



A TYPOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS PLAY ACTIVITIES IN PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN RURAL SIAYA COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

Play is widely recognised as central to early learning. However, classroom practice in many rural Kenyan pre-primary schools tends to favour Westernised activities, while rich indigenous forms remain visible yet unevenly documented and poorly planned. This paper identifies and describes the types of play activities practised by learners in rural pre-primary schools in Siaya County, Kenya, and shows how these plays are organised, resourced, and situated in everyday school life. A qualitative, multi-site field design was employed, with purposive sampling used to select 6 rural schools 12 female teachers, 7 education officers, and 2 community elders. Data sources comprised semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations (one per teacher); and teachers' reflective journals. Data were thematically analysed, with triangulation across sources and careful attention to cultural and linguistic context during transcription and translation to enhance trustworthiness. The findings revealed four play types that characterise daily practice: physical and rule-based games (for example *ajua*, *kora*, *katolo*, *goyo rulo*, *ng'ielo*); socio-dramatic and role-imitation (enacting family and community roles in Dholuo); musical-rhythmic-chant games (circle songs, call-and-response, body percussion); and manipulative play (modelling, building and weaving with sticks, seeds, leaves, clay, tyres and bottle tops). This paper concludes that indigenous play in these settings is not peripheral but a central engine of participation and learning, binding joy, culture and collaboration while exercising language, memory, coordination, problem-

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solving and creativity. It recommends that schools adopt a school-wide plan for integrating indigenous play into weekly routines, including protected time for learner-led, teacher-scaffolded play across the four types, a strengthened pipeline for indigenous play through regular engagement with community elders, and brief observation rubrics and play portfolios to document learning gains.

Keywords: indigenous play, pre-primary education, play-based learning, creativity, oral traditions

1. Introduction

A growing body of scholarship affirms that indigenous games possess significant educational value and can be integrated into formal curricula to strengthen early learning. Studies such as Acharibasam and McVittie (2020) and Ukala and Agabi (2017) highlight that indigenous games operate as pedagogical tools that cultivate foundational skills in culturally meaningful ways. They argue that such games can be deliberately aligned with curricular goals rather than treated as informal or extracurricular activities. Extending this perspective, Madondo and Tsikira (2022) conceptualise indigenous play as a diverse repertoire rooted in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), while Serpell (2020) underscores that play is inseparable from its cultural context, serving as a powerful bridge between children's everyday experiences and school-based learning.

At the heart of this discourse lies the concept of creativity. Kampylis and Berki (2014) define creativity in education as the ability to apply imagination in generating ideas, experimenting with alternatives, and evaluating outcomes. O'Connor (2012) further contends that education has a direct responsibility to nurture these creative capacities from the earliest years. Classic and contemporary theorists converge on this point: Vygotsky (1978) positioned imagination and make-believe as engines of cognitive development across domains, while Newton and Newton (2014) cautioned that creativity is often under-promoted when teachers lack clarity or confidence about how it manifests in practice.

Within African contexts, scholars have long recognised traditional games as conduits for creativity, socialisation, and cultural identity. These games nurture cooperation, teamwork, and mutual respect through shared participation and adherence to group rules. They also stimulate problem-solving as learners strategise, negotiate outcomes, and adapt to changing play conditions, thereby developing cognitive flexibility and creative thinking. At the same time, indigenous play reinforces cultural identity by transmitting language, customs, and communal values that connect children to their heritage and collective memory. As Tatira (2014) and Maunganidze (2016) affirm, traditional games form part of Africa's undocumented heritage and serve as living pedagogies for moral development and community cohesion.

However, modernisation and schooling reforms have increasingly marginalised these traditional forms of play. Ogunyemi and Henning (2020) warn that modern

educational trends can distort or displace indigenous play practices, while Ng'asike (2014) shows how Kenyan pre-primary education often privileges Western pedagogies at the expense of local approaches that are equally effective. Kenyan evidence points to the costs of such neglect. For instance, Odongo and Onderi (2016) associate the sidelining of indigenous learning modes with the erosion of social values, and Wadende *et al.* (2016) demonstrate that traditional motivational practices ease children's transition from home to school.

Under Kenya's Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF), which guides the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), creativity is recognised as a core competency from the early years (KICD, 2017). Yet, the extent to which rural schools translate this principle into planned, culturally grounded play remains under-documented. In addressing this gap, the present paper sought to develop a field-based typology of indigenous play as practised in rural pre-primary schools in Siaya County, Kenya, aiming to contribute to understanding how local play traditions can foster creativity within early learning contexts.

1.1 Research questions

This paper sought to answer two questions:

- 1) What types of play are practised by learners in rural pre-primary schools in Siaya County?
- 2) How are these plays organised and resourced in daily classroom practices?

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical perspectives on play

Play has long resisted a single definition, yet classic and contemporary theorists converge on its core features. Huizinga (1955) viewed play as absorbing, bounded, and rule-governed; Vygotsky (1978) emphasized its imaginative, desire-driven, and socially mediated qualities; while Rubin (1983) described it as intrinsically motivated and actively engaged behaviour. Gray (2013) distilled five universal attributes: self-chosen, intrinsically motivated, imaginative, governed by mental rules, and conducted in a relaxed, alert frame of mind. In early childhood contexts, these features encompass everyday activities such as construction, singing, movement, turn-taking, and pretend play, all of which help children make sense of their worlds. When object manipulation and open-ended materials are used in play, they stimulate problem-solving, cooperation, and creativity (Healey *et al.*, 2019).

2.2 Indigenous play as cultural knowledge

Across Africa, indigenous play is recognised as a vital component of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, an "*undocumented heritage*" transmitting communal values, environmental knowledge, and survival skills (Maunganidze, 2016). Serpell (2020) argues that play is inseparable from culture, forming a bridge between everyday life and formal

schooling. Within this frame, creativity, which is central to 21st-century education, emerges from environments that encourage imagination, experimentation, and social evaluation (Kampylis & Berki, 2014). Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised imagination as a developmental engine, yet teachers often underutilise it when uncertain about how to facilitate creative play (Newton & Newton, 2014).

2.3 Typologies and forms of indigenous play

Empirical evidence from multiple contexts shows remarkable diversity in indigenous play forms while also revealing structural similarities across regions. Studies in Indonesia, Ghana, and Zimbabwe (Usman & Yusuf, 2021; Abdulai, 2016; Dewah & van Wyk, 2014;) highlight games involving song, rhythm, storytelling, riddles, and counting as central to physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional growth. In Zimbabwe, games such as *pada* and *nhodo* embed mathematical reasoning and fine motor control, while riddles foster observation and analogical thinking. In Ghana and Cameroon, traditional plays link directly to language acquisition, memory, estimation, and endurance (Lukong & Mbuwir, 2024). In rural African settings, games like *Raka-Raka*, *Zambezi*, and *Hwai-Hwai* have been shown to enhance coordination, sequencing, and social negotiation (Madondo & Tsikira, 2022). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that indigenous play encompasses both structured and spontaneous activities, ranging from object-based manipulation and physical movement to role-play and verbal games—hence forming the empirical foundation for constructing a typology of indigenous play activities relevant to early childhood education.

2.4 Organisation and facilitation of indigenous play

How indigenous play is organised and resourced within classroom settings varies widely. The Learning through Play framework (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Parker *et al.*, 2022) identifies four interconnected lenses centring on the learner's agency; learning outcomes, play experience, design, and facilitation. Empirical studies support guided play, where adults design enabling environments, but children retain control over action, as most effective for achieving curricular outcomes (Weisberg *et al.*, 2013; Wood, 2009; Fisher *et al.*, 2013). Teachers facilitate through light scaffolding, open-ended questioning, and flexible materials (Lillard, 2013; Hedges & Cooper, 2018). Cross-cultural research also identifies multiple teacher roles including leader, observer, participant, or afforder, with each role influencing how play unfolds in daily practice (Bennett *et al.*, 1997; Hyvönen, 2011; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). These organisational variations reveal play as both child-initiated and teacher-guided, operating in indoor and outdoor spaces with shifting rule systems and group dynamics.

2.5 Resourcing and contextual realities

Indigenous play activities are typically supported by local and low-cost materials including seeds, stones, ropes, sticks, recycled containers, and open space, which are often combined with songs or verbal chants that scaffold learning (Maunganidze, 2016).

However, teachers' pedagogical confidence, material access, and institutional support critically shape implementation. Inadequate training, rigid curricula, and pressures to deliver academic results often marginalise indigenous play in classroom routines (Abdulai, 2016; Kekesi *et al.*, 2019; Madondo & Tsikira, 2022). Conversely, studies show that when communities and elders are involved as resource persons, indigenous play becomes richer, more authentic, and sustainable (Louth & Jamieson-Proctor, 2014; Lukong & Mbuwir, 2024).

2.6 The Kenyan context and the emerging gap

Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) explicitly names creativity as a core competency (KICD, 2017). Yet research indicates that early childhood classrooms often privilege Western pedagogies, risking erosion of local relevance and values (Ng'asike, 2014; Odongo & Onderi, 2016). Indigenous motivational practices, such as traditional songs and group games, can strengthen transitions from home to school and embed cultural identity in learning (Wadende *et al.*, 2016). Despite this, most Kenyan studies have focused on resources, teacher qualifications, or academic outcomes, leaving limited empirical attention to the actual play forms learners engage in daily, how those plays are structured or facilitated, and what materials and spaces support them.

2.7 Rationale for the present study

Given this backdrop, it is timely to document the range of indigenous play activities still practised in rural Kenyan pre-primary settings and to describe how they are organised and resourced within everyday teaching and learning. This study therefore develops a field-based typology of indigenous play in Siaya County, mapping observed play forms, their organisation (free, guided, or mixed), and their material and social supports. By grounding these descriptions in classroom realities, the paper contributes empirical clarity to the discourse on play-based pedagogy in Africa and reinforces indigenous play as a living resource for creativity and holistic child development under Kenya's CBC framework.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Research methods and design

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which enabled the researchers to appreciate that truth and knowledge about IP is culturally and historically situated among the Luo natives (Ryan, 2018) as well as based on people's experiences and their understanding of them. A multiple case design was employed where one school from each of the 6 different cases (representing the sub-counties) was sampled (Creswell, 2016) so as to obtain an in-depth understanding of the use of IP in its natural real context.

The 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census indicates that Siaya County had a rural population of 907,766, representing 91.4% of its total population, compared with an urban population of 85,417, representing 8.6% of the population (KPHC, 2019). This

predominantly rural population made the county an appropriate setting for the study, as rural communities were presumed to be more likely to retain active indigenous knowledge systems. In this paper, the term ‘classroom’ is also used broadly to refer to any organised indoor or outdoor learning environment in which interaction between teachers and learners takes place.

3.2 Target population and sampling

Purposive sampling was mainly used to select the study sites and participants. First, seven education officers were selected according to their areas of responsibility. One officer was responsible for the whole county, while the other six, referred to as sub-county coordinators, represented the six sub-counties in Siaya County. The study then used criterion-based sampling to identify suitable rural pre-primary schools. The ECD sub-county coordinators, referred to as education officers in this paper, served as key informants and helped identify schools that met the study criteria. The schools had to be located in remote parts of the county, serve communities whose population was mainly indigenous to the area, and fall within areas where the education officers were actively involved. In each sub-county, the education officer provided a list of three schools that met these criteria, from which the researchers randomly selected one school.

The final sample consisted of 12 female teachers from six pre-primary schools and seven education officers. All the teachers were female, reflecting the high number of female teachers working at the ECD level (Shaeffer, 2015). Two teachers, one teaching PP1 and the other teaching PP2, were selected from each school. The study also included two community elders, one male and one female, who were at least 70 years old. They were selected to provide cultural and historical information about traditional play in the community. Elders within this age group were considered likely to have detailed and authentic knowledge of traditional games, their educational purposes and the social values associated with them. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the teacher participants and the study sites.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Pre-Primary Teachers

School	Teacher	Gender	Qualification	Experience	Dholuo Proficiency
A	TA1	Female	Diploma	12 years	Native Speaker
	TA2	Female	Certificate	17 years	Native Speaker
B	TB1	Female	Diploma	18 years	Native Speaker
	TB2	Female	Certificate	22 years	Native Speaker
C	TC1	Female	Certificate	34 years	Native Speaker
	TC2	Female	Diploma	22 years	Acquired Speaker
D	TD1	Female	Diploma	13 years	Native Speaker
	TD2	Female	Diploma	10 years	Native Speaker
E	TE1	Female	Diploma	14 years	Native Speaker
	TE2	Female	Diploma	11 years	Acquired Speaker
F	TF1	Female	Diploma	28 years	Acquired Speaker
	TF2	Female	Diploma	17 years	Native Speaker

As shown in Table 1, most teachers held Diploma qualifications, with a few holding Certificates. Teaching experience was substantial (mean $\approx$ 18.2 years; median 17; range 10-34 years). Dholuo proficiency was predominantly native, with three acquired speakers.

3.3 Data generation

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations of indoor and outdoor learning sessions, and teacher reflective journals. Teachers, education officers and community elders were interviewed. Teachers and education officers first took part in baseline interviews on Indigenous Play Pedagogy (IPP), after which the officers provided occasional progress updates. Teachers also kept guided journals on the games used, teaching approaches and their changing views of IPP. Community elders were interviewed in Dholuo by teachers who were familiar to them, following brief training on the study purpose, ethics and interview guide.

The researcher supervised the fieldwork, reviewed the records and ensured that ethical and methodological procedures were followed. Each teacher was observed once, and the observation notes were compared with journals collected two months later. A consent-based WhatsApp group was used to introduce participants and share examples of Luo indigenous games. It was restricted to study-related communication and deleted after data collection. Interviews conducted in Dholuo were translated into English by the first author, with back-translation and peer review used to check accuracy.

3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Analysis proceeded iteratively alongside data generation (Creswell, 2014), beginning with verbatim transcription of interviews and organisation of observation notes and teacher journals. We first “winnowed” the dataset to retain material relevant to the research question, then undertook manual (hand) coding, foregoing software (e.g., NVivo, ATLAS.ti, MAXQDA) due to cost constraints. Guided by Braun and Clarke’s six phases (familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, naming, and reporting) codes and themes were derived directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Lochmiller, 2021).

To preserve confidentiality while maintaining traceability, pseudonyms were used. Teachers were assigned codes that combined their school and individual identifier, such as Teacher A1, Teacher A2, Teacher B1, and so forth. In this system, the letter denotes the school (e.g., School A, School B), while the number distinguishes individual teachers within that school. Eventually, the teachers were identified as TA1, TA2, TB1 and so on. Education officers were abbreviated as EO1, EO2, and so on, with no reference to their actual duty stations. Similarly, the observations conducted were coded as Observation A1, C4, F10 etc. The letter code denotes the school, and the number code denotes the cumulative appearance out of the total observations made. For instance, ‘Observation C4’ means the fourth observation out of the total observations which were made by the

researcher in School C. In this paper, we have presented findings alongside verbatim quotations referenced using these codes.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Institutional clearance was obtained from Moi University, and access was negotiated with county officers and heads of institutions; individual participation proceeded only after informed consent was secured, with the study's purpose, procedures, potential publication, voluntariness, and right to withdraw clearly explained. Privacy and dignity were respected by keeping to agreed schedules and seeking permission for any unscheduled requests; no incentives were offered. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through pseudonyms and secure data handling, with information used solely for research purposes. Cultural sensitivity and minimal intrusion guided all interactions. Participants signed consent to participate and to have their photographs used in the dissemination of the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

Teachers, education officers, elders, observations, and reflective journals converged on a wide repertoire of indigenous and non-indigenous play activities regularly enacted in both classroom yards and nearby open spaces, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Types of Play Activities Categorized with Mode and Setting

Play Activity	Category	Mode of Play	Play Setting
<i>Marobo</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Owalo dance</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Both
<i>Ng'ielo ng'ielo</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Ombulu</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Structured
<i>Atuom Rombo</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Ajua</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Dodo ero biro</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Both
<i>Kora</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Indoor
<i>Oyieyo paka dwaro</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Ang'ad kae, aora opong</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Oling liyo, Oling liyo</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
<i>Ngero</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Indoor
<i>Sigana</i>	Indigenous	Structured	Indoor
<i>Brikicho</i>	Indigenous	Unstructured	Outdoor
Skipping rope	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
Kite making	Indigenous	Unstructured	Outdoor
Singing games	Indigenous	Mixed	Both
Tug of war	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
Tyre racing	Indigenous	Structured	Outdoor
Clay modelling	Indigenous	Unstructured	Both
Drawing on the ground	Indigenous	Unstructured	Both
Role playing	Indigenous	Unstructured	Both

Drama (e.g., fetching water)	Indigenous	Mixed	Both
Storytelling	Indigenous	Structured	Indoor
Digital songs (via phones)	Non-indigenous	Structured	Indoor
Western dance styles	Non-indigenous	Structured	Both
Musical chairs	Non-indigenous	Structured	Both
Bubble blowing	Non-indigenous	Unstructured	Outdoor

Most of the indigenous plays are named in Dholuo while some are named in English. The non-indigenous ones, on the other hand, were all named in English. As such, in our discussions we have italicised both categories to draw a distinction between the plays and the narratives. We clustered the evidence into four broad types of play observed across schools, including: (1) physical and rule-based games, (2) socio-dramatic play, (3) musical-rhythmic-chant games, and (4) manipulative play.

4.1 Physical and rule-based play

Physical and rule-based games were the most visible, everyday forms of play as captured in multiple teacher and education officers' accounts across the schools. They involved chasing, hiding, target and team contests, plus turn-taking board/stone games. The repertoire commonly named included *brikicho* (hide-and-seek), *marobo* (stone-passing/singing), *ng'ielo jagodhre* (snake-like movement), *ajua, kora, atuom rombo, gwen gore* (cock fighting), *tug of war, pick-a-boo*, and *hopscotch*. The participants said:

"Then we also have the hide and seek, we also have the tug of war... hopscotch... the traditional way where you throw stones then they jump." (EO1, pg. 2)

"Ehh, singing games be wajatiyoga go kaka 'marobo tandarobo' nyithindo matindo chako (we also use singing games like marobo tandarobo, the young learners start)" (TF2, pg. 75, line 5)

These reports anchor physical/rule-based play as routine and largely outdoor, often organised quickly by teachers or learners and sustained with local, low-cost materials (stones, cloth, seeds). Strategy-oriented games such as **ajua/kora** add cognitive load (sequenced turns, attention, planning). The pattern fits work positioning traditional games as a diverse, community-rooted repertoire (Madondo & Tsikira, 2022) and play as culturally expressive and generative (Gray, 2013), while Vygotsky (1978) helps explain the mix of imagination and rules in singing/stone games.

Regarding IP agency and organisation, findings showed varied facilitation. Even so, IP reliably elicited participation, coordination, and learner agency. Learners frequently self-organised play, especially *tug of war* initiating teams, rules, and turns with minimal adult direction. In some lessons, teachers primed participation. For instance, they used the play of *ng'ielo* to get learners settled in the field as the game captured their attention. Later on, the teacher got into other songs like *'embe umbe'* and *'wololo wololo'*.

"Learners got new ideas and applied them... They did everything on their own. It was truly learner-driven." (Reflective Journal, Teacher 2, School C)

This aligns with guided-play evidence where adults set light frames and children direct activity (Weisberg *et al.*, 2015; Fisher *et al.*, 2013). Occasionally, team set-ups were framed as boys vs. girls, and some contests drifted toward de-contextualised competition, echoing Ogunyemi and Henning's (2020) caution to preserve cultural meaning through light-touch facilitation.

Elder narratives situated target and running games like *katolo*, *odumbo* (*aiming at a floating object with stones/soil*), *nyangee* (*vigorous running*), and *amen* (*wrestling*) in everyday rural life, emphasising endurance and precision. They reported that such games were played during herding or in village spaces such as fields. They also emphasised that children replayed school games at home and vice versa.

"Tuke gi newatugo e sikul, ka wasetugo e sikul to saa ma wadok dala, watugo nyaka ei dala' (we would play indigenous games in school, then later play them at home)." (Elder 2, pg. 6)

"Eee ne nitie manenyalo tugre e sikul. Eee newatimo moko e sikul moko be mana dala, moko be mana ka kwath' (eee we would play some in school, some home and some when we were out herding)" (Elder 1, pg. 3)

"...boys would play odumbo, a ball-shaped material... children try aiming at it with stones or soil, so that the one who hits it first becomes the winner." (Elder 1, pg. 2)

Such home-school circulation helps explain why these games feel natural. They travel from field and homestead to school yard, carrying locally meaningful goals (accuracy, stamina) and using readily available materials. This continuity is consistent with the African Indigenous IECCE framework (Awopegba, Oduolowu & Nsamenang, 2013) and studies of traditional games building movement skills and participation (e.g. Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015).

Vignette A: Ng'ielo Ng'ielo - The Snake Game

A clear morning at School F. The learners spill outside the classroom for their mid-morning play session. The field buzzes with laughter—some chase tyres, others toss balls, and a group spontaneously jumps in rhythm.

Then, the teacher gently calls the learners to form a line.

"Ng'ielo ng'ielo..." sings the soloist. "Ng'ielo jagodhre," the chorus responds.

They clasp each other's shoulders, forming a human snake. The soloist leads them in coiling movements, bending and turning like a real ng'ielo (snake) through the dusty field. With every turn, the children echo the melody, giggling and swaying in harmony.

Midway, the children improvise by holding hips instead of shoulders. Some laugh nervously, others hesitate, but the game presses on. The teacher later reflects that while this version was playful, not all learners were comfortable, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive adaptations.

What shines through is the teamwork. To keep the snake unbroken, learners must adjust to each other's pace, maintain rhythm, and anticipate movements. Slower learners sometimes cause traffic jams in the coil, but grouping them strategically allows everyone to enjoy the experience.

The teacher notes the power of the game, not just in joyful expression, but in teaching coordination, confidence (especially for soloists), cultural pride, and cooperative spirit.

"They enjoy and relax fully during this session... all learners got involved fully in the singing game... they work together for the game to be enjoyable." (Reflective Journal, Teacher 2, School F, 23/05/2025)

Vignette B: Tug of War - A Struggle for Strength and Strategy

A bright Thursday morning at School C. Learners pour into the play yard, energy high. Without prompting, two groups assemble - boys and girls facing each other. There is no rope today, so they repurpose a classroom cloth. The play must go on.

What follows is an improvised tug of war, full of laughter, grit, and spirited cheering. As the leading pair pull, teammates rally behind, lending both strength and encouragement. The game intensifies, drawing more learners into action.

From a distance, the teacher watches with pride. This is learner-driven: children organise themselves, set rules, and adjust as they go—unlike earlier sessions without indigenous games, where learners waited passively for direction.

The teacher observes sharing (taking turns), communication (tactics, cheering, conflict resolution), and emergent leadership.

"Learners got new ideas and applied them during this play... they did everything on their own. It was truly learner-driven." (Reflective Journal, Teacher 2, School C, 16/05/2025)

The teacher concludes: "This indigenous play is very key in the learning process... it helps learners appreciate their culture and promote it to the next generation." (Reflective Journal, Teacher 2, School C, 16/05/2025)

4.2 Socio-dramatic and role-imitation play

Role-imitation anchored in everyday Luo life is common and learner-led. Learners spontaneously enacted familiar community roles (teacher, fisherman, caregiver), typically in Dholuo and without adult prompts. One teacher narrated;

"...saa moro inyalo yudo ka, kata abiro eiy staffroom kae to kidok to iyudo ka nyathi koro pimo kaka ne ipuonjo. Kore en ticha ochoko jomoko kae opuonjo. Iyudo ka bende moro tugo ni en jalupo (sometimes I leave them and come to the staffroom; when I return, you see some imitating the teacher by gathering peers and teaching them, and others pretend to be fishermen.)" (TB1, pg. 22, line 29)

This mirrors African Indigenous IECCE guidance to reflect lived realities (Awopegba *et al.*, 2013) and Ebrahim's (2013) view that indigenous play enables meaningful, context-based expression. Vygotsky (1978) frames such make-believe as an imaginary situation governed by internal rules, while Gray (2013) emphasises self-chosen, imaginative, culturally expressive play.

Oral traditions such as storytelling, riddles and tongue-twisters seed dramatic enactment and widen participation (including shy learners). Teachers bridged school and home by sending learners to grandparents for *sigana* (stories) and *ngeche* (riddles/proverbs). In class, stories like *Apiyo gi Adongo** and *Apuoyo kod Opuk* catalysed questioning, turn-taking and role-play.

"There are days of riddles...we use both Kiswahili and Dholuo... we do them in class then homework, they go to their grandparents..." (TE2, pg. 66, line 24)

"Chon ne nitie sigendni mane mine nyalo goyonwa...mago nechalo sigendi machon mane miyo dhi bedo giluoro (...there were legends our mothers would tell us...stories that made us cautious)." (Elder 1, pg. 5)

This practice aligns with Madondo & Tsikira's (2022) argument that indigenous play is a repository for cultural transmission and intellectual formation, and with Nyota & Mapara (2008) on oral traditions as pedagogical tools encoded with community wisdom. Findings that riddle boost multi-domain learning (Makaudze & Gudhlanga, 2011) and that indigenous games enhance attention, concept formation, memory and reasoning (Lukong & Mbuwir, 2024) further support this pattern. Stories become scenes where learners dramatised characters and actions with improvised props and local language.

"When we are in the field, we use owalo...the one of banana leaves, not the purchased one. They just come with the leaves and we make owalo." (TA1, pg. 6, line 27)

"...we can play drama, and imitate mom or grandmother going to the river with a pot on the head." (TE1, pg. 60, line 26)

Reportedly, the improvisation and utilisation of utensils such as bottle tops (plates), soil (*unga*), and leaves (vegetables) during pretend play emphasised the imitations done by learners during pretend play. Learners routinely adapted available

materials into costumes and props, hence lowering cost barriers and deepening immersion in domestic and community scripts while preserving a recognisably local aesthetic. Such material “set-ups” are consistent with guided play principles where adults lightly structure environments while children direct the action, supporting language, self-regulation, and cooperative problem-solving (Weisberg *et al.*, 2015).

4.3 Musical-rhythmic-chant play

It emerged that singing games were routine, culturally anchored, and multimodal, where songs were combined with movement and occasionally with props. Across schools, learners routinely formed circles or lines and used call-and-response to pace games, often switching between Dholuo and Kiswahili. These routines align with a pedagogy of play that blends environment, language, and action (Wood, 2009). Some teachers said:

“...when they hide, they have to sing the song for hide and seek.” (TA1, pg. 2, line 30)

“...when we’re going to outdoor, we can, let’s say a theme of a cow, or theme of animals...we start singing nyama nyama nyama, and we jump...when you choose the right one, let’s say you say a cow, they jump, it’s nyama” (TB1, pg. 27)

During this time, they also coordinated movement with low-cost objects (e.g. stones, branches, banana leaves). Teachers reported these activities engaged learners while supporting coordination, memory, and cultural identity. These patterns echo African play scholarship that links music tightly with play (Kejo, 2017) and documents play songs and rhymes as a core genre (Abaryy, 1989).

It was discovered that rhythm and chant organised the plays, whereas songs regulated turns, timing, and group coordination. Musical structures such as clapping cycles, chants, and body percussion (fist-beats) did more than entertain. They synchronized attention, sequencing, and turn-taking. Elders described *wer* sung alongside *katolo*, and detailed *othoth oriyo* (a body-percussion game), illustrating how rhythm scaffolds collective action. Musical cues served as “rules in mind,” helping children coordinate entries and exits, pace passes, and share turns precisely the kind of lightly structured, child-directed regulation emphasized in guided play (Weisberg *et al.*, 2015; Fisher *et al.*, 2013).

“Eeee wer be newawero saa ma watugo katolo ni. Jomoko tugo katol to jomoko wer. (eee we would also sing when playing katolo, some would play while some sing.)” (Elder 2, pg. 6)

“ne wagoyo othoth oriyo...ing’ino adhong to, gi lweti ariyo to ikudho muyo e iye kanyo to iloso duol moro, kata ka wer moro to wero go othoth oriyo no. Koro seche go wagoyo buombwa be wamiel. (we would play othoth oriyo, you would make a fist with your two hands and blow air inside to produce musical sounds, and even some music we play

alongside othoth oriyo. During this time would beat our wing-like arms and dance.)"
(Elder 1, pg. 2)

Through the IPs, learners and teachers co-adapted traditional singing games using local props and different costume themes. Play was frequently 'locally engineered' where branches became 'fruit', stones paced *marobo*, and sisal skirts (*owalo*) cued patterned dance movements. Teachers and education officers described modified versions of plays and musical instruments. Learners and teachers co-particularly co-modified songs and costumes while keeping a local character.

"We did marobo. In fact, we carried our stones, and our attire. We modified it. Not the normal marobo where you just put the stones, and you exchange...We modified it, but it was very local." (EO1, pg. 11, line 10)

"...And then the pattern of the sisal skirt. How would the sisal skirt move, how would you move your body so that that sisal skirt actually goes round, and then comes up and goes down?" (EO2, pg. 13, line 31)

"The local play. Hiyo dayo luongo nyathine...They were singing. And they were using those props..." (TA1, pg. 8, line 15)

Such small, culturally anchored modifications fit the continuum from free to guided play that sustains participation and identity (Pyle *et al.*, 2018).

Findings also showed that free, music-rich play widens participation and agency, and that overly directed sessions could dampen engagement. Education officers contrasted child-chosen singing and dancing (characterised by high participation and authentic voice) with directed routines which involved selective uptake.

"... when you are in the field with the learners...everyone participates...but when it is a directed play, it is as if you are forcing them...so directed play is a bit limiting." (EO1, pg. 7, line 24)

"free choice...you'll find them singing these other songs, these other foreign songs. Then immediately as a teacher you come in with a traditional song. So, we see so many of the teachers doing that. My take is that they support the indigenous plays." (EO3, pg. 20, line 28)

This matches evidence on guided-vs-free play where gentle, unobtrusive scaffolding is argued to support autonomy while nudging learning goals (Vygotsky; Weisberg *et al.*, 2015). Consistent with the literature, free play remains child-initiated and child-directed, while guided play provides light scaffolds without usurping agency (Weisberg *et al.*, 2015). Lastly, even though singing games created a shared space for all

learners, some initial gender patterning was observed during participation. Observation notes captured girls gravitating first to singing games while boys opted for non-cultural contests such as sack racing. In the course of playing, groups merged as Dholuo and Kiswahili singing games blended in a single performance space, suggesting music serves as a social bridge.

4.4 Manipulative play

Learners routinely built and modelled with what was at hand, and most of this making was learner-initiated. Learners manipulated sticks, stones, banana leaves, soil, seeds, bottle tops and clay to model houses and animals, weave baskets, make owalo skirts, and stage homestead scenes typically during free play with minimal adult direction. This aligns with accounts of play as object-manipulation that stimulates problem-solving, cooperation and creativity (Healey *et al.*, 2019) and with designs that emphasize rich materials plus children's self-directed engagement (Marshall, 2017; Gray, 2011).

"Free play, veery! ...ng'ato gero ot gi lauw...ng'ato...otimo weaving (...one uses sand to make a house...another ties knots with grass as if weaving a basket)." (TE1, pg. 61)

"We give them time to model what they can...most girls model babies... each one [models] what they like." (TA2, pg. 14)

Improvisation and recycling were pervasive, enabling participation with low-cost local resources. Learners repurposed carrier bags, paper, ropes and tyres into balls, props and play items.

"We have some balls...made of waste materials like... papers, ... carrier bags, then some ropes...and loops...like a tyre...then they just play with it." (TF1, pg. 70)

"If they are playing Kati, they use the tyres...For kora, they use the seeds from different plants." (EO7, pg. 49)

Observations noted ropes, sacks, tyres and "shop corners" stocked with found objects. Blending purchased with natural materials (e.g., plasticine and clay) showed adaptive design in resource-constrained settings. This resonates with play-design guidance that urges leveraging available environments and materials (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Parker *et al.*, 2022).

Constructive play bridges lived experience and symbolic representation, supporting memory, transfer and creativity. Following shared experiences such as the Kisumu Museum visit, learners re-created animals and Luo homesteads with clay, twigs and soil. Elders also recalled children writing on the ground after games.

“Tuke gi ne kawasetugo kamae to puonjruok manewapuonjre to kawasetugo katolo ma waol to koro newandike e low. Indika ndika e low (After playing katolo and getting exhausted, we would sit and write on the ground)” (Elder 2, pg. 6, line 24)

Such modelling exemplifies imaginative, rule-guided activity (Vygotsky, 1978) and imaginative, self-chosen play as an engine for cultural invention (Gray, 2013), with hands-on manipulation enhancing retention (Healey *et al.*, 2019). The field-note vignette below illustrates how a shared experience (the Kisumu visit) translated into collaborative modelling and making during free play.

Vignette C: Clay Cows and Paper Baskets- Remembering Kisumu



Following an educational visit to Kisumu Impala Park and the Museum, learners returned to school with a burst of curiosity and inspiration. During free play, they eagerly reenacted the scenes and experiences they had encountered. Using clay, they began to model animals they had seen at the animal park, such as lions, monkeys, and antelopes, calling them by their Dholuo names. Others traced outlines of animals with their fingers on the dusty ground, reliving the visit through lines and shapes.

The museum’s traditional homestead exhibition had also left a strong impression. With childlike precision, learners used twigs and soil to recreate miniature versions of a man’s hut, Mikayi’s house, and Nyachira’s house, structures they had seen on display. They worked collaboratively, recalling details and helping each other decide which part of the homestead to build. Meanwhile, those fascinated by the basketry they had observed began weaving their own baskets, not with reeds, but with folded paper.

The teacher reflected that during these indigenous play activities, learners were fully immersed, hands-on and self-motivated. Unlike other lessons where memorisation dominated, this play-based approach appeared to deepen retention and spark innovation.

“These activities enlarged learners’ creativity in and out. During indigenous play, learners’ hands are on always but during play without indigenous elements, it’s all mastery - thereby they easily forget what is learnt.” (Reflection Journal, Teacher 2, School C, 21/05/2025)

This episode exemplifies object-mediated recall and collaborative design as learners transformed lived experience into artefacts. This is consistent with Vygotsky (1978) on rule-guided make-believe, Gray (2013) on self-chosen imaginative play, and Healey *et al.* (2019) on object manipulation feeding problem-solving and creativity.

Material choices shaped cultural grounding. As such, locally rooted artefacts kept meaning salient even as learners mixed old and new. While most classrooms and field spaces were crowded with improvised objects, we noted that in one site many items did not originate from the local community. Elsewhere, learners used plasticine and avoided the use of clay during modelling even when the real clay was available. Curating materials that invite open-ended manipulation and preserve local referents helps keep cultural meaning in view (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Parker *et al.*, 2022).

“While locally available materials like tins and bottle tops are used, none seems to originate from the local community.” (Observation D7, 13/05/2025)

“The teacher does not guide learners to use clay for modelling despite experiencing a rainy season and the school being very muddy. The clay could easily be associated with the mud houses that are common in the Luo community.” (Observation F10, 15/05/2025)

These practices continue an intergenerational tradition of modelling and making. Elders recalled clay figures of people and animals, paper kites, and improvised ‘kitchen’ sets, mirroring today’s object-based play and reinforcing hand–eye coordination, persistence, and cultural continuity.

“jo manewanyalo chweyo kaka baba kaka mama to waloso gik machalo dhok, dhok go waketo gig lwetwa, eee mago nemorowa kata seche ma wan e kwath to waketho go saa...(we would also model using clay family members like father, and mother and make make animals like cattle. That was fun and when we go herding, we would do the same to pass time)” (Elder 1, pg. 3)

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study identified a broad, culturally grounded repertoire of play in rural Siaya pre-primary schools, clustered into four types: physical and rule-based (e.g., ng’ielo, marobo, brikicho, ajua, kora, tug of war), socio-dramatic and role-imitation (family and community roles enacted in Dholuo), musical-rhythmic-chant (circle songs, call-and-response), and manipulative (modelling, building, weaving with sticks, seeds, leaves, clay, tyres, and bottle tops). Regarding organisation and resourcing, the evidence shows that play is predominantly learner-led with light teacher scaffolding, occurs both indoors and outdoors, and relies on low-cost, local materials that widen participation and keep meaning culturally salient. Oral traditions such as *sigana* (stories) and *ngech* (riddles), reliably spark enactment, while music and rhythm help coordinate turn-taking and group movement. Play circulates between home and school, reinforcing familiarity and motivation, and initial gendered preferences are fluid, often dissolving as groups merge around shared songs and tasks. We conclude that indigenous play in rural contexts is not peripheral. It is undoubtedly a central engine of participation and learning, binding joy,

culture, and collaboration while exercising language, memory, coordination, problem-solving, and creativity. Accordingly, we recommend adopting a school-wide Indigenous Play Integration Plan (IPIP) to make indigenous play a planned, resourced, and lightly guided part of weekly routines.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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