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Title

EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF UNSTRUCTURED FREE PLAY ON COGNITIVE DEVELOPEMNT OF STANDARD 1 LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY AT KIDDIES PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MZUZU

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of unstructured free play on the cognitive development of Standard 1 learners at Kiddies Primary School in Mzuzu. Unstructured free play allows children to engage freely in activities of their choice, which supports key cognitive skills such as attention, memory, language development, creativity, and problem-solving. The study was guided by Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which emphasize active learning and social interaction in children's cognitive growth. Existing literature supports the role of free play in improving concentration, language development, and problem- solving abilities among young learners. An explanatory sequential research design was used, beginning with the collection of quantitative data followed by qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of how unstructured free play influences cognitive development among Standard 1 learners at Kiddies Primary School in Mzuzu. A total of 16 participants, including teachers, administrators, and learners, were selected using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. Data were collected through questionnaires, classroom observations, and focus group discussions.

The findings showed that unstructured free play had a positive influence on learners' cognitive development. Most teachers and administrators reported improvements in learners' attention, concentration, language development, creativity, and problem-solving skills after play activities. Specifically, 67% of respondents agreed that free play enhanced attention and concentration, while 83.3% observed improvements in learners' speech and comprehension. In addition, 66.7% reported strengthened problem-solving and decision-making skills. Classroom observations further revealed that learners remained focused for 10–12 minutes after play and used richer vocabulary during learning activities. Although minor challenges such as overexcitement and tiredness were noted, the overall findings indicate that unstructured free play significantly supports cognitive growth and classroom readiness among Standard 1 learners.

Keywords: Unstructured free play**,** Cognitive development**,** early childhood education and Standard 1 learner

INTRODUCTION

Children learn in various ways, and one of the most effective ways for young learners is through unstructured free play. Unstructured free play is especially important for Standard 1 learners because it provides opportunities for children to explore their environment, express creativity, and interact freely with their peers. In a relaxed and child-centered setting, learners are able to learn naturally through play. This study focuses on examining how unstructured free play influences the cognitive development of Standard 1 learners at Kiddies Primary School in Mzuzu.

Cognitive development refers to the growth of a child's ability to think, understand, and make sense of the world around them. During Standard 1, children begin to develop key cognitive skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making. Unstructured free play allows learners to practice these skills in an enjoyable and meaningful way. Through play, children experiment, solve problems, communicate ideas, and learn from their peers.

Research shows that when children are given time and space to engage in unstructured free play, they develop important thinking, language, and social skills that support their overall development. Studies indicate that free play enhances creativity, improves language development, and strengthens children's ability to interact

socially. Many educators also recognize that free play is not just a leisure activity but a vital part of learning, as it contributes to cognitive, social, and emotional growth. According to early childhood education guidelines, unstructured free play helps children understand themselves and others, build friendships, and practice cooperation, sharing, and conflict resolution. Overall, this research examines the role of unstructured free play in supporting cognitive development among Standard 1 learners and highlights its importance in early childhood education and future learning.

Background

Children learn in many ways, and one of the most natural methods is through unstructured free play, where learners choose what, how, and with whom to play. This type of play supports cognitive development by improving memory, attention, problem-solving, decision-making, and social skills. For example, activities like building blocks or traditional games such as kachele help children learn to balance, solve problems, negotiate rules, share, and take turns, while also fostering creativity and language development *(Ginsburg, 2007; Lobo, 2006).*

In formal school settings, especially for Standard 1 learners, the focus is often on reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, research emphasizes that unstructured free play is equally important, as it encourages imagination, creativity, and critical thinking. During free play, children may create stories, build structures, or imitate peers, which enhances their understanding of the world and develops essential cognitive skills *(Bodrova & Leong, 2007).* At Kiddies Primary School in Mzuzu, Standard 1 learners are at a critical stage of brain growth, making it vital to explore how free play influences their thinking and learning abilities.

In Malawi, as in many countries, schools often prioritize exams and academic results over play, yet children need time to explore and learn through play to achieve holistic development *(UNICEF, 2012).* Recognizing the connection between unstructured free play and cognitive development can help schools design curricula that balance academic learning with play, ultimately supporting better learning outcomes, confidence, and enjoyment among young learners *(Whitebread & Basilio, 2012).*

Problem Statement

Unstructured free play is vital for the holistic development of children, particularly Standard 1 learners, as it enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, memory, attention, and reasoning skills. Studies show that unstructured play promotes creativity and improves cognitive control, which are essential for learning and everyday decision-making *(Adebunmi, 2022; Charles et al., 2019).*

Despite the benefit of unstructured free play many schools prioritize structured academic activities and limit opportunities for free play. Research by *UNICEF (2012, 2018)* emphasizes that children learn not only through formal lessons but also through play, which significantly supports cognitive development, especially between ages three and seven. This study, therefore, investigates how increased opportunities for unstructured free play influence the cognitive development, academic performance, and overall growth of Standard 1 learners at Kiddies Primary School.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Main objective

The main objective of this study is to examine the influence of unstructured free play on cognitive development on the standard 1 learners at Kiddies primary

school in Mzuzu.

Specific objectives

- To identify how unstructured free play influences learners' attention and concentration during class time at kiddies primary.
- To determine the extent to which unstructured free play enhances on learners' speech act (language) and comprehension at Kiddies primary.
- To assess the help unstructured free play renders on learners' problem solving skills at Kiddies primary school in Mzuzu.

Research questions

- How does unstructured play affects the cognitive development of standard 1 learners at kiddies primary school?
- How do teachers observe changes in attention and learning when students have unstructured free play time?
- How does unstructured free play help to improve student's speech and comprehension at kiddies primary school?
- How does imaginative play contribute to creativity and problem solving skills in standard 1 learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical evidence shows that unstructured free play positively influences the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young learners *(Babbie, 2020).* Studies indicate that children who engage in free play demonstrate longer attention spans, improved concentration, and better classroom engagement *(Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Strong, 2005; Ruff & Lawson, 2014).* Free play also supports the development of friendships, emotional regulation, and social skills, which further enhance attention and participation in class *(Rubin, 2015).* In Malawi, some schools, such as Makupo and Chibavi Primary Schools, integrate free play into their curricula to foster exploration, social interaction, and skill development *(Education, 2018).* Researchers emphasize that a balance between structured learning and unstructured play is crucial for optimal development, as playtime allows learners to recharge while maintaining focus during academic tasks *(Blatchford, 2011; MacIntyre, 2017).*

Unstructured free play also enhances language, comprehension, and communication skills. Children use language to negotiate, role-play, and create stories, which improves vocabulary, sentence structures, and understanding of perspectives *(Sutherland, 2015; Jackie & Castleberry, 2010; Ginsburg, 2007; Singer, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978).* Social play and community support further strengthen speech, comprehension, and engagement in classroom activities *(Pellegrini & Gustafsson, 2005; Lonsdale, 2013; Smith, 2016; Burghardt, 2013).*

Moreover, unstructured free play promotes problem-solving and critical thinking. Children learn to make decisions, experiment, and overcome challenges, which enhances creativity, perseverance, and cognitive flexibility *(Chimowa, 2020; Ginsburg, 2007; Berk, 2009; Smith & Jones, 2015).* Play provides a safe environment to fail, try again, and develop confidence, emotional resilience, and collaborative problem-solving skills *(Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978; Denham, 2012; University of Malawi, 2020; Paragrini & Gustafsson, 2005).*

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory. Piaget emphasizes that children learn best through active engagement with their environment, with

play being essential for exploration, experimentation, and understanding *(Piaget, 1952)*. Vygotsky highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive growth, emphasizing collaborative learning, idea sharing, and problem-solving as vital for development *(Vygotsky, 1978)*. These theories support the inclusion of unstructured free play in school curricula and explain its role in promoting cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

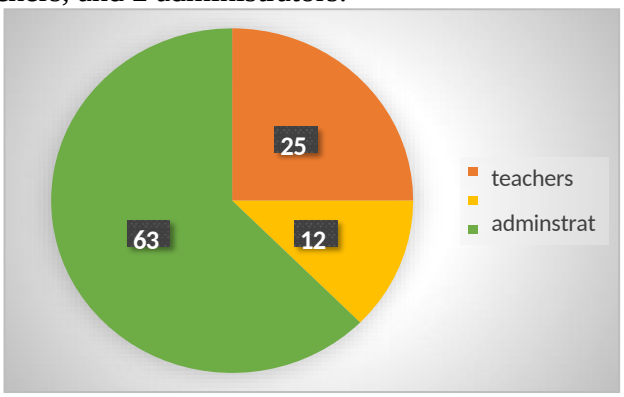
This study employed an explanatory sequential research design, collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper insights into how unstructured free play influences the cognitive development of Standard 1 learners at Kiddies Primary School, Mzuzu *(Creswell, 2018)*. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Questionnaires and structured observations gathered numerical data, while focus group discussions with teachers and administrators provided in-depth understanding of learners' play behavior and cognitive growth. The study was conducted at Mzuzu area, selected for its focus on child-centered and inclusive education. The target population included all Standard 1 learners (aged 6–7), as well as teachers and administrators. Stratified sampling was used to select 10 learners for quantitative data, ensuring fair representation of both boys and girls, while purposive sampling identified 6 key participants (teachers and administrators) for qualitative data. The total sample size was 16 respondents, allowing close observation of play activities and meaningful data collection.

Research instruments comprised questionnaires and observation checklists for quantitative data, and focus group discussions for qualitative insights. A pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability and feasibility of instruments, sampling methods, and data collection procedures. Data analysis involved Microsoft Excel for quantitative data using bar charts, pie charts, and histograms, while qualitative data from focus group discussions, observations, and questionnaires were analyzed thematically.

Ethical considerations included informed consent from parents/guardians, maintaining confidentiality of all data, ensuring participants' safety and well-being, and conducting the study without bias, treating all learners fairly. This methodology ensured a systematic, ethical, and comprehensive approach to understanding the role of unstructured free play in enhancing cognitive development, providing both numerical evidence and in-depth insights from educators and learners.

RESULTS

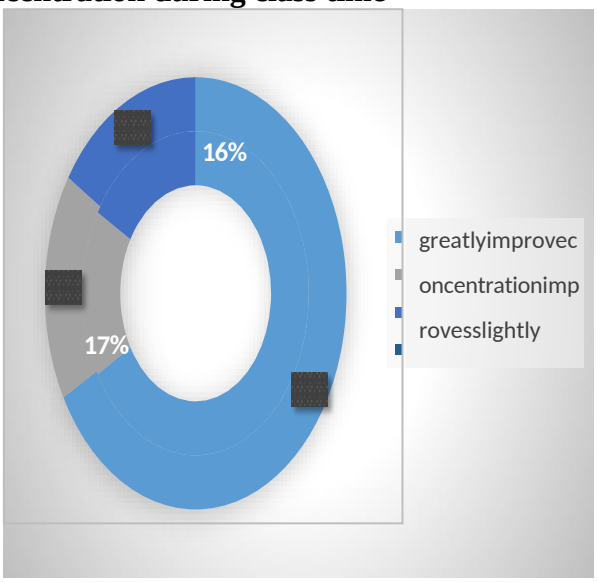
This chapter presents the findings from questionnaires, observations, and focus group discussions conducted at Kiddies Primary School to examine the influence of unstructured free play on the cognitive development of Standard 1 learners.
The study achieved a 100% response rate with 16 participants, including 10 learners, 4 teachers, and 2 administrators.



Demographic data showed a balanced representation of **g**enders, with 56.2% female and 43.7% male participants, and the majority of learners aged 1–18 years (62%).

Findings

To identify how unstructured free play influences Learners attention and concentration during class time



The findings indicate that unstructured free play positively impacts learners' attention and concentration. About 67% of respondents reported that play enhances focus, classroom engagement, and readiness for academic tasks. Observations confirmed that learners returned from play sessions calmer, happier, and more attentive, aligning with previous research *(Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Strong, 2005).* Some challenges were noted, including over-excitement, conflicts, and fatigue, highlighting the need for a balance between play and structured learning *(Blatchford, 2011).*

To determine the extent to which unstructured free play enhances on learner's speech act (language) and comprehension

Regarding language and comprehension**,** 50% of respondents indicated that unstructured free play significantly improved learners' vocabulary, sentence formation, and confidence in expressing ideas, while 33.3% observed moderate improvements. Role-playing and pretend play were particularly effective in enhancing expressive language, comprehension, and peer interaction, allowing learners to negotiate rules, cooperate, and resolve conflicts *(Sutherland, 2015; Jackie & Castleberry, 2010; Ginsberg, 2007).*

To assess the help unstructured free play renders on learner's problem solving skills

In terms of problem-solving skills, 66.7% of respondents agreed that free play fosters creativity, decision-making, resilience, and logical thinking. Learners were observed exploring solutions independently, experimenting through trial and error, and applying strategies learned during play to classroom tasks. Unstructured play also promoted teamwork, emotional regulation, and confidence when facing challenges *(Chimowa, 2020; Ginsberg, 2007).*

Overall, the findings show that unstructured free play significantly contributes to cognitive development**, e**nhancing attention, concentration, language, comprehension, creativity, and problem-solving abilities among Standard 1 learners. These results affirm the importance of integrating free play into early childhood education to support holistic learning and development.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study clearly indicate that unstructured free play positively influences multiple dimensions of cognitive development among Standard 1 learners. Attention and concentration were significantly enhanced, with learners returning to class more focused and ready to engage in learning tasks. This supports previous research by *Pellegrini* and *Bohn (2005)* and *Strong (2005)*, who emphasized that play acts as a mental "*reset,*" allowing

children to regulate their energy and attention for academic tasks. Additionally, the study highlighted improvements in learners' expressive language and comprehension. Role-play, make-believe, and collaborative games provided learners with opportunities to expand vocabulary, form coherent sentences, and practice listening skills. These findings align with Vygotsky's theory, emphasizing that social interaction is crucial for cognitive growth and the development of higher-order thinking skills *(Vygotsky, 1978).*

Furthermore, unstructured free play was found to enhance problem-solving abilities Learners explored ideas independently, applied trial-and-error strategies, and collaborated with peers to resolve challenges during play. This hands-on, experiential approach strengthened critical thinking, creativity, and resilience, supporting *Chimowa's (2020)* assertion that traditional games develop higher-order cognitive skills. Observations during classroom activities indicated that learners could transfer problem-solving strategies from play to academic tasks, highlighting the practical value of play in learning. The study also underscores the social benefits of play, as learners developed cooperation, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills, which are essential for collaborative learning and positive classroom environments.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that unstructured free play plays a critical role in the cognitive development of Standard 1 learners at Kiddies Primary School. Across multiple indicators—attention and concentration, language and comprehension, and problem-solving skills—play was found to positively influence learners' abilities, engagement, and overall readiness for learning. Learners who participated in unstructured free play demonstrated improved focus and longer attention spans in classroom activities, confirming that play helps release energy, refresh the mind, and prepare children for structured learning. Additionally, unstructured play provided opportunities for expressive language, vocabulary expansion, and narrative skills, enabling learners to communicate more confidently and understand instructions better.

Furthermore, unstructured free play enhanced problem-solving skills, creativity, and decision- making, as children explored ideas independently, collaborated with peers, and applied trial-and- error approaches. The study highlights that the cognitive benefits of free play extend beyond academic tasks, also supporting emotional regulation, confidence, independence, and social interaction, which are foundational for holistic development.

Overall, the findings emphasize that unstructured free play is not merely a recreational activity, but a strategic tool for learning and development. By integrating play into early childhood education, schools can create environments that nurture both cognitive and social-emotional growth. This underscores the need for educators, parents, and policymakers to value play as an essential component of early learning, ensuring children develop the skills and confidence needed for future academic success and lifelong learning.

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