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Exploring the Role of Contextual Learning in Developing the Cognitive Abilities of Children Aged 5–6 Years

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to explore the role of contextual learning in developing children's cognitive abilities. The subjects of this research were all 18 children in Group B of Pelita Hati Kindergarten, consisting of 9 boys and 9 girls. The findings revealed that contextual learning played a significant role in enhancing the cognitive development of children in Group B, particularly through the use of spinach as a learning medium. Before the learning activity began, the teacher introduced spinach, explained its parts, and encouraged the children to identify and count them. The teacher then invited the children to play a sorting game by arranging the spinach from the smallest to the largest. Through contextual learning, children were able to interact directly with concrete materials, which supported the early childhood education principle of learning through play and facilitated better understanding. Observations conducted over three weeks showed that contextual learning greatly contributed to children's cognitive growth, particularly in three key aspects: sequencing, identifying, and counting.

Keywords: *Contextual Learning, Cognitive Development, Early Childhood, Qualitative Research*

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is a foundational stage of learning designed to provide children from birth to six years old with developmental stimulation that supports their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Fitri & Tirtayani, 2023; Laela et al., 2023; Syarfina & Warmansyah, 2025). It aims to build a strong basis for lifelong learning and prepare children to enter formal education successfully (Pérez-Rodrigo & Aranceta, 2001; Poerwati et al., 2025). Early education plays a critical role in nurturing children's holistic development and establishing the foundation for their future learning, behavior, and health. During this stage, children's brains develop rapidly, making it the most sensitive and crucial period for cognitive and emotional formation (Murni et al., 2023; Sitorus, 2023; Tanu, 2019; T. Wulandari et al., 2024). Every child is a unique individual who passes through distinct stages of development; therefore, educators and parents must create learning environments that enable children to explore experiences meaningfully while respecting their individuality and developmental needs (Sutisna & Laiya, 2020).

Early childhood education serves as the level of education prior to primary schooling and provides structured opportunities for children's comprehensive development (Innes et al., 2023; Isnariyati et al., 2025; Verani et al., 2022). It focuses on stimulating children's

intellectual, emotional, social, and physical capacities through nurturing guidance and purposeful play activities. ECE emphasizes developmentally appropriate practices that balance learning stimulation with children's natural curiosity and need for exploration (Hoiriya & Sumiharsono, 2020). Education during this phase not only aims to teach knowledge but also to cultivate essential competencies such as reasoning, communication, creativity, and cooperation.

According to Azizah et al., (2019) early childhood education seeks to develop the potential of the whole child, helping them become well-rounded individuals who can function as complete human beings aligned with social and cultural values. Pratiwi et al., (2021), state that the goal of early childhood education is to facilitate children's holistic growth, emphasizing the integration of cognitive, emotional, moral, and physical dimensions. Monitoring and supporting children's development from an early age ensures that their growth is directed appropriately, forming a strong character and positive personality traits (Nugrahaeni & Ami, 2023).

In the current era, educational institutions particularly those providing early childhood education have adopted innovative approaches that bridge learning and real-life experience. One such approach is contextual learning, which helps teachers connect instructional materials with children's daily lives, encouraging them to relate new knowledge to their existing experiences and apply it meaningfully (Nurlaila et al., 2025). Through this method, learning becomes more authentic, as children learn by doing, exploring, and interacting rather than merely receiving information passively. This process aligns with the constructivist theory, which holds that knowledge is built through experience and reflection (Nurtaniawati, 2019; Wibowo et al., 2025). Consequently, teachers play a key role in designing learning environments that engage children actively, allowing them to discover meaning and construct knowledge independently.

Contextual learning is characterized by five essential elements: connection, experience, application, collaboration, and transfer. These components emphasize the importance of enabling children to construct understanding through direct experience, problem-solving, and meaningful interaction (Nurhayati et al., 2024). Preliminary observations conducted in Group B of Pelita Hati Kindergarten revealed that several children's cognitive abilities were still underdeveloped, largely because classroom instruction rarely connected learning content with the realities of children's daily lives. This finding motivated the researcher to conduct a study entitled "Exploring the Role of Contextual Learning in Developing the Cognitive Abilities of Children Aged 5–6 Years", aiming to describe how contextual learning supports cognitive growth among young learners.

One of the strengths of contextual learning is its ability to make educational experiences more meaningful and long-lasting. By linking classroom concepts with real-world experiences, children develop a deeper understanding of learning content and retain it longer (Sukatin et al., 2020). This process also enhances learning productivity and strengthens conceptual comprehension, as contextual learning is grounded in the constructivist framework, where children are encouraged to explore, discover, and construct their own understanding (Andari & Wiguna, 2023; Masykuroh & Kurnia, 2025). For young children, such experiential learning supports natural curiosity and promotes critical thinking, imagination, and problem-solving skills.

The role of contextual learning in early childhood education is therefore crucial, particularly in stimulating cognitive development. It encourages teachers to link instructional content to children's real-world contexts and to design learning experiences that are meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. As emphasized by Hazizah, (2020) contextual learning focuses on aligning classroom experiences with children's actual life

situations, ensuring that learning remains relevant and grounded. Based on the cognitive-constructivist perspective, effective learning develops through social interaction, cultural participation, and active engagement, allowing children to construct their understanding dynamically (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, contextual learning not only makes lessons more interesting and enjoyable but also enhances cognitive quality by encouraging exploration and discovery.

Several strategies can be applied to foster cognitive development through Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) (Susanti et al., 2020; S. Wulandari et al., 2021). These include stimulating children's thinking through independent problem-solving, promoting inquiry-based activities across themes, encouraging curiosity by allowing children to ask questions, creating a community-based learning environment, incorporating reflection at the end of sessions, and conducting authentic performance-based assessments (Schuhmacher et al., 2023). Such approaches allow children to actively explore, observe, and interpret their environment, promoting reasoning, creativity, and analytical skills.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of contextual learning in enhancing the cognitive development of children in Group B at Pelita Hati Kindergarten. Specifically, the study seeks to describe how contextual learning contributes to the improvement of children's ability to observe, identify, and analyze real-life concepts through active engagemen. Theoretically, this research is expected to serve as a reference for educators in implementing contextual learning as an effective pedagogical approach in early childhood education. Practically, the findings are expected to help teachers enhance children's cognitive abilities, increase attention, cooperation, creativity, and enjoyment during learning activities, and create a meaningful foundation for lifelong learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Type of Research

This research is qualitative in nature. Qualitative data are data that cannot be measured numerically but are presented in the form of descriptions involving observation, feelings, and opinions. The use of a qualitative research approach was chosen to describe and explain clearly and in detail the role of contextual learning. Qualitative research is a process of inquiry that seeks to understand human or social phenomena by creating a comprehensive and complex picture that can be expressed through words, reporting detailed views obtained from informants, and conducted in a natural setting.

Research Location and Subjects

This research was conducted at Pelita Hati Kindergarten, located in Martasari Village, Pasangkayu Regency, for a duration of three weeks during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The subjects of this study were all students in Group B of Pelita Hati Kindergarten, totaling 18 children, consisting of 9 boys and 9 girls. The primary data were obtained through direct observation of the subjects being studied, namely the students at Pelita Hati Kindergarten in Martasari Village, Pasangkayu Regency.

Data Collection Techniques

The observation technique was the initial stage of data collection. Observation was carried out using observation sheets that had been prepared beforehand. The researcher observed the activities performed by the children and recorded them on the observation sheet. The data collection was conducted through direct observation to identify the problems being studied, using the observation sheet to monitor children's activities from the time they arrived at school until they went home at Pelita Hati Kindergarten.

The documentation technique was used to obtain data regarding the role of contextual learning in children's cognitive development. This method was used to acquire relevant data, supported by the use of a camera to capture evidence and record activities that occurred during the research process.

The interview technique was employed to collect information and data through conversations or question-and-answer sessions related to the research problem. The researcher used a semi-structured interview, in which questions were prepared in advance but allowed flexibility during the interview process. The interview was conducted with the classroom teacher to obtain information about the implementation of contextual learning, children's responses, and the observed impact on their cognitive development.

Data Analysis Technique

The qualitative data analysis in this study was conducted using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman. This process involved systematically organizing and interpreting data obtained from interviews, field notes, and documentation, followed by drawing conclusions that could be easily understood and communicated to others. Qualitative analysis focused on in-depth description and representation of findings in verbal form. According to Miles and Huberman, data analysis in qualitative research is carried out both during and after the data collection process. The analysis is performed interactively and continuously until the research is completed, ensuring that the data reach a point of saturation. This approach allows the researcher to continually reflect on and refine the findings throughout the research process.

The components of the interactive model of data analysis used in this study consist of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data collection refers to gathering all information obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data reduction involves the process of selecting, simplifying, and organizing raw data to highlight key findings relevant to the study objectives. Data display refers to the presentation of the processed data in descriptive form to make it easier to interpret relationships and patterns that emerge from the analysis. The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, is used to interpret the meaning of the data, identify emerging themes, and ensure the credibility of the findings through constant comparison and validation. The components of this interactive data analysis model are illustrated as follows:

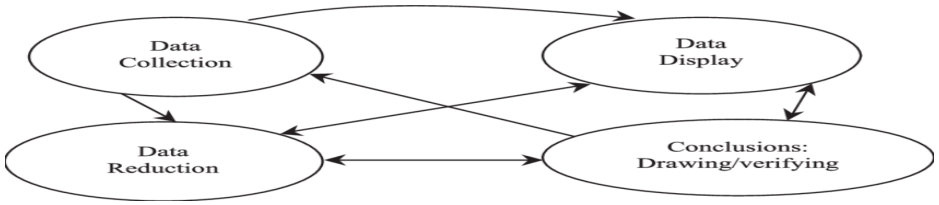

Figure 1. Components of Interactive Data Analysis Model (Miles and Huberman)

The figure above illustrates the interactive and cyclical nature of data collection and data analysis. The research process proceeded through several interconnected stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. These stages were carried out continuously until the data were deemed saturated, ensuring the findings accurately represented the real conditions observed in the classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Overview

This institution was established through the initiative of community members, local education advocates, and teachers in Martasari Village, who organized early childhood learning groups for children in Pedongga District and the surrounding areas who previously had limited access to early education. Under the guidance of the Pelita Hati Early Childhood Education Foundation in Martasari Village, Pedongga District, Pasangkayu Regency, Pelita Hati Kindergarten officially began operation on July 15, 2013.

Pelita Hati Kindergarten implements a curriculum for early childhood education that integrates both national early learning standards and local cultural elements. The curriculum emphasizes nature-based learning and promotes multiple intelligences development, encouraging children to explore their individual talents through group play activities. The developmental aspects emphasized include cognitive, language, socio-emotional, moral and religious values, as well as fine and gross motor skills, all of which are nurtured holistically through imaginative, creative, and exploratory play experiences. Early childhood is often referred to as the golden age, a period that must not be overlooked in child development. Pelita Hati Kindergarten seeks to optimize this developmental window by focusing on five major areas of growth, prioritizing the cultivation of multiple intelligences through a center-based learning approach. This method, recommended by the Directorate General of Early Childhood Education of Indonesia, emphasizes active, child-centered learning experiences tailored to the developmental needs of young learners.

The Role of Contextual Learning in Cognitive Development: The Aspect of Sequencing

Based on interviews with Teacher Mi, the Group B teacher at Pelita Hati Kindergarten, regarding the role of contextual learning in developing children's cognitive abilities, it was found that contextual learning using spinach leaves as a learning medium effectively supports children's ability to understand sequencing concepts (Bahfen et al., 2020). In this activity, children were given several spinach leaves of varying sizes and were asked to observe and arrange them from the smallest to the largest, or vice versa.

Although the task seemed simple, it provided meaningful stimulation for logical reasoning and comparative thinking. Before the activity, the teacher first introduced spinach as a learning material, explained its characteristics, and demonstrated how to arrange the leaves in size order. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, seriation—or the ability to arrange objects in order based on increasing or decreasing size—is an important milestone in logical thinking for young children (Ilmiyah et al., 2024; Maghfiroh & Suryana, 2021) also emphasize that children learn to think logically through concrete experiences, such as sorting and classifying objects by size or quantity.

This activity exemplifies the function of contextual learning, as it allows children to interact directly with real objects, making abstract concepts more comprehensible. (Hasanah et al., 2025). found that the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model effectively improves cognitive skills, especially in ordering numbers (1–10) through concrete media such as counting cards and tangible objects. Furthermore, noted that sorting activities involving real vegetables such as spinach or carrots help develop children's early numeracy and logical reasoning. Supporting this stated that contextualized teaching through singing, experiments,

tasks, and storytelling encourages children to group, order, and solve problems logically in daily life. From these findings, it can be concluded that contextual learning plays a significant role in developing children's cognitive skills through sequencing activities. By Hati et al., (2024) engaging children in ordering spinach leaves from smallest to largest, teachers foster logical thinking and early mathematical reasoning in a concrete and enjoyable way.

The Role of Contextual Learning in Cognitive Development: The Aspect of Naming

Observations and interviews with Teacher Mi also revealed that contextual learning helps develop the naming aspect of children's cognition. In this case, the teacher used spinach as a concrete medium to encourage children to identify and verbally express the different parts of the plant. The activity began with the teacher introducing the spinach and asking guiding questions about its parts. Through a question-and-answer interaction, children were encouraged to mention and describe the leaf, stem, and root of the spinach plant. The use of a question-and-answer method in this context proved to be effective. According to (Safira et al., (2021). the questioning method engages children's curiosity, enhances their thinking skills, and promotes active verbal participation. By asking and responding to questions, children are able to form connections between observation and language expression, which strengthens cognitive processing.

Naming activities where children identify and pronounce the names or characteristics of objects they see help develop verbal expression, categorization, and memory recall. As Yusuf, (Yusuf, 2021)) explain, naming supports active thinking processes that contribute to the construction of a child's cognitive framework. Similarly, Sitorus, (2023) highlight that oral language activities, such as naming and describing objects, are strongly linked to cognitive development, particularly memory and classification skills. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that contextual learning enhances children's cognitive abilities in naming through real and meaningful experiences. When children can see and interact with actual learning materials such as spinach they more easily understand and remember concepts. This hands-on approach strengthens both verbal and cognitive development by linking observation with expression.

The Role of Contextual Learning in Cognitive Development: The Aspect of Counting

The interviews and observations further indicated that contextual learning also supports the counting aspect of children's cognitive development. In this activity, the teacher invited children to count the number of spinach leaves provided by the researcher. Through this exercise, children were encouraged to recognize numerical concepts and associate numbers with real quantities. The children counted each spinach leaf, stem, or bunch one by one while touching and observing them directly. This activity was both enjoyable and effective because it allowed children to engage with tangible objects, making abstract numerical ideas easier to grasp. By manipulating real materials, children connected numbers with quantities, enhancing their early numeracy skills. Mustakim et al., (2020), emphasize that counting activities using concrete objects such as leaves or vegetables effectively support cognitive development, as they engage multiple senses and reinforce concept understanding.

found that counting and grouping vegetables like spinach, tomatoes, and carrots help children link quantities with numbers naturally.

Furthermore, reported that play-based counting activities such as pretending to be vegetable sellers and counting spinach leaves during role-play significantly improve children's numeracy and cognitive engagement. These activities transform counting into an enjoyable experience that promotes curiosity, concentration, and understanding (Azkia et al., 2025; Sutisna & Laiya, 2020; Zaenab, 2016). Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that contextual learning plays an important role in developing children's cognitive skills through counting activities (Laranti et al., 2023). By using spinach leaves as learning media, children learn to connect abstract numerical concepts with concrete experiences. This method not only makes learning enjoyable but also helps children internalize mathematical reasoning through meaningful, hands-on engagement (Bahfen et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that contextual learning plays an important role in developing the cognitive abilities of children at Pelita Hati Kindergarten, Martasari Village, Pasangkayu Regency through engaging activities such as sequencing, naming, and counting using spinach as a real-life learning medium. In these activities, children were introduced to basic numerical and logical concepts by directly observing, touching, and manipulating spinach leaves, stems, and bunches. The hands-on experience allowed them to understand abstract ideas such as size, order, and quantity through concrete interaction, making the learning process both meaningful and enjoyable. Contextual learning not only enhanced children's logical reasoning and early numeracy skills but also fostered curiosity, concentration, and active participation, which are essential components of early cognitive development.

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