

Bridging Theory and Practice in Early Literacy: A Qualitative Descriptive Study of the CLEAR Approach Framework for Integrating Play-Based Exploration and Explicit Instruction

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Abstract:

Early childhood professionals worldwide face a persistent instructional dilemma: how to balance exploratory, play-based learning with direct, explicit instruction in foundational literacy skills. This qualitative descriptive study examined how educators and parents described learners' engagement and confidence as indicators of integration between play and direct teaching when using the CLEAR Approach, an instructional framework for inclusive instruction designed to bridge play-based exploration and explicit teaching through five interconnected components: Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the study analyzed educator and parent reflections from a virtual early literacy program in the United States. Data were drawn from twelve learners aged three to five who participated in the program, providing insight into how CLEAR-aligned instruction supported engagement and confidence in early literacy learning. Findings indicated that CLEAR-aligned instruction supported both engagement and confidence, illustrating how inclusive instructional design can integrate explicit literacy instruction into exploratory, playful, and inclusive learning experiences. The study contributes to discussions on inclusive early literacy pedagogy by offering a model that aligns with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). Implications are discussed for educators, teacher preparation programs, theory, and learners, as well as future research on framework fidelity and adaptability across diverse instructional contexts.

Keywords: literacy instruction, differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, early childhood education, virtual learning, instructional framework, Science of Reading, inclusive instruction

1. Introduction

Early childhood professionals face a persistent instructional dilemma: how to balance exploratory, play-based learning with direct, explicit instruction in foundational literacy skills. In many classrooms, this tension results in polarized practices, with some leaning heavily toward academic rigor and others toward unstructured play. Both extremes risk disadvantaging learners. Overly academic approaches can limit creativity and social-emotional growth, while play-only models may leave children underprepared for the literacy demands of formal schooling. Decades of research affirm that young children benefit most when playful exploration and explicit instruction are intentionally integrated (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Pyle et al., 2024; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Allee (2024)



argued for a balanced “middle road” approach that combines standards-driven instruction with active, playful learning. Similarly, Pyle et al. (2024) emphasized that play-only models are insufficient for developing more advanced reading and writing skills without intentional teacher facilitation. Rand and Morrow (2021) further cautioned that explicit decoding instruction alone is insufficient, arguing that language-rich, play-based experiences are essential for developing the vocabulary and comprehension skills necessary for meaningful reading. Yet despite decades of evidence supporting the integration of playful exploration and explicit instruction, early childhood educators continue to report difficulty implementing these approaches in developmentally responsive and inclusive ways (Allee, 2024; Ernst & Reynolds, 2021). In this study, the term inclusive refers broadly to instruction that recognizes and responds to learner diversity across developmental, linguistic, cultural, and academic dimensions. Rather than focusing solely on children with identified disabilities, inclusion in this context encompasses all learners, including those who are multilingual, gifted, have special needs, or have less visible learning differences such as dyslexia or anxiety. From this perspective, inclusive literacy instruction means designing learning experiences that ensure every child can participate meaningfully, access instruction at an appropriate level of challenge, and experience success (CAST, 2018). However, implementing such inclusive instruction remains difficult in practice. The challenge is not a lack of commitment but a lack of practical frameworks that translate theory into day-to-day instructional design.

Globally, this dilemma is magnified by issues of access and equity, as UNESCO and UNICEF (2024) emphasize that millions of children, especially those in low-income regions, still lack access to organized pre-primary education. Expanding access alone, however, is insufficient; what matters equally is the quality and inclusivity of instruction once children enter early learning settings. As a result, there is a growing need for frameworks that are adaptable and effective across diverse cultural, linguistic, and developmental contexts (Messenger & Gallagher, 2025; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024).

The CLEAR Approach (Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building) was developed to address the need for practical, inclusive frameworks that support educators in balancing exploratory, play-based learning with direct, explicit instruction. Designed by the author, a practitioner–researcher, and grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, the CLEAR Approach offers early childhood professionals an instructional design framework for inclusive instruction that bridges play-based exploration and direct, explicit teaching. It draws conceptually from inclusive models such as Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson, 2017), and Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2002), translating their broad principles into concrete, actionable teaching practice. Rather than prescribing curriculum content, CLEAR focuses on how instruction is delivered, through strategies that personalize learning, promote engagement, encourage active participation, and strengthen teacher–learner relationships.

The framework was designed specifically to support learners who are developmentally ready for more structured, skill-based instruction, including the pre-readiness and readiness phases of early literacy, a critical window when learners are developing print awareness, phonological understanding, and word recognition skills. By combining Child-Centered observation, Learner-Led choice, Engaging tools, Active participation, and strong Rapport, CLEAR offers an accessible structure for inclusive instruction. It reframes the debate between play and rigor as a false dichotomy by showing that both can coexist. Contemporary early childhood scholarship increasingly argues that play-based learning



and explicit instruction are not opposing approaches but can work together through intentional design that balances child autonomy with adult guidance (Allee, 2024; Pyle et al., 2024).

Engagement and confidence were selected as focal outcomes to determine how CLEAR-aligned instruction supports learning. Research on guided play and intentional early literacy instruction suggests that when educators meaningfully integrate play-based exploration with explicit teaching, learners demonstrate greater engagement, enjoyment, and confidence during literacy learning (Allee, 2024; Messenger & Gallagher, 2025; Pyle et al., 2024). The five components of CLEAR (Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building) provide educators with a framework for delivering explicit instruction in a playful and exploratory way. When instruction successfully bridges play-based exploration and direct, explicit teaching, this integration becomes visible through learners' engagement and confidence, outcomes that educators have identified as indicators of successful instructional integration (Cavanaugh et al., 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

The study was situated in a virtual one-on-one early literacy enrichment program in the United States, providing a specific context for examining how CLEAR-aligned instruction supported learner engagement and confidence. This qualitative descriptive study explored how educators and parents described young learners' engagement and confidence during instruction aligned with the CLEAR Approach. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the study aimed to provide a rich description of how the CLEAR framework supports the integration of play-based exploration and direct, explicit instruction in the context of early literacy.

The study addressed the following guiding questions:

1. How do educators and parents describe learners' engagement and confidence during CLEAR-aligned literacy instruction?
2. In what ways do these reflections illustrate how the CLEAR Approach bridges exploratory, play-based learning and direct, explicit instruction?
3. How do these insights inform ongoing refinement of the CLEAR Approach as an instructional design framework for inclusive instruction in early literacy contexts?

Collectively, these guiding questions reflect a broader inquiry into how instructional frameworks like CLEAR can inform inclusive literacy practices across varied educational contexts. This challenge extends beyond national boundaries, reflecting a broader need for inclusive frameworks that can be adapted to varied sociocultural and educational contexts. As international early childhood systems continue to emphasize quality, inclusion, and foundational learning as central pillars of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024), frameworks such as CLEAR may contribute to discussions on how to operationalize these priorities in practice.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is a fundamentally social process shaped by interaction, language, and shared activity. From this perspective, knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and collaboration between learners and more knowledgeable others within a given cultural context. Central to this theory is the zone of



proximal development (ZPD), the range between what a learner can do independently and what can be achieved with appropriate guidance or scaffolding. Instruction that occurs within the ZPD allows educators to tailor support to the learner's current abilities while gradually promoting independence and mastery.

The CLEAR Approach operationalizes Vygotsky's principles by positioning instruction as an interplay between support and autonomy. Through Child-Centered and Learner-Led practices, educators observe each learner's readiness level and scaffold experiences that extend development beyond the learner's independent capacity. The engaging and active components of CLEAR reflect Vygotsky's emphasis on learning through purposeful activity and social interaction, while Rapport Building mirrors his view that emotional connection is integral to cognitive growth. These features create instructional spaces where exploration and explicit guidance coexist as educators model, prompt, and question, while learners engage, experiment, and contribute to meaning making.

This sociocultural foundation also supports CLEAR's alignment with inclusive education. By viewing diversity as an asset to collective learning, the framework acknowledges that all learners, regardless of background, ability, or language, bring valuable perspectives to the learning community. Within a sociocultural lens, inclusion is not merely a matter of access but of participation, where every learner is positioned as an active contributor to shared learning experiences within the context of literacy instruction.

Accordingly, the CLEAR Approach extends Vygotsky's principles into early literacy contexts, emphasizing guided interaction, responsive scaffolding, and authentic social engagement as learners progress from supported participation toward increasing independence. By situating early literacy growth within this social and developmental continuum, CLEAR translates Vygotsky's theoretical principles into concrete instructional practice.

2.2 Conceptual foundation: the CLEAR framework

The CLEAR Approach (Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building) was designed as a framework for inclusive instruction intended to translate Vygotskian principles into actionable instructional practice (Vygotsky, 1978). The CLEAR Approach was developed by the author through iterative field-based application and practitioner reflection. It was designed to help early childhood professionals integrate play-based exploration and direct, explicit instruction in inclusive ways, addressing the full spectrum of learner variability, including differences in readiness, culture, language, and ability (CAST, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). Aligned with guided play pedagogy (Weisberg et al., 2013; Pyle & Danniels, 2017), CLEAR supports the intentional integration of exploration and instruction within inclusive, instructional contexts. CLEAR complements broader inclusion models by offering a concrete, acronym-based structure and strategies for instruction, that, in this study, were applied within early literacy contexts. This framework operationalizes inclusive principles into practical, moment-to-moment pedagogy, bridging research with daily classroom implementation. The need for such structure is especially evident in early literacy, where educators must integrate systematic instruction in foundational skills (Science of Reading principles) with opportunities for language-rich, culturally responsive exploration (Gay, 2002; Pyle et al., 2024; Rand & Morrow, 2021). While frameworks such as UDL, DI, and CRT provide comprehensive, research-based guidelines for inclusive instruction, their implementation often relies on the teacher's capacity to interpret and adapt them to specific contexts (Uyar & Eti, 2023). CLEAR provides that missing bridge by translating



inclusive theory into concrete instructional practice, enabling educators to intentionally integrate explicit instruction within exploratory, play-based learning experiences.

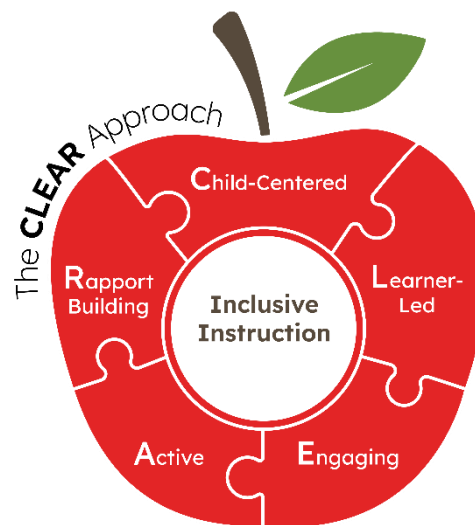


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the CLEAR Approach: An Instructional Design Framework for Inclusive Instruction

The conceptual image of the CLEAR Approach represents inclusive instruction through a cohesive, interdependent design. The apple symbolizes growth, knowledge, and early learning, while its five interlocking puzzle pieces represent the framework's core components: Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building. Together, these pieces illustrate how each component connects to and supports the others, forming a balanced, inclusive framework that bridges play-based exploration and explicit instruction.

Each of CLEAR's five components represents an interrelated element of inclusive instruction within early literacy contexts:

- **Child-Centered:** Plan instruction based on ongoing observations and assessments. Educators use these observations to determine exactly which literacy skills, such as specific letter-sound correspondences, a child is ready to practice next while also incorporating each learner's interests and cultural background, ensuring that instruction remains responsive and meaningful to each learner.
- **Learner-Led:** Give learners meaningful choices in how they engage with learning. Within early literacy contexts, learner-led practice might include choosing from teacher-prepared options that reflect personal interests, such as selecting picture cards or manipulatives to build compound words related to sports or animals (e.g., foot + ball = football or dog + house = doghouse). Child-centered observation informs the design, ensuring that learner choice remains connected to student interests.
- **Engaging:** Design learning experiences that capture interest and attention. Multisensory materials and interactive methods keep learners curious, focused, and joyful in their exploration of literacy concepts, such as using monster pointer fingers

to find letters in a book or magical reading glasses to build confidence while reading, ensuring that learners connect enjoyment with focused, purposeful literacy learning.

- **Active:** Include movement and active participation in learning. Physical participation reinforces focus, memory, and comprehension as learners move, communicate, and collaborate with literacy concepts such as letter scavenger hunts, dance-freeze rhyme games, or partner reading, ensuring that physical and social participation strengthens cognitive processing and literacy skill development.
- **Rapport Building:** Build positive relationships and a supportive environment. Consistent encouragement and predictable routines help learners feel secure and confident in their interactions. Within early literacy contexts, rapport can be strengthened through practices such as establishing clear procedures and transitions, using praise or encouragement systems like cheer chants or sticker charts, or adding elements of novelty through themed activities, ensuring that every learner feels valued, motivated, and included in the literacy experience.

Collectively, these components create a balanced framework that bridges exploratory, play-based learning and direct, explicit instruction. By combining autonomy with structure, the CLEAR Approach enables educators to deliver instruction that is both responsive and rigorous, ensuring that foundational literacy skills develop within a context of joy, agency, and inclusion. The framework serves as a lens through which early childhood professionals can design, observe, and reflect on practice in ways that honor the individuality of learners while maintaining fidelity to research-based literacy instruction. Aligned with modern and postmodern curriculum perspectives (Doll, 2012), CLEAR reflects both systematic, evidence-based design and flexible, context-responsive implementation.

While inclusive frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL; CAST, 2018), Differentiated Instruction (DI; Tomlinson, 2017), and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT; Gay, 2002) provide comprehensive principles for inclusive instruction, educators in early childhood settings continue to report uncertainty about how to integrate explicit, systematic instruction within play-based, developmentally appropriate environments (Messenger & Gallagher, 2024; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2024). Research highlights persistent challenges in balancing foundational skill instruction with exploratory learning and determining appropriate levels of adult guidance in literacy (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Pyle et al., 2024). Additionally, educators often receive limited preparation in how to merge play-based pedagogy with culturally responsive, research-based instruction, resulting in inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices (Allee, 2024; Ernst & Reynolds, 2021). The CLEAR Approach addresses these needs by offering a practical, structured model that organizes inclusive principles into actionable strategies, providing educators with a clear method for merging rigor and play, scaffolding and autonomy, and systematic skill instruction within joyful, developmentally responsive learning contexts.

3. Methodology

This qualitative descriptive study (Sandelowski, 2000) explored how educators and families described learners' engagement and confidence during instruction aligned with the CLEAR Approach. A qualitative descriptive design was selected to capture participants' reflections in accessible, everyday language, providing a rich summary of experiences within authentic instructional contexts.



Data were drawn from existing instructional artifacts collected between 2021 and 2024 during implementation of the CLEAR Approach in a virtual early literacy enrichment program in the United States. The framework had originally been implemented in in-person settings; however, instruction transitioned to a virtual one-on-one format during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing an opportunity to examine whether the positive patterns of learner engagement and confidence observed in-person would also emerge in a virtual environment. This format offered a consistent and structured setting for analyzing qualitative data while still reflecting authentic instructional interactions. Each learner participated in twenty-four weekly, thirty-minute one-on-one sessions focused on early literacy skills such as print concepts, phonological awareness, and word recognition. Each session followed a consistent sequence of check-in, review, literacy skill introduction, and a learner-led activity, guided by the five CLEAR components: Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building (see Figure 1).

The dataset included Student Progress Forms and post-assessment reflections completed by instructors, as well as Parent Feedback Forms and informal parent interviews collected for instructional improvement. These sources provided complementary educator and family perspectives on learner engagement and confidence.

All data were originally gathered for instructional improvement and communication purposes rather than for research. Families voluntarily enrolled in the instructional program and signed instructional agreements permitting assessment and feedback collection as part of standard instructional practice. For this study, all data were retrospectively analyzed and de-identified prior to analysis. Because participants were between the ages of three and five, assent was addressed developmentally through ongoing learner willingness to participate during instructional activities and the option to discontinue participation at any time.

A purposive, criterion-based selection (Creswell & Poth, 2018) identified twelve learners aged three to five, including eight children enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs (Pre-K) and four enrolled in Kindergarten in the United States, who completed the full twenty-four-session sequence between 2021 and 2024. Cases were included if they (a) completed one-on-one virtual instruction, (b) participated within the 2021–2024 timeframe, (c) completed the full twenty-four-session instructional sequence, and (d) received instruction from a single instructor, with the sample drawn from multiple instructors. Instruction was delivered by four trained instructors, each following a semi-structured protocol, a consistent lesson framework that guided instructional sequence, timing, and activity structure while allowing flexibility for learner responsiveness, ensuring fidelity while maintaining individualized responsiveness. Data were analyzed using directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with a deductive coding framework derived from the five CLEAR components, which collectively represented the instructional conditions associated with learner engagement and confidence. Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral, the researcher engaged in iterative readings, coded statements according to the corresponding CLEAR component, and refined codes to identify recurring patterns across sources. Because qualitative description emphasizes low-inference reporting (Sandelowski, 2000), participants' own words were retained whenever possible to preserve authenticity and context.

Credibility was supported through triangulation of educator and parent perspectives across Student Progress Forms and post-assessment reflections completed by educators, as well as Parent Feedback Forms and informal interviews provided by parents, which together offered a comprehensive picture



of learner experience. As the developer of the CLEAR Approach, owner of the instructional program from which the data were drawn, and one of the instructors involved in implementation, the author engaged in reflexivity throughout analysis to reduce bias. This included maintaining low-inference reporting (retaining participants' own words to preserve authenticity), employing directed content analysis to adhere strictly to the pre-established CLEAR coding framework, and continuously comparing coded statements back to the raw data to ensure that interpretations reflected participants' perspectives rather than the framework's intended impact. All data were de-identified prior to analysis and analyzed retrospectively; no new data collection occurred.

4. Findings

Data from educators and parents were organized and interpreted using the five components of the CLEAR Approach, Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building, as a deductive framework.

4.1 Child-Centered

This theme included descriptions of instruction focused on individual learner profiles and parental goals. Educators documented observations throughout instruction. For instance, one educator noted that "Participant 11 sometimes struggled with capitalized words, though he knows almost all words in lowercase," while another explained that "Participant 6 is challenged by [the sight word] 'can'; we will keep practicing" Educators highlighted that "Participant 10 always brings her love for Encanto into our lessons," and "Participant 11 is always so excited to read, talk about Tom Brady, and play games together."

One parent reflection noted that they enrolled their child "to ensure readiness for kindergarten," adding that "learning how to read is foundational to reading to learn." Another shared that their child "recently took a reading assessment at his school and scored in the 84th percentile." The parent of Participant 1 requested "a detailed report with recommendations once a month."

4.2 Learner-Led

This theme included descriptions of learner choice and autonomy. One educator noted that "Participant 1 got sad when there were no more activities in the binder—wants to continue!" Another shared that "Participant 2 loves to complete the worksheets and the matching game is her favorite!" While others described learners engaging in options such as "freeze dance," "tic-tac-toe," and "open-the-box."

The parent of Participant 2 shared that their child "spends time reading books every night to her two younger sisters," while another parent described how "My son developed a true love for reading and looks forward to learning new words every week." Parents also noted that their children felt "proud of [their] reading progress."

4.3 Engaging

This theme included descriptions of interactive tools and technology. Instructors noted activities such as "tic-tac-toe," "open-the-box," and virtual "freeze dance." One educator shared that "Participant



2 enjoys saying words in different silly voices,” while another noted that “Participant 3 loves to do freeze dance together and complete worksheets.”

One parent described that their child’s teacher “makes it such an enjoyable learning experience with a mixture of games, reading stories, and even freeze dance time.” Parents observed their children “look forward to class every week” and “feel proud of their reading progress.”

4.4 Active

This theme included descriptions of active participation. One educator noted that “Participant 9 needed time to warm up, but once engaged, had fun learning words,” while another noted that learners were “actively engaged in all activities—always excited to read.” Activities such as “freeze dance,” “open-the-box,” matching games, and worksheets were implemented.

One parent shared that their child was “thrilled about being recognized as Star of the Month” and “so proud of the reading progress he has made,” while others noted that their children “look forward to each class” and “love learning new words every week.”

4.5 Rapport Building

This theme included descriptions of Rapport Building. Instructors described their learners as “a pleasure to work with,” “a bright light in my day,” and “so much fun to work with.” Educators noted, “Participant 11 is always so excited to read, talk about Tom Brady, and play games together,” and “Participant 6’s happy smile and excitement make reading fun.”

One parent shared that their child “looks forward to her class every week,” while another described the instructor’s “enthusiasm and creative approach” as making “all the difference.” Parents reported that their children had a “positive and supportive experience” and “developed a true love for reading.”

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that when educators intentionally implement the five components of the CLEAR Approach, direct, explicit literacy instruction becomes exploratory, playful, and inclusive, leading to engagement and confidence-building. Across all five components, CLEAR-aligned instruction may have contributed to conditions in which engagement and confidence flourished together rather than separately. Personalized, scaffolded guidance (Child-Centered) and opportunities for choice and autonomy (Learner-Led) nurtured ownership and readiness. Interactive tools and technology (Engaging) and movement-based participation (Active) sustained focus and joy, while strong relationships and consistent encouragement (Rapport Building) cultivated emotional safety and pride.

The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to the study’s three guiding questions and situates them within contemporary literature on play-based pedagogy, guided play, and explicit early literacy instruction.

5.1 How confidence and engagement work together (RQ1)

Findings from educators and families indicated that learners displayed engagement and confidence when instruction reflected the five interconnected components of the CLEAR Approach. Educators



and parents described learners who were eager to participate, responsive to choice and movement, and proud of their accomplishments. Engagement was most evident when instruction was responsive to each learner's interests (Child-Centered, Learner-Led) and incorporated interactive, movement-based tasks (Engaging, Active). Confidence emerged as learners experienced success in recognizing words, applying reading strategies, and receiving consistent praise and encouragement (Rapport Building). The data suggest that this emerging confidence may have extended beyond instructional sessions, as parents described children independently engaging in literacy-related behaviors at home, such as reading to younger siblings.

These reflections suggest that engagement and confidence functioned as reciprocal constructs: as learners became more confident, their engagement deepened, and increased engagement further strengthened confidence. Educators and families described this relationship as a part of learner progress within CLEAR-aligned instruction. The emotional safety and individualized scaffolding fostered through Rapport Building may have provided the foundation for exploration, persistence, and self-assurance, illustrating that social-emotional support and academic growth are mutually reinforcing dimensions of early literacy development (Allee, 2024; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

5.2 The CLEAR Approach as a pedagogical bridge (RQ2)

The findings suggest that the CLEAR Approach bridged exploratory, play-based learning with structured, explicit literacy instruction, addressing a persistent instructional tension (Messenger & Gallagher, 2024). Through Child-Centered observation and Learner-Led choice, instruction remained developmentally responsive while maintaining focus on foundational skills such as print awareness, word recognition, vocabulary, and early fluency (Pyle et al., 2024). Educators embedded explicit literacy into instructional contexts, using games and movement to encourage active participation (Allee, 2024). These practices support Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that learning occurs within socially interactive, scaffolded experiences situated in the ZPD and guided by a more knowledgeable other (MKO). The Child-Centered component most directly reflects the educator functioning as the MKO: educators use ongoing observation and data to identify each learner's ZPD and then use that insight to guide the selection and implementation of the remaining components, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building, so that instruction remains responsive, scaffolded, and inclusive. This scaffolding was operationalized through instructional design, ongoing observation, assessment, and the responsive implementation of instructional activities. These findings suggest the CLEAR Approach may translate the theoretical framework of guided play pedagogy (Weisberg et al., 2013) into concrete, actionable practice. Contemporary scholarship continues to document tensions that educators experience when attempting to balance play-based pedagogy with explicit literacy instruction in early childhood settings (Messenger & Gallagher, 2024, 2025; Pyle et al., 2024). While many inclusive frameworks describe what effective instruction should entail, CLEAR illustrates how this balance might occur in real-time by balancing autonomy with structure and exploration with rigor (Allee, 2024). Engagement and confidence, as reflected in participant descriptions, suggest that explicit literacy instruction and playful learning are not opposing forces but complementary processes when guided by intentional design (Messenger & Gallagher, 2025; Rand & Morrow, 2021).



5.3 Refining the framework for practice (RQ3)

Reflections from educators and families informed ongoing refinement of the CLEAR Approach. The emphasis on rapport underscores the importance of relational quality as an intentional pedagogical element rather than a background condition for learning. Building trust and emotional connection appeared to support learners' confidence and willingness to attempt new challenges, suggesting that Rapport Building may function as the foundational element for the other four components. This alignment between safety and academic risk-taking is supported by research indicating that responsive relationships and a sense of safety are essential to promote brain growth and mitigate stress in early learners (Allee, 2024). Equally, the findings highlight the value of learner autonomy. The most confident and engaged learners appeared to be those who perceived agency in their learning, selecting activities, seeing their preferences honored, and sharing progress with family members. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that protecting child agency and choice is a critical benefit of play-based contexts, which allows children to internalize skills more effectively than in didactic settings (Pyle et al., 2024). Furthermore, providing opportunities for children to compose their own messages and lead their learning builds both their literacy skills and their personal agency (Messenger & Gallagher, 2025). Integrating more structured opportunities for learner voice and transparent family communication may further strengthen implementation fidelity across diverse instructional settings. At the same time, the findings suggest that implementing the CLEAR framework requires a high degree of ongoing observation, instructional responsiveness, and the ability to move along an instructional continuum. Balancing learner autonomy and playful exploration with explicit literacy goals may demand strong real-time instructional adjustment to meet varied learner needs. These instructional demands may be especially important to consider in classroom settings with larger group sizes, limited instructional support, or varying levels of educator experience.

Finally, the virtual context of this study provided meaningful insight into CLEAR's adaptability. Despite being delivered entirely online, educators maintained engagement through interactive tools and relational support. This may suggest that the CLEAR framework's core components are transferable across modalities, which may have implications for broadening access to inclusive early instruction across delivery formats. This transferability suggests CLEAR may offer a useful model for diverse early learning contexts, particularly in multilingual and resource-varied environments where educators face challenges integrating explicit instruction within play-based curricula.

Together, these findings address the research questions by illustrating how the CLEAR Approach fosters learner engagement and confidence through a balance of exploration and explicit instruction. Grounded in Vygotskian principles of scaffolding, social interaction, and guided participation, CLEAR offers a framework for instruction within early literacy contexts. The integration of its five components suggests that when instruction is Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and rooted in strong Rapport, early literacy learning may support learner readiness and confidence.

6. Implications for Practice and Theory

6.1 Implications for educators

The CLEAR Approach offers a concrete structure for balancing explicit instruction with playful, exploratory learning. Educators can use CLEAR as a planning and reflection framework to guide lesson



planning that integrates each learner's interests and instructional level, offers meaningful choices, incorporates engaging and active participation, and fosters rapport and encouragement while maintaining skill development goals.

6.2 Implications for teacher education

Teacher preparation programs can incorporate CLEAR as an applied model for implementing inclusive pedagogies such as UDL, DI, CRT, and guided play within early literacy coursework. While guided play has often been introduced theoretically, the CLEAR framework translates this concept into applied classroom practice, illustrating how exploratory, play-based learning and direct, explicit instruction can be intentionally integrated.

6.3 Implications for theory

This study extends applications of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by positioning Child-Centered decision-making as the mechanism for locating each learner's ZPD and guiding responsive scaffolding. Within CLEAR, ongoing assessment identifies what a learner is ready to tackle next (ZPD), and those data then shape how the remaining components, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building, are intentionally selected and enacted to support progress. In this way, CLEAR illustrates how ZPD-aligned scaffolding and social interaction can be designed to foster inclusion, confidence, and engagement in early literacy learning.

6.4 Implications for learners

The findings suggest that CLEAR may benefit learners by creating literacy experiences that are both playful and rigorous. When educators apply the framework's five interconnected components, Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building, learners experience instruction that is responsive to their developmental readiness, encourages confidence, and supports sustained engagement. By balancing exploratory learning with direct, explicit instruction, CLEAR may foster a sense of accomplishment and belonging that contributes to early literacy growth and motivation.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While the findings provide meaningful insight into the potential of the CLEAR Approach, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a small, context-specific sample ($n = 12$) drawn from a single virtual one-on-one enrichment program, which may limit transferability to broader early childhood classroom-based contexts. Additionally, because this qualitative descriptive design focused on educator and parent reflections rather than direct learner assessment, the study did not examine measurable literacy outcomes; therefore, the impact of CLEAR on children's literacy growth cannot be determined at this stage. Finally, the author's dual role as framework developer and researcher introduces potential bias, though this was mitigated through reflexive analysis and triangulation of multiple data sources.

Educators with prior experience in special education or inclusive practices may have brought additional expertise to the scaffolding process, using the same CLEAR structure but varying in how they guided, prompted, or extended learner choices. Because instruction was delivered in a virtual one-on-one format, factors such as home setting, technology access, and learner comfort with the digital



environment may have influenced engagement. Although these contextual factors fall outside the study's scope, they highlight the importance of examining environmental influences on implementation fidelity in future research.

Future research should examine the CLEAR Approach in larger and more diverse settings, including in-person classrooms, small-group interventions, and multilingual environments. Mixed-methods or experimental studies could quantify the framework's impact on specific literacy outcomes, such as phonological awareness, word recognition, and early fluency, while also examining the acceptability and practicability of the CLEAR Approach as an inclusive framework in early childhood settings. Evaluating these early implementation outcomes will help determine whether the framework effectively supports student literacy growth while also being welcomed by educators and workable within authentic instructional contexts. These findings will, in turn, guide future research on student literacy outcomes and framework fidelity.

8. Conclusion

Findings from this qualitative descriptive study suggest that the CLEAR Approach offers a practical and inclusive framework for bridging the divide between play-based exploration and direct, explicit instruction. Grounded in Vygotskian theory, CLEAR translates sociocultural principles into five interconnected components, Child-Centered, Learner-Led, Engaging, Active, and Rapport Building, that collectively position teaching as an experience that is both intentional and learner-centered.

Findings from educators and families revealed that when instruction is guided by these components, participants described learners as demonstrating engagement and growing confidence in reading. The framework's design emphasizes not what to teach, but how to teach inclusively, linking foundational skill development with meaningful social interaction, choice, and creativity to balance explicit instruction with exploratory, learner-led engagement.

The CLEAR Approach bridges explicit instruction, exploratory learning, and inclusive pedagogy through instructional design to support early literacy practice toward a model that is both research-informed and accessible. Beyond its national context, the framework's emphasis on inclusion aligns with global education priorities outlined by UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), underscoring its potential relevance for international adaptation and collaboration. As future studies continue to examine its acceptability, practicability, and fidelity across diverse early childhood settings, the CLEAR Approach shows potential as a framework for fostering inclusive, engaging, and developmentally responsive instruction.

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