work in Indonesia and Zambia shows that play-based pedagogies can enhance holistic development when teachers plan activities with clear goals and scaffold participation, including cooperation and communication (Sitorus et al., 2025; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025). A systematic review of SEL and play with preschool children concludes that pretend play, construction play, and cooperative games offer opportunities to practise role-taking, self-control, and conflict resolution, which are central to social-emotional competence (Social Emotional Learning and Skills Development Review Team, 2024). Several studies link play more directly to emotional resilience.

Mahmood reports that playful activities that include moderate challenge can strengthen resilience, social competence, and self-confidence by giving children safe spaces to experience frustration, make choices, and recover after mistakes (Mahmood, 2025). Game-based and physical play interventions have been associated with improvements in emotion regulation and peer interaction, suggesting that carefully structured play can help children manage anger and disappointment (Xie, 2025; Mauro, 2024).

Work in Chinese kindergartens shows that culturally adapted play activities can help children understand specific emotions, such as anger, and practise appropriate responses, which are closely related to coping and self-regulation (Liu & Demetriou, 2025). Global SEL frameworks also describe play activities such as role play, stories, and group games as key opportunities for children to rehearse waiting, losing, sharing, and trying again, all of which contribute to resilience over time (UNESCO, 2021).

Teachers' beliefs, practices, and constraints around play-based pedagogy

Teachers' beliefs about play shape how often and how purposefully they use it for learning, with those who see play as central more likely to plan targeted activities, observe children closely, and link games to specific academic or SEL goals (Klemme, 2024; Arda Tuncdemir, 2025). Professional learning studies stress that sustained support, shared reflection, and modelling of playful approaches are needed to build teachers' confidence in integrating play and SEL (Hooper et al., 2025; Liu & Demetriou, 2025).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, research finds strong rhetorical support for play based pedagogy but persistent barriers, including large classes, limited materials, pressure for formal preparation, and shortages of time and training, which constrain child centred and playful methods despite their documented benefits for engagement and skills (KIX SSA Play Review Team, 2023; Ehiriogu et al., 2025; Otware et al., 2025; Wilinski et al., 2025). Namibian studies report similar tensions, with high pupil teacher ratios, cramped spaces, limited equipment, time pressure, and mixed expectations from parents and school leaders making it difficult to realise policy visions of holistic, play based pre-primary education, a challenge compounded by the relatively small share of the national education budget allocated to this phase (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; Nzwala & Mukwambo, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

Identified gaps and justification for the present study

The international literature shows that play-based learning can support SEL and resilience, but most detailed classroom studies come from well-resourced settings in high-income countries (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Social

Emotional Learning and Skills Development Review Team, 2024). African research on learning through play is growing. However, it usually addresses access, quality, curriculum implementation, or broad skill development rather than emotional resilience as a distinct outcome. It highlights wide variation in teacher preparation, classroom conditions, and curriculum approaches while calling for country-specific cases that trace how play-based SEL is enacted locally (Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025; Ehiriogu et al., 2025; Otwate et al., 2025; Nampijja et al., 2024; Mokhele et al., 2025).

In Namibia, existing work documents structural and curricular challenges in pre-primary classes but does not closely analyse how play supports emotional coping, persistence, and recovery or how teachers scaffold children's emotions in everyday practice (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; Nzwala & Mukwambo, 2024). This study responds by presenting a detailed case of four pre-primary classrooms at Origo primary school, examining routine play episodes, teacher strategies, and children's observable resilience behaviours in relation to the resource conditions of a semi urban government school, and providing practice-oriented insights to inform teacher development and policy aimed at strengthening emotional resilience through play in pre-primary education.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by a combined theoretical framework that integrated sociocultural perspectives on learning with process-oriented models of resilience in early childhood education (Fleer, 2023; Hooper et al., 2025). Sociocultural theory views development as occurring through participation in shared, culturally organised activities in which adults and peers' mediate children's engagement using language, tools, and routines (Fleer, 2023; Rogoff, 2016). In this view, learning takes place in the zone of proximal development when teachers and more competent peers provide support that helps children perform tasks and manage emotions they could not handle on their own (Fleer, 2023; Klemme, 2024). Research applying sociocultural theory to early childhood classrooms shows that guided play offers a rich context in which teachers model emotional language, negotiate rules, and scaffold

children's participation, thereby promoting social understanding and self-regulation (Klemme, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). Studies of play-based pedagogy further indicate that teacher involvement in play, such as joining games, posing questions, and structuring roles, is linked to deeper engagement and stronger social-emotional outcomes than unstructured free play alone (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025; Mondini et al., 2021).

Resilience research conceptualises resilience as a dynamic process that reflects positive adaptation in the context of adversity rather than a fixed trait within the child (Masten, 2021; Hooper et al., 2025). Early childhood resilience models highlight the importance of warm, responsive relationships with adults, predictable routines, and opportunities to experience manageable challenges as key protective factors in school settings (Hooper et al., 2025; Van Pham, 2024). Evidence from school-based social-emotional learning interventions shows that when teachers help children name feelings, rehearse coping strategies, and receive support from peers, children are more likely to recover from setbacks and remain engaged in learning tasks (Wu et al., 2020; Social Emotional Learning and Skills Development Review Team, 2024). Reviews of resilience-oriented programmes in the early years also stress that everyday classroom activities, rather than only formal lessons, are central contexts in which children practise coping, problem solving and help seeking (Van Pham, 2024; Djamnezhad et al., 2021). Integrating these two perspectives positions play as a key activity setting where sociocultural mediation and resilience processes intersect in early childhood classrooms (Mahmood, 2025; Liu & Demetriou, 2025).

During play, children encounter emotional challenges such as losing, waiting, sharing, and rebuilding, while teachers and peers provide support that can transform these experiences into opportunities to practise regulation and persistence (Mahmood, 2025; Xie, 2025). Studies of learning through play show that when teachers deliberately scaffold emotional moments by naming feelings, modelling calming strategies, and guiding negotiation, children gradually internalise coping strategies and show greater resilience in subsequent activities (Liu & Demetriou, 2025; Social Emotional Learning and Skills Development Review Team, 2024). Work from low-resource

early childhood settings further suggests that the quality of these interactions is powerfully shaped by contextual factors such as class size, space, and availability of materials, which influence how far teachers can attend to emotional dynamics during play (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; Nampijja et al., 2024). Within this integrated framework, the present study interpreted play-based approaches at Origo primary school as sociocultural settings in which teacher scaffolding, peer interactions, and classroom conditions together supported or

constrained preschool learners' emotional resilience (Fleer, 2023; Hooper et al., 2025). The analysis, therefore, focused on the kinds of play activities offered, the strategies teachers used to mediate emotions and conflicts, and the observable ways in which children coped with setbacks, sought support and re-engaged in play, treating these patterns as expressions of resilience emerging through everyday social interaction in a specific Namibian school context (Masten, 2021; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025).

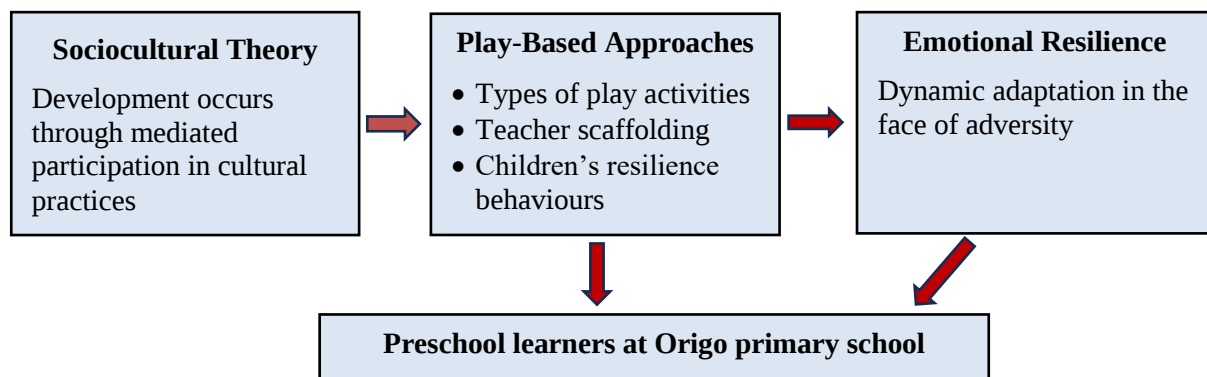


Figure 1: Conceptual framework (Source: authors)

The conceptual framework views play-based activities in the four pre-primary classrooms as the primary setting in which teachers and peers mediate children's learning and emotions, in line with sociocultural theory, which holds that development occurs through guided participation in shared activities (Fleer, 2023; Klemme, 2024). Play is organised into three linked elements: the types of play offered, teacher scaffolding during play, and children's observable resilience behaviours, such as coping, help-seeking, and re-engagement (Mahmood, 2025; Liu & Demetriou, 2025). Emotional resilience is understood as positive adaptation when children face frustration or conflict during play and manage to calm down, solve the problem or return to the activity, supported by teacher guidance and peer responses (Masten, 2021; Hooper et al., 2025).

Research methodology

Research paradigm, research design, and research approach

The study was situated within an interpretivist qualitative paradigm because interpretivist inquiry seeks to understand how participants construct meaning within their natural social environments, which is appropriate for examining emotional processes during everyday play (Ayton, 2023; Lim, 2025).

Interpretivist approaches emphasise subjective experience and context-specific interpretation, making them suitable for early childhood research where emotions, interactions, and routines are shaped by classroom dynamics (Junjie, 2022; Matta, 2022). A qualitative embedded case study design was used, treating Origo primary school as a single bounded case with four pre-primary classrooms as embedded units, consistent with guidance that embedded case designs allow close analysis of multiple, interconnected contexts within one institution (Greenhalgh, 2025; Bunkar et al., 2024). Case study designs are widely recommended for classroom-based early childhood research because they enable detailed, multi-layered descriptions of complex practices as they unfold naturally (Busetto et al., 2020; Elliott & Timulak, 2021). The overall approach was descriptive-interpretive, which is well-suited to studies aiming to document lived practice rather than to generate quantified causal claims (Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Wiesner, 2022).

Site and participants

The study took place at Origo primary school, a semi urban public school implementing Namibia's national play-based pre-primary curriculum. Purposeful sampling was used to include the four pre-primary classrooms

because purposeful sampling prioritises settings that are information rich and typical of the phenomenon under study (Junjie, 2022; Greenhalgh, 2025). The participants were the four pre-primary teachers and the 129 preschool learners distributed across Classes A to D, consistent with methodological recommendations that classroom-based early childhood studies involve the key adults who shape learning environments and the intact groups of children experiencing those environments (Ayton, 2023; Köhler, 2024). Young children were not individually interviewed because observation is considered an ethically appropriate method for assessing children's emotional experiences without placing undue verbal demands on them (Fielding, 2025; Kelly, 2025).

Data generation

Data came from classroom observations, semi-structured teacher interviews, and school documents, a combination recommended for strengthening credibility and contextual depth in qualitative case studies (Greenhalgh, 2025; Ahmed, 2024). Observations were conducted twice weekly across one semester, producing 60 play episodes, with extended engagement helping capture typical routines rather than isolated events (Visser, 2025; Köhler, 2024). Structured field notes documented play organisation, teacher actions, and children's emotional expressions, and short vignettes were written immediately after emotionally significant moments to preserve sequence and meaning (Ahmed, 2025; Busetto et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023; SEL Skills Development Review Team, 2024).

Semi-structured interviews with each teacher followed the observation phase, a method that offers consistent prompts while allowing in-depth exploration of teachers' reasoning (Naz, 2022; Ruslin, 2022). The interview guide was pilot-tested with one pre-primary teacher from a neighbouring government primary school who was not included in the main study. The pilot assessed the clarity, relevance, sequencing, and estimated duration of the questions. Feedback from the pilot teacher informed minor revisions to the wording and order of the questions before the four study interviews were conducted. Documentary data, such as timetables, lesson plans, and national guidelines, were collected to contextualise observed practice, in line with

recommendations for a holistic case study design (Greenhalgh, 2025).

Data analysis

Interview transcripts, observation notes, vignettes, and documents were compiled into a single dataset in line with qualitative data preparation guidelines (Lim, 2025; Busetto et al., 2020). Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Ahmed, 2025). The dataset was read repeatedly to build familiarity with patterns in play, teacher actions, and learner emotions, consistent with recommendations for deep immersion at the outset of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Coding was then conducted using both inductive and conceptually informed codes that captured types of play, teacher scaffolding strategies, learner coping responses, and contextual conditions, aligning with guidance that reflexive thematic analysis can combine data-driven and theoretically guided approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023). Related codes were grouped into candidate themes that reflected recurring patterns across the four classrooms, and these themes were refined by assessing coherence within each theme and distinctiveness between them, following current good practice in thematic analysis (Byrne, 2022; Ahmed, 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2023). Analytic memos documented coding decisions and interpretive reflections to enhance transparency, and within case and cross-case comparisons highlighted both shared and classroom-specific patterns, as recommended in multilevel qualitative case methodologies (Köhler, 2024; Greenhalgh, 2025).

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, in line with qualitative research standards (Stahl & King, 2020; Ahmed, 2024). Credibility was supported through triangulation of observations, interviews, and documents, together with sustained engagement across the school term (Lim, 2025; Ahmed, 2024). Transferability was strengthened by providing a detailed description of the school and classroom contexts so readers could judge the relevance

to other settings (Kakar & Kakar, 2023; Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability and confirmability were ensured through an audit trail that documented coding decisions and theme development, enabling external assessment of analytic rigour (Ahmed, 2024; Lim, 2025). Ethical approval was obtained from the Teacher Education Department of Sunshine Private College, followed by permission from the Hardap Regional Director of Education, the Oanob Circuit Inspector, and the principal of Origo Primary School. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and parents or guardians, while learners provided age-appropriate assent in line with ethical guidance for research involving children (Askari et al., 2024; de la Vega et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024; Kelly, 2025). Confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms and secure storage procedures. Safeguarding protocols for reporting child protection concerns were agreed with the school before fieldwork, in line with ethical recommendations for research with young children (NSPCC, 2023; Askari et al., 2024).

Delimitation

This study was limited to four pre-primary classrooms in a single school and involved only four teachers over the course of one semester. As a result, the findings remain context-specific and cannot be generalised to all Namibian pre-primary settings. In addition, learners themselves were not interviewed, so

their emotional experiences were interpreted mainly through classroom observations, teacher interviews and class-level checklists. Future research would benefit from including a wider range of schools and regions, following learners over longer periods, and incorporating the perspectives of children and parents. It would also be useful to examine whether targeted teacher training leads to measurable improvements in resilience-focused play and in learner outcomes.

Findings

Play activities across the four pre-primary classrooms

Play was a consistent part of the daily routine in all four classrooms, although the balance between free and guided activities varied. Across the 60 observed episodes, free indoor play in learning corners and free outdoor play each accounted for 20 episodes, while guided small-group and guided whole-class games together accounted for another 20 episodes. Free indoor play typically involved blocks, puzzles, dramatic play, and drawing, while outdoor play included running games, ball activities, and sandpit exploration. Guided games included teacher-led board games, movement songs, and structured turn-taking tasks. Play was scheduled daily across the four classrooms. Overall, learners experienced diverse play contexts that naturally produced emotional encounters.

Table 1: Distribution of play activities across the 60 observed episodes

Type of play	Frequency (out of 60 episodes)
Free indoor play (corners)	20
Free outdoor play	20
Guided small-group games	10
Guided whole-class games	10

Table 1 shows that the distribution of play was balanced between free indoor play and free outdoor play, each representing one-third of all observed episodes. Guided play, both small-group and whole-class, made up the remaining third. This balance indicated that children had consistent opportunities to move between exploratory play, peer negotiation and more structured teacher-led activities. The proportion of guided play also showed that teachers integrated rule-based or instructional games throughout the daily timetable, although the total duration of each type varied between classes.

Emotional expressions during play

Across the term, emotional expressions were observed in all classrooms. Joy, shyness, and pride appeared most frequently, with 11, 11, and 10 episodes, respectively. Emotional challenges also occurred consistently: anger appeared in 8 episodes, frustration in 7, anxiety in 7, and sadness in 6 episodes. These patterns showed that play elicited both positive and negative emotions, creating regular opportunities for emotional learning. Teachers' notes explained that strong emotions were most common during competition-based

games, the sharing of limited materials, and construction activities.

Table 2: Frequency of emotional expressions across the 60 observed play episodes

Emotional expression	Frequency
Joy	11
Shyness	11
Pride	10
Anger	8
Frustration	7
Anxiety	7
Sadness	6

Table 2 demonstrates that positive emotions such as joy, pride, and shyness were common, appearing in 32 of the 60 episodes. However, negative emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and sadness also occurred regularly. This confirms that play in these classrooms was emotionally rich and naturally created small challenges that could act as resilience-building opportunities. The overall spread of emotions suggested a classroom climate where children were free to express their feelings but also required support to navigate intense moments of frustration or conflict.

Learners' coping and resilience behaviours

Across the 60 episodes, most children demonstrated adaptive coping strategies. Negotiated turn-taking was the most frequent coping response (16 episodes). Trying again or adjusting a strategy appeared in 12 episodes, and brief withdrawal followed by re-engagement occurred in another 12. Seeking help from a teacher or peer appeared in 15 episodes. Only 5 episodes showed complete withdrawal until the teacher intervened.

Table 3: Frequency of coping and withdrawal behaviours across the 60 observed play episodes

Coping behaviour	Frequency
Negotiated turn-taking	16
Tried again / used a new strategy	12
Took time away and later re-engaged	12
Sought help from the teacher	15
Complete withdrawal	5

Table 3 indicates that adaptive coping behaviours outweighed non-adaptive withdrawal responses. Negotiating turns and seeking help were the two most common strategies. Notably, only 5 episodes showed complete withdrawal, where the child disengaged until the teacher intervened. This pattern aligned with the qualitative descriptions in observation notes, which frequently recorded children returning to tasks with short verbal prompts or modelling from teachers or peers. The mixture of adaptive and less adaptive responses highlighted areas where teacher scaffolding made a difference, especially in helping withdrawn children re-enter play.

The resilience checklists completed after each observation session provided a complementary view at class level. On the four-point scale (1 = rarely observed to 4 = consistently observed), mean scores across all classes ranged from 2.42 to 3.17. The highest

rated indicator was “teacher supportive and validating”, with an average of 3.17 across sessions, followed by “*children's express feelings mostly appropriately*” and “*children use simple strategies to calm*”, both with means of 3.00. Ratings for “*children negotiate and solve conflicts*” and “*children seek help when upset or stuck*” fell between 2.75 and 2.83, while “*children can name and talk about feelings*” and “*peers are inclusive and supportive*” had lower means of 2.42. These scores suggested that, across the term, emotional resilience indicators were most often in the “sometimes” to “often” range, with teacher support somewhat stronger than children's explicit emotion language or peer inclusiveness. Observation summaries add qualitative detail to these numerical patterns. Early sessions in each class were described as having a “mixed emotional climate with high energy and sudden conflicts around popular toys”. In contrast, later sessions were often

characterised as “*calm and cooperative, with frequent positive peer support and more independent problem solving*”. Typical coping strategies moved over time from frequent reliance on teacher mediation towards children “*using short phrases to ask for a turn, inviting others into play and suggesting fair rules*”, especially in Classes A and B by the third session.

Teacher scaffolding for emotional resilience

Across the 60 episodes, teacher responses showed a strong pattern of emotional and motivational scaffolding during play. The most frequent response type, recorded in 19 episodes, involved naming the feeling, validating it and suggesting a simple strategy,

such as “*you feel sad because the tower fell, let us try again together*”. In 16 episodes, teachers reminded the class of agreed-upon rules and helped children agree on a fair solution, for example, by renegotiating turn-taking or clarifying game rules. Teacher 3 explained, “*Guided play teaches skills intentionally, like turn-taking, calming strategies, and conflict resolution. We need balance.*” Offering comfort, giving the child time, and gently inviting them back to play was noted in 15 episodes, while asking open questions to help children think of their own solutions appeared in 10 episodes. Teacher 4 explained, “*Guided play helps teach emotional skills directly, like naming feelings and calming techniques. I use both.*”

Table 4: Frequency of teacher emotional scaffolding responses across the 60 observed play episodes

Teacher response	Frequency
Named emotion + offered strategy	19
Mediated rule-based solution	16
Comforted the child and invited re-entry	15
Asked reflective questions	10

Table 4 shows that teachers frequently used emotional scaffolding techniques, particularly naming emotions, followed by a simple coping strategy. Rule-based mediation was the second most common, which fitted the high number of turn-taking conflicts during block play and board games. Asking reflective questions was the least frequent, which reflected teachers’ comments about time pressure and the need to keep the group moving. These scaffolding behaviours were central to transforming play episodes into resilience-building moments.

Teacher interviews illustrated how these strategies were understood. Teacher 1 described emotional resilience as follows: “*It means the child can recover after being upset. They can calm themselves, talk about feelings, and try again after failure*”. Teacher 2 emphasised the importance of encouraging persistence, explaining that “*when the child’s structure falls, I tell them it is fine to feel cross, but we can build again or ask a friend to help*”. Teacher 3 linked resilience to accepting loss in games, explaining that “*in board games they practise losing and still staying in the group*”. The resilience checklists echoed this pattern. Across all sessions, teacher behaviour was consistently rated between “*often*” and “*consistently*” supportive and emotionally

validating. Observation summaries highlighted recurring practices such as using simple breathing routines before energetic games, modelling phrases like “*I feel angry, I need a turn*” and mediating early conflicts in a way that gradually encouraged children to speak for themselves. These findings indicated that teacher scaffolding was a central mechanism through which play activities were converted into resilience-building experiences.

Peer involvement in emotional support

Peer responses provided additional relational support, though not uniformly. In 18 episodes, peers comforted a distressed child with a pat or a hug and invited them back into the game. In 12 episodes, they actively included the child by offering a turn or sharing materials, and in 9 episodes, peers repeated a simple rule about taking turns to resolve the situation. However, in 11 episodes, peers ignored the upset child and continued playing, and in 10 episodes, they teased the child before the teacher intervened. These patterns suggested that peer interactions sometimes reinforced resilience but, in a noticeable minority of cases, also added to the child’s distress, underlining the importance of teacher guidance in shaping peer norms.

Table 5: Frequency of supportive and unsupportive peer responses across the 60 observed play episodes

Peer response	Frequency
Comforted or calmed peer	18
Invited the learner back to play	12
Repeated rules (turn-taking reminders)	9
Ignored the upset child	11
Teased child	10

Table 5 shows that peer responses were mixed. Positive peer support was more common than negative responses, but teasing and ignoring occurred often enough to disrupt some play episodes. These findings further highlighted the need for deliberate teacher guidance in developing socially supportive peer norms. They also reinforced the role of peers as secondary resilience agents, though inconsistently.

Constraints and support needs

Findings from the observation summaries and teacher interviews showed that classroom- and school-level conditions significantly shaped the extent to which play could be used to support emotional resilience. Teachers 1, 2, 3, and 4 identified large classes or overcrowding and limited play materials as significant constraints, while Teacher 1 also highlighted limited classroom space. Teacher 4 explained, *“Sometimes children fight because they do not have enough items.”* Teacher 1 explained, *“When the room is crowded and noisy, it is difficult to hear the quieter children when they try to express their feelings or negotiate.”*

Time pressure was another recurring theme. Teachers 1, 2, 3, and 4 reported that pressure for early reading and writing, written work, academic outcomes, and reporting requirements reduced the time available for play. Observation summaries across the 60 observed play episodes documented that crowded indoor space, limited duplicate materials, and pressure to move to the next activity often curtailed opportunities for deeper emotional learning after conflicts. At the same time, teachers identified precise support needs and opportunities. All four teachers expressed positive attitudes toward play and saw it as central to pre-primary education. However, they requested more concrete materials, additional adult support during busy times, and targeted training on using play for emotional learning. Teacher 1 suggested that *“a clear message from school leadership that play is valued for emotions, not only for academics”*

would legitimise spending more time on resilience-oriented play. Teacher 4 requested *“training that shows exactly how to turn everyday games into lessons for coping and problem solving”*. These comments, combined with the observational data, indicated that Origo primary school already had many elements of a resilience-supporting play environment, but that strengthening resources, time, and professional support would allow teachers to use play more intentionally and consistently to build preschool learners’ emotional resilience.

Discussions

This study examined how play-based approaches at Origo primary school supported preschool learners’ emotional resilience. Daily free and guided play exposed children to recurring, manageable emotional challenges, giving them opportunities to practise coping strategies that aligned with evidence that play-based stressors, when supported, strengthened regulation and persistence (Mahmood, 2025; Xie, 2025; Mondt et al., 2021; Sitorus et al., 2025). Learners frequently used adaptive strategies such as negotiating turns, seeking help, and re engaging after brief pauses, with only a small group of children withdrawing entirely, which showed that most pre-schoolers could develop basic resilience skills when classroom routines allowed repeated practice, although some still needed targeted support (van Pham, 2024; Social Emotional Learning and Skills Development Review Team, 2024; Hooper et al., 2025; Parker et al., 2022). Teacher scaffolding was the main driver of this development, as teachers named emotions, validated feelings, and modelled simple coping strategies, consistent with emotional coaching and sociocultural accounts of learning as socially mediated participation in meaningful activity (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025; Blewitt et al., 2021; Fleeer, 2023; Xu et al., 2024; Rogoff, 2016; Klemme, 2024). Peer interactions also mattered, with comforting and sharing behaviours often supporting resilience, but

teasing and exclusion sometimes intensifying distress, echoing findings that peer culture could both buffer and amplify emotional challenges and therefore requires intentional adult guidance to nurture inclusive norms (Liu & Demetriou, 2025; Mahmood, 2025; Nampijja et al., 2024; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025). Structural constraints, including large classes, cramped spaces, limited materials, and academic time pressure, reduced opportunities for close observation and extended emotional conversations, in line with wider African and global evidence that overcrowding and performance demands restrict deep SEL work through play (Mubiana & Nkengbeza, 2023; Otware et al., 2025; Shaikh, 2024; Klemme, 2024).

Nevertheless, teachers showed strong commitment to play-based pedagogy. Clearly, they requested more resources, additional adult support, and specialised professional development, which aligned with international guidance that effective play-based SEL requires adequate resourcing and sustained training (Hooper et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2021). Overall, the findings indicated that even in a resource-constrained semi-urban school, play contributed meaningfully to emotional resilience through the combined effects of teacher scaffolding, emerging peer support, and repeated engagement with manageable emotional challenges, supporting the view of resilience as a dynamic process that develops through everyday social participation rather than through isolated interventions (Masten, 2021; Hooper et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The study examined how play-based approaches supported emotional resilience among preschool learners in four pre-primary classrooms at Origo primary school. Findings showed that free and guided play were woven into daily routines and elicited genuine emotions such as joy, frustration, conflict, persistence, and cooperation, giving children repeated opportunities to practise coping and to re-enter activities after difficulty. Many learners used adaptive strategies like negotiating turns, seeking help, trying alternative approaches, and taking short breaks, although a small group still depended heavily on adult support. Teacher scaffolding was central, as teachers named emotions, validated feelings, and helped children choose simple coping strategies, turning ordinary play

incidents into resilience-building moments, with emerging peer support sometimes reinforcing this process. At the same time, large classes, limited materials, cramped spaces, and academic pressure constrained how much attention teachers could give to emotional learning during play. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the use of play-based approaches for supporting emotional resilience among preschool learners in Namibian pre-primary classrooms. First, daily free and guided play needs to be protected as a regular part of the timetable, with school leaders making it clear that emotional learning is valued alongside early literacy and numeracy so that moments of frustration or conflict are not rushed past.

In addition, teachers would benefit from focused professional development that shows them how to use the strategies already working in these classrooms, such as naming feelings, validating them, modelling simple ways to cope, mediating turn-taking, and inviting children back into the activity. At the same time, peer support can be strengthened by deliberately teaching inclusive behaviours and quickly addressing teasing or exclusion. Furthermore, overcrowding, limited materials and cramped space continue to limit how much attention teachers can give to emotional moments, so more duplicate resources, occasional extra adult help during busy periods and better use of available space would make a noticeable difference. Overall, sustained training, modest additional resources and straightforward classroom tools for tracking children's coping would help turn the promising practices already observed into more consistent and intentional work.

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