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Pedagogical activities and teaching resources to promote holistic development in children in early years education

Actividades pedagógicas y recursos didácticos para favorecer el desarrollo integral en niños de Educación Inicial

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de investigación se basó en diseñar una propuesta sobre actividades pedagógicas y recursos didácticos para favorecer el desarrollo integral en niños de Educación Inicial en contexto ecuatoriano. Para ello, se empleó un diseño documental descriptivo con modalidad de proyecto factible, sistematizando dieciséis fuentes académicas sobre juego estructurado, actividad física, recursos musicales y narración oral en la primera infancia, organizadas en matrices comparativas según tipo de estudio, contexto y resultados. Los resultados evidencian que estas cuatro categorías promueven simultáneamente las dimensiones cognitivas, socioemocionales, motoras y comunicativas, siendo la mediación sensible del docente el factor transversal que potencia sus efectos. A partir de este diagnóstico se diseñó una propuesta de cuatro componentes: juego de simulación guiada, actividad física estructurada, recursos musicales y rítmicos con tradición ecuatoriana y narración interactiva, de bajo costo y alta viabilidad institucional, evaluable mediante indicadores de participación espontánea y percepción docente del progreso grupal.
Descriptores: psicología de la educación; psicología del niño; desarrollo del niño. (Tesauro UNESCO)

ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to design a proposal for educational activities and teaching resources to promote holistic development in children in early years education within the Ecuadorian context. To this end, a descriptive documentary design was employed in the form of a feasibility study, systematising sixteen academic sources on structured play, physical activity, musical resources and oral storytelling in early childhood, organised into comparative matrices according to study type, context and results. The results show that these four categories simultaneously promote cognitive, socio-emotional, motor and communicative development, with the teacher's sensitive guidance acting as the cross-cutting factor that enhances their effects. Based on this analysis, a four-component proposal was designed comprising guided simulation play, structured physical activity, musical and rhythmic resources drawn from Ecuadorian tradition, and interactive storytelling. This proposal is low-cost and highly feasible within an institutional setting, and can be evaluated using indicators of spontaneous participation and teachers' perceptions of the group's progress.
Descriptors: educational psychology; child psychology; child development. (UNESCO Thesaurus)

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Research Articles

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical activities and teaching resources are the two operational pillars through which the purpose of promoting children's holistic development in early years education is realised in everyday classroom practice; holistic development, understood as the simultaneous articulation of cognitive, socio-emotional, motor and communicative dimensions, does not occur spontaneously, but depends largely on the intentionality with which the teacher selects and organises these activities and resources. In this regard, Mohammed et al. (2026), through a scoping review, established that play-based learning is the pedagogical mechanism with the strongest empirical support for promoting holistic development in early childhood.

Within the pedagogical activities documented in the specialised literature, play now holds a central but not exclusive place; in this respect, Colliver and Veraksa (2019) showed that play, when structured as an intentional pedagogical tool (rather than merely as a free recreational activity), considerably improves children's learning processes. Skene et al. (2022), likewise through a systematic review with meta-analysis, showed that teacher guidance during play increases the positive effects of this activity on learning and development compared with entirely free, unmediated play.

Because holistic development includes the child's motor and physical dimension, it is necessary to examine the evidence related to physical activity and movement as pedagogical resources; in this respect, Jylänki et al. (2022) established that motor-skill and physical-activity interventions have positive effects on cognitive and academic skills in preschool-aged children; Zhang et al. (2022) documented that structured physical activity intervention simultaneously promotes working memory and motor competence in preschool-aged children.

There is also evidence, however, that sound- and rhythm-based teaching resources are vehicles for holistic development; on this point, Bentley et al. (2023) demonstrated in a randomised controlled trial that a music programme translates into significant effects on executive function, self-regulation and school readiness in preschool-aged children; Bugos and DeMarie (2017) similarly showed that even a short-term music programme can improve children's executive functions, making this type of resource particularly cost-effective in terms of the time needed to implement it.

Language and oral storytelling should also be considered as pedagogical resources for holistic development; likewise, Suggate et al. (2021) showed that interactive, elaborative storytelling increases children's vocabulary more than repeated reading or interventions focused solely on phonemic awareness; this supports the inclusion of oral storytelling as a core teaching resource in the early years classroom. Based on the above, the purpose of this article is to establish the relevance of pedagogical activities and teaching resources for holistic development in children in early years education from an Ecuadorian standpoint. To this end, the available scientific evidence on play, physical activity, musical and rhythmic resources, and oral storytelling as vehicles for holistic development is reviewed, the practices with the strongest empirical support are systematised, and a pedagogical proposal adapted to early years classrooms in the country is formulated.

In other words, this study does not seek to settle the theoretical debate on child development, but rather to provide an operational bridge between international evidence and the actual availability of time, space and resources in Ecuadorian school contexts; in this respect, the relevance of the study lies in the fact that the activities and resources chosen directly determine what holistic development opportunities are offered to the child (Veraksa et al., 2022), since different types of play have differentiated effects on the development of executive functions.

In line with the above, the research objective is formulated as designing a proposal on educational activities and teaching resources to promote holistic development in children in early years education within the Ecuadorian context.

METHOD

In accordance with the objective set out above, the present study is based on a descriptive documentary design supported by the feasibility-study modality; the descriptive documentary component allowed for the systematisation, description and comparison of the published scientific evidence on pedagogical activities and teaching resources for children's holistic development, while the feasibility-study component guided the construction of a proposal of teaching strategies adapted to the reality of early years classrooms in Ecuador.

For this purpose, academic sources indexed in databases related to early childhood education, developmental psychology and public health were reviewed (RCTs, systematic reviews, meta-analyses and intervention studies applied to early years and preschool education). Sixteen sources were selected that met the criteria of thematic relevance, declared methodological rigour and correspondence with the educational level under study.

As an analytical technique, the documentary analysis method was used, whereby the following elements were extracted from each source: type of study, geographical context served, population served, type of activity or resource described, and main results reported. This information was organised into comparative matrices in order to identify common patterns and recurring activities across the studies reviewed. Under these circumstances, the feasibility-study phase was developed in three steps: first, a needs assessment based on the documentary review; second, the design of a proposal of teaching strategies based on the systematised evidence; and third, the definition of criteria for pedagogical feasibility (curricular time and resources generally available in early years institutions in Ecuador).

RESULTS

Four broad categories of activities and resources were identified from the documentary analysis: those related to structured, guided play; those related to physical activity and movement; those related to musical and rhythmic resources; and those related to oral storytelling and language. Table 1 systematises the reviewed studies with the greatest empirical weight for the design of the proposal.

Table 1. *Documentary analysis of the studies reviewed.*

Author(s) and year	Type of study	Context	Main contribution
Bentley et al. (2023)	Randomised controlled trial	Australia	A music programme improves executive function, self-regulation and school readiness.
Jaggy et al. (2023)	Experimental study	Switzerland	Social pretend play strengthens preschoolers' social development.
Jylänki et al. (2022)	Systematic review	International	Motor-skill and physical-activity interventions improve cognitive and academic skills.
Mohammed et al. (2026)	Scoping review	International	Play-based learning is the mechanism with the strongest empirical support for holistic development.
Nat et al. (2026)	Intervention study	Netherlands	Pretend play improves children's social competence.
Skene et al. (2022)	Systematic review and meta-analysis	International	Teacher guidance during play increases its positive effects on learning.
Suggate et al. (2021)	Experimental study	Germany	Interactive, elaborative storytelling strengthens vocabulary more than repeated reading.
Veraksa et al. (2022)	Comparative study	Russia	Different types of play produce differentiated effects on executive functions.
Williams and Bentley (2026)	Randomised controlled trial	Australia	A rhythm and movement intervention improves social and behavioural development.
Zhang et al. (2022)	Intervention study	China	Structured physical activity promotes working memory and motor competence.

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

As Table 1 shows, the international evidence supports at least four types of pedagogical activities for children's holistic development: structured and pretend play (Jaggy et al., 2023; Nat et al., 2026), physical and motor activities (Jylänki

et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), musical and rhythmic resources (Bentley et al., 2023; Williams and Bentley, 2026) and oral storytelling (Suggate et al., 2021). With regard to play specifically, Veraksa et al. (2022) documented that not all types of play have the same effects on child development, since pretend play with explicit rules is more strongly favoured than unstructured motor play; in this respect, Colliver and Veraksa (2019) likewise noted that it is the way the teacher structures the play that makes it effective as a learning tool.

Skene et al. (2022) accordingly found that teacher guidance (active, sensitive teacher participation in the play activity) increases the effects of play on learning and development compared with entirely autonomous play, while Jaggy et al. (2023) showed that social pretend play specifically strengthens preschool children's social skills, when it takes place within structured interaction with their peers.

With regard to physical activity and movement, Jylänki et al. (2022) established that motor-skill interventions have positive effects on cognitive and academic skills; Chiu et al. (2026), through a quasi-experimental study in Taiwan, showed that an eight-week physical activity programme simultaneously improves the cognitive, emotional and motor development of preschool-aged children; Carson et al. (2019) showed that physical activity and sedentary behaviour are consistently related to social skills during early childhood.

For musical and rhythmic resources, Bugos and DeMarie (2017) showed that even a short music programme produces measurable improvements in children's executive functions, making the cost-benefit ratio for curricular incorporation favourable; in this respect, Williams and Bentley (2026) showed that rhythm and movement intervention also improves social and behavioural development in preschool-aged children, extending the reach of musical resources beyond the purely cognitive dimension. In this regard, oral storytelling, according to Suggate et al. (2021), was shown to strengthen vocabulary more than repeated reading

without interaction or interventions focused solely on phonemic awareness, when the storytelling is interactive and elaborative, with the teacher asking questions and enriching the story during reading.

With regard to the specific teaching strategies documented in the literature, Table 2 systematises the categories identified together with their corresponding empirical basis.

Table 2. *Analytical documentary categories.*

Category	Activity or resource	Basis
Guided pretend play	Social play scenarios with simple roles and rules, mediated by the teacher	Jaggy et al. (2023); Nat et al. (2026); Skene et al. (2022)
Structured physical activity	Motor circuits and movement games with explicit cognitive objectives	Jylänki et al. (2022); Zhang et al. (2022); Chiu et al. (2026)
Musical and rhythmic resources	Brief sessions of singing, body percussion and movement accompanied by music	Bentley et al. (2023); Bugos and DeMarie (2017); Williams and Bentley (2026)
Interactive Storytelling	Stories told with guiding questions and joint elaboration of the narrative	Suggate et al. (2021)
Structured socio-emotional learning	Explicit emotional-recognition and self-regulation routines integrated into play	Murano et al. (2020); Ștefan et al. (2022)

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

As Table 2 shows, the activities with the strongest empirical support combine explicit pedagogy with a playful or expressive component, which means that the dichotomy between free play and directed teaching is less effective than guided play, in which the teacher intervenes sensitively without taking initiative away from the child. The systematised results thus show that children's holistic development is promoted through the intentional combination of structured play with physical activity, musical resources and oral storytelling, rather than through the isolated implementation of any single component; the teacher's sensitive mediation is also a cross-cutting factor that enhances the effects of all the categories identified above.

PROPOSED TEACHING STRATEGIES

Accordingly, based on the documentary diagnosis presented above, a proposal of teaching strategies is set out below for promoting holistic development in early years classrooms in Ecuador, under a feasibility-study approach, structured around four interrelated components: guided pretend play; structured physical activity; musical and rhythmic resources; and interactive storytelling. In this context, the first component, guided pretend play, assumes that play with the teacher's sensitive mediation produces greater benefits than either free play or directed teaching alone. Brief social play scenarios are therefore proposed, such as a market, a kitchen or a doctor's office, in which children take on simple roles and the teacher intervenes at the right moment to enrich language, mediate conflicts and make the play more complex (Skene et al., 2022; Jaggy et al., 2023); this responds directly to what Skene et al. (2022) and Jaggy et al. (2023) documented, namely that teacher guidance during pretend play significantly strengthens learning and social skills.

The second component, in addition, is the systematic inclusion of structured physical activity in daily curricular planning. Short motor circuits (movement, balance and coordination) with explicit cognitive objectives (following a sequence, counting repetitions or classifying elements along the way) should have fixed time slots during the day (Jylänki et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), since Jylänki et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2022) showed that this type of activity simultaneously improves cognition, working memory and motor competence. Chiu et al. (2026) also showed that short-term programmes (8 weeks) produce measurable improvements in cognitive, emotional and motor development.

The third component, in turn, involves incorporating musical and rhythmic resources into the classroom's daily routine, that is, setting aside short sessions (no more than fifteen minutes) of singing, body percussion and movement to music, using songs and rhythms from Ecuadorian musical tradition as a culturally appropriate vehicle for this activity. Bentley et al. (2023) and Bugos and DeMarie

(2017) have shown that even short music programmes improve executive function and self-regulation in children, so this strategy is grounded in evidence (Bentley et al., 2023; Bugos and DeMarie, 2017) that even brief interventions are effective. Williams and Bentley (2026) also showed that rhythm and movement interventions extend these effects to social and behavioural development.

Continuing with what has been set out in the proposal, the fourth component is interactive storytelling as a core educational resource for strengthening language: setting a fixed time during the day for storytelling, in which the teacher asks guiding questions before, during and after the story and invites children to predict what will happen next, describe characters, and suggest alternative endings; on this point, the work of Suggate et al. (2021) showed that this type of storytelling strengthens vocabulary more than repeated reading without interaction.

It is important to note, however, that activities that could be integrated into daily life include: a rhythm circle (a short morning session of singing and body percussion to start the day); an explorers' circuit (a weekly motor route with cognitive challenges); and a shared story (a daily storytelling session in which children propose twists to the story). This type of activity draws on the contributions of Murano et al. (2020) and Ștefan et al. (2022), who structured socio-emotional learning routines that increase sustainability when consistently incorporated into the school day.

In order to clarify the feasibility of implementation, Table 3 organises the proposal into sequential phases, indicating activities, those responsible and the estimated timeframe.

Table 3. *Sequential phases of the proposal.*

Phase	Main activity	Responsible party	Estimated duration
Diagnosis	Identification of the activities and resources currently available in the classroom	Classroom teacher	2 weeks
Awareness-raising	Initial teacher workshop on guided play and sensitive mediation	Pedagogical coordination	1 week
Implementation	Development of the proposal's four components within the classroom's daily routine	Classroom teacher	1 academic term
Cultural incorporation	Selection of songs, rhythms and stories from Ecuadorian tradition	Classroom teacher	First 4 weeks
Monitoring and adjustment	Qualitative evaluation of the group's holistic development and adjustment of strategies	Pedagogical coordination	At the close of each two-month period

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

The proposal described above does not require substantial financial resources or specialised infrastructure, since the proposed activities are mainly sustained by protected curricular time and the teacher's pedagogical intention (which facilitates its feasibility in early years institutions with limited resources, a common situation in many Ecuadorian contexts). The evaluation of the proposal should therefore include both quantitative and qualitative indicators (frequency of children's spontaneous participation in the proposed activities; variety of roles and vocabulary used during pretend play; and teachers' perceptions of progress observed in the group), so that the strategies can be progressively adjusted, a flexible principle of the feasibility-study approach.

DISCUSSION

The systematised results of this study allow us to discuss, first, that teacher mediation is the cross-cutting factor across all the categories of pedagogical activities identified. Although the international literature supports play, physical activity, music and storytelling separately (Mohammed et al., 2026; Jylänki et al., 2022; Bentley et al., 2023; Suggate et al., 2021), it is only when the teacher intervenes sensitively and in a structured way (Skene et al., 2022, specifically with guided play) that effectiveness is considerably greater.

Second, the relationship between the type of play and the development of executive functions needs to be discussed; in this respect, Veraksa et al. (2022) showed that not all types of play have the same effect on this development, and that pretend play with explicit rules favours it more than unstructured motor play; this matters for Ecuador because curricular planning in early years education does not always differentiate between types of play when organising classroom spaces and times. It is also worth noting that the evidence reviewed allows us to discuss musical resources as a low-cost, time-efficient strategy; accordingly, Bugos and DeMarie (2017) showed that even short music programmes produce measurable improvements in executive functions, which matters for Ecuadorian institutions where curricular time and material resources are limited.

The limitations of the evidence reviewed with regard to its direct applicability to Ecuador must also be discussed; most of the systematised studies were carried out in geographically and culturally distant contexts (Bentley et al., 2023; Jaggy et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2026; Veraksa et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), whose institutional, curricular and cultural conditions differ considerably from those of many early years institutions in Ecuador, so that the uncritical transfer of these strategies without adaptation would undermine their relevance. The proposed approach therefore contains a cultural adaptation component (particularly for musical and narrative resources), favouring songs, rhythms and stories from Ecuadorian tradition over generic or imported ones, a principle of contextual relevance that guides the feasibility-study approach.

It is also necessary to discuss the role of social pretend play as a privileged space for socio-emotional development; on this point, Jaggy et al. (2023) and Nat et al. (2026), from different geographical contexts, agree that pretend play consistently strengthens children's social competence; this leads us to include specific role-play scenarios in our proposal rather than limiting the intervention to individual activities or those structured exclusively along academic lines. Where an artificial dichotomy is drawn between cognitive development and socio-emotional and

motor development, the evidence reviewed argues for integration: a well-designed pedagogical activity can promote several domains of development simultaneously; Chiu et al. (2026) found simultaneous improvements in cognitive, emotional and motor development following a physical activity intervention, supporting the integrative logic behind the proposal formulated in the present study.

With regard to structured socio-emotional learning and the other categories of activities, it should be borne in mind that these routines are not independent, but form part of play, movement and storytelling (Murano et al., 2020; Ștefan et al., 2022). In this respect, Murano et al. (2020) and Ștefan et al. (2022) showed that the most effective programmes have structured routines sustained over time, so it is better to integrate this component transversally with the other proposed activities rather than treat it as a separate curricular block.

CONCLUSION

The documentary analysis shows that pedagogical activities and teaching resources are what operationalise children's holistic development in early years education in Ecuador; in this regard, the systematised evidence showed that guided play, structured physical activity, musical and rhythmic resources and interactive storytelling simultaneously increase cognitive, socio-emotional, motor and communicative dimensions when sensitive, intentional teacher mediation is present. The proposal thus responded directly to the objective by articulating four patterns systematised in the results: guided pretend play through everyday role-play scenarios; structured physical activity in motor circuits with explicit cognitive objectives; brief sessions of traditional Ecuadorian music and rhythm; and interactive storytelling with guiding questions. The feasibility of this proposal therefore depends less on financial resources than on the pedagogical intention and the protected curricular time that each institution allocates to its systematic implementation. Integrating these four strategies in an articulated way, rather than

individually, is therefore the most culturally relevant and effective way of enhancing children's holistic development in early years classrooms in Ecuador.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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