

“Nurturing Minds through Play: Family Perceptions of Play-Based Learning – A Case Study of Mazabuka District, Zambia”

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ABSTRACT

This article explores family perceptions of play-based learning in the home environment in Mazabuka District, Zambia. It is based on a qualitative study that examined how cultural and familial beliefs shape understanding and engagement with play as a learning tool in early childhood education. The research was guided by three objectives and employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 25 participants, including five early childhood education teachers and 20 parents or guardians in Mazabuka. Through thematic analysis, the study found that while many families acknowledged the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of play-based learning, others viewed play as recreational rather than educational. Cultural norms, perceptions of unstructured play, and concerns about disruptive activities influenced parental support. The findings highlight the importance of raising awareness among families about the educational value of play. The study recommends parent sensitisation programmes, stronger collaboration between families and educators, and the creation of safe, culturally appropriate home play environments.

Keywords: Play-based learning, home environment, family beliefs, parental involvement, early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning (PBL) is widely recognised as a foundational approach in early childhood education, promoting children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development through interactive and exploratory activities. Scholars such as Henricks (2023), supported by Mwansa and Tembo (2023), argue that play is not merely a recreational activity but a vital pedagogical tool that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and social competence. Within Zambia’s formal education system, play-based learning has been increasingly integrated into early childhood education policies, reflecting its importance in promoting holistic child development (Ministry of Education, 2023).

While schools have made strides in implementing PBL, learning extends beyond formal classrooms. According to Phiri and Banda (2021), children’s foundational learning experiences often occur in home environments, where they engage in meaningful interactions with parents and caregivers. The home, regarded as the first classroom, plays a critical role in shaping children’s early learning experiences. Through everyday activities such as storytelling, role play, and problem-solving games, children develop essential skills long before they enter formal schooling (Kalinde & Vermeulen 2016).

Zambia has recognised the centrality of PBL by developing frameworks such as the *Learning through Play in Early Education: Teacher’s Manual* (2021) and the *Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE Teachers* (2020), which not only support classroom practices but also underscore the need for enabling home environments (Kaluba, Phiri & Banda, 2024). These policies call for collaboration between homes and schools, acknowledging that children’s learning outcomes are enhanced when both environments support play-based experiences.

Despite these developments, the home environment presents both opportunities and challenges for implementing PBL. Research by Ndlovu (2021) highlights how access to safe play spaces, availability of play materials, and active parental involvement contribute significantly to children's development. Children from homes with supportive play resources tend to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, creativity, and problem-solving abilities (Kaluba, Kalinde, Mambwe, Sichula, and Njobvu 2024)). However, economic hardships, overcrowding, and limited parental awareness often impede children's ability to engage in rich play experiences. Furthermore, cultural beliefs about the role of play influence how families perceive and prioritise play-based learning. In some Zambian communities, play is still viewed as mere leisure, not an integral part of learning, leading to diminished support for play-based educational practices at home (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017).

The Education Sector Skills Plan (2017–2021) and the Early Childhood Teachers Diploma Syllabus (2015) stress the need for aligning school-based learning with home practices, advocating for parental engagement and the integration of play into everyday home routines. However, disparities remain, particularly in how different families understand and respond to the concept of play-based learning.

This study focuses on understanding family perceptions towards play-based learning in the home environment in Mazabuka District, Zambia. It seeks to explore the cultural and familial beliefs about play, how these beliefs influence home practices, and the perceived benefits of play-based learning in children's development. Additionally, the study will investigate parental concerns surrounding non-supportive or unstructured play and how these concerns may limit children's learning opportunities. By examining these factors, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the role family dynamics play in either fostering or limiting children's engagement in PBL at home.

Understanding these perceptions is essential for informing strategies that support families in promoting play-based learning, ultimately contributing to a more holistic and inclusive approach to early childhood education in Zambia.

Statement of the problem

Play-based learning is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of early childhood education, known for its ability to foster cognitive, emotional, and social development in young learners (Nyangwete, Sichula & Kalinde 2025). While much attention has been given to formal classroom settings, less is understood about how families perceive and support play-based learning within the home environment. In Mazabuka District, cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and varying family values may significantly shape how play is understood and integrated into daily life. Yet, there is limited empirical evidence on how families interpret the value of play, the benefits they associate with it, and the concerns they harbour about certain types of play that may be seen as unproductive or misaligned with their aspirations for children. Without understanding these perceptions, it becomes difficult for educators and policymakers to engage families in meaningful ways that reinforce learning through play at home. If this gap remains unaddressed, opportunities to harness family support for early childhood development through play may be missed, perpetuating disparities in learning outcomes rooted in socio-cultural misunderstandings or misalignment.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the family perceptions of play-based learning in Mazabuka, Zambia.

Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To determine the cultural and family beliefs about play.
- ii. To establish family perception on the benefits of play based learning.
- iii. To establish the parental concerns about non-supportive play activities.

Scope of the study

This study concentrated specifically on examining family perceptions of play-based learning within the home setting, with an emphasis on how cultural values, beliefs, and parental attitudes influence children's learning experiences outside formal classrooms. The research was limited to families with children enrolled in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres in Mazabuka District, providing a focused view of how play is understood and supported at the household level. The study did not explore broader pedagogical approaches within the ECE curriculum but remained centred on play as a learning tool. Participants were selected from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to capture a diverse range of views and practices related to play-based learning, while institutional or policy-level factors were beyond the scope of this investigation.

METHODOLOGY

This study provided an opportunity to delve into the key factors that facilitate play-based learning within the home environment. To thoroughly explore these elements, a qualitative research design was adopted, enabling an in-depth examination of how aspects such as parental participation, access to play resources, and daily household routines impact children's involvement in play-based learning activities. This approach was selected due to its strength in capturing participants' perspectives and offering a detailed understanding of the contextual influences shaping play-based learning at home (Williams, 2016). The adaptable nature of qualitative methods allowed the research to identify emerging themes naturally, revealing how various home-related factors either promote or limit play-based learning experiences (Denzin, 2017). By focusing on the voices and stories of participants, the study gained rich insights that might not be fully accessible through quantitative techniques, thus ensuring a holistic grasp of home-based contributions to play-based learning. While existing research on play-based learning (Keung & Cheung, 2019; Ali et al., 2018; Taylor & Boyer, 2020) has mainly centred on school settings involving teachers and pupils, few studies have directly engaged parents in exploring this dynamic.

The research was carried out in Mazabuka District, a peri-urban area in Southern Zambia. Early childhood education in this region is predominantly provided by government institutions, with limited involvement from private entities and non-governmental organisations. As of 2024, Mazabuka hosts 58 Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres established within 86 government and community schools (Mazabuka District Council, 2024), reflecting growth from only 22 centres in 2017. Despite this increase, many centres still lack adequate infrastructure such as designated play areas and classrooms. According to the Policy Monitoring and Research Centre (2017), ECE activities remain relatively low in Southern Province, including the number of ECE centres. The province employs a total of 171 ECE teachers, highlighting a significant shortfall against the required teaching staff, though efforts have been made to mitigate this gap through the recruitment of community teachers.

A total of 25 participants took part in this study, including 5 early childhood education (ECE) teachers and 20 family members from different households within Mazabuka District. The ECE centres involved were selected through random sampling from the 58 centres available in the district. To identify participants who could offer detailed perspectives on home-based factors supporting play-based learning, purposive sampling was employed. This method was chosen because it allowed for the deliberate selection of individuals with direct experience and relevant knowledge related to children's play-based learning in home settings (Yin, 2018).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria The five ECE teachers were chosen based on their expertise and active role in implementing play-based learning within their classrooms. Their insights were critical to understanding how the home environment interacts with school play activities. The 20 family members were selected from households with young children involved in play-based learning. These participants, primarily parents and guardians, are key influencers of the home environment and were well-positioned to provide valuable information on aspects such as the availability of play materials, parental engagement, and safety within the home. By utilising purposive sampling, the study ensured that participants possessed the necessary experience and understanding to comprehensively address the research objectives. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, context-specific data regarding the essential home factors that support play-based learning.

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, both of which were effective in eliciting in-depth qualitative information. Semi-structured interviews with parents, caregivers, and ECE teachers allowed for flexible, open-ended conversations where participants could freely express their views and experiences related to home-based play learning (Scott, 2019). Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted with selected caregivers and educators to encourage interactive dialogue, enabling participants to share and reflect on common and differing experiences (Taherdoost, 2016). These group interactions deepened the study's insights by fostering collective reflection and the emergence of diverse perspectives.

For data analysis, a thematic approach was utilised to identify recurring patterns and key themes within the participants' responses. Thematic analysis was selected because it offers a structured method for organising and interpreting qualitative data, thereby ensuring that the findings authentically represent the lived experiences of the participants (Ndlovu & Mthembu, 2021). This process involved transcribing the interviews and discussions, coding the data into meaningful categories, and then extracting themes that corresponded with the study's research aims.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the specific objectives that guided the study. These were:

1. What are the cultural and family beliefs about play?
2. How do families perceive the benefits of play-based learning?
3. What parental concerns exist regarding non-supportive play activities?

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Cultural and Family Beliefs about Play	Traditional Views on Play as Leisure vs Learning Influence of Cultural Norms on Play Activities Gender Roles and Play Expectations Intergenerational Transmission of Play Values
Family Perceptions of Play-Based Learning Benefits	Cognitive and Social Development Benefits Emotional Well-being and Confidence Building Preparation for Formal Education
Parental Concerns about Non-Supportive Play	Risks of Unsafe or Inappropriate Play Activities Impact of Screen Time and Sedentary Behaviours Challenges with Limited Play Materials and Space

Cultural and Family Beliefs about Play

This theme addresses the first research question, which explored the cultural and family beliefs surrounding play within the home environment. The data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions revealed that family beliefs about play are deeply influenced by cultural traditions, generational values, and social expectations. Four main sub-themes emerged: traditional views of play as leisure rather than learning, the influence of cultural norms on the types of play encouraged, gendered expectations of children's play activities, and the intergenerational transmission of play values.

Traditional Views of Play as Leisure

A common perception among many families was that play is primarily a form of rest or entertainment rather than a purposeful learning activity. Many parents described play as a "break" from work or schooling, rather than a crucial element of development. One participant noted, *"Play is just for fun; it is what children do when*

they are not studying or helping with chores." (P8) Similar sentiments were echoed by others who felt that the home was mainly for work and discipline, with play being a less valued activity.

Cultural Norms Influencing Play

Cultural traditions were found to shape not only how much time children spend playing but also the types of play considered appropriate. In some families, certain games or activities were passed down as important cultural practices, while others were discouraged as frivolous. For example, P14 explained, *"Our culture values games that teach respect and cooperation, so we encourage children to play those rather than just any game."* This reflected the role of play in reinforcing community values and social norms.

Gendered Expectations

The study found distinct differences in play activities encouraged for boys versus girls. Many parents reported that boys were often allowed more freedom for active and outdoor play, while girls were encouraged to engage in quieter, indoor activities seen as more suitable for their gender. P3 expressed, *"Boys play football and run around, but girls mostly stay inside playing with dolls or helping with house chores."* These gender norms influenced the kinds of play experiences children had and how families supported them.

Intergenerational Transmission of Play Values

Families also revealed that beliefs about play were passed from older generations to younger parents, creating continuity or sometimes tension between traditional and modern views. Some parents expressed a desire to balance cultural expectations with new ideas about the educational value of play. P11 shared, *"My parents said play was for wasting time, but I believe play helps my child learn, so I try to encourage it."*

The findings highlight that cultural and family beliefs form a complex framework that influences children's play experiences at home. While traditional views often position play as leisure, emerging recognition of its developmental benefits suggests a gradual shift in perceptions. Understanding these beliefs is crucial for designing play-based learning interventions that respect cultural values while promoting effective learning through play.

Family Perceptions of Play-Based Learning Benefits

This theme responds to research question number two, which explored family perceptions regarding the benefits of play-based learning within the home environment. The study found that parents and caregivers generally held positive views on how play supports their children's development. Their insights highlighted several key areas of benefit, including cognitive and social development, emotional well-being, and preparation for formal schooling. These perceptions reflect how families value play as an essential part of early childhood learning. Three main sub-themes emerged: cognitive and social development benefits, emotional well-being and confidence building, and preparation for formal education.

Cognitive and Social Development Benefits

Families overwhelmingly recognized play-based learning as a vital contributor to children's cognitive growth and social skills. Many parents observed that through play, children develop problem-solving abilities, language, and creativity. P8 shared, *"When my child plays with puzzles or building blocks, I see how they learn to think and figure things out."* P15 added, *"Playing with other children teaches them to share, take turns, and work together."*

Early childhood educators reinforced these observations, noting that play provides natural opportunities for learning important concepts and social interactions. T4 commented, *"Play stimulates thinking and helps children develop communication skills essential for school readiness."*

Emotional Well-being and Confidence Building

Parents also emphasized the emotional benefits of play, noting that it helps children express themselves, manage feelings, and build confidence. P3 explained, *"My child feels happy and relaxed when playing. It helps them handle frustration better."* P10 said, *"Through play, my child learns to be independent and more confident in trying new things."* Teachers supported this view, highlighting that play nurtures self-esteem and emotional resilience. T2 remarked, *"Children who engage regularly in play are often more emotionally balanced and willing to explore challenges."*

Preparation for Formal Education

Another significant perception was that play-based learning effectively prepares children for the transition to formal schooling. Parents believed that play helps children acquire foundational skills such as concentration, following instructions, and basic literacy and numeracy concepts. P6 noted, *"Play activities like counting games and storytelling make it easier for my child to adjust to school routines."* Similarly, P12 shared, *"I see how playing with letters and numbers at home makes my child more confident in class."* Educators agreed that play-based learning provides a strong foundation for academic success. T5 stated, *"Play nurtures curiosity and learning habits that support children's smooth integration into the school environment."*

The findings underscore that families perceive play-based learning as multifaceted in its benefits enhancing cognitive and social abilities, promoting emotional well-being, and laying the groundwork for formal education. These positive perceptions reinforce the importance of encouraging play within home environments to support holistic early childhood development.

Parental Concerns about Non-Supportive Play

This theme addresses research question number three, which explored parental concerns about play activities that do not support children's learning and development. The study revealed that while parents valued play, they also expressed worries about specific aspects of children's play that could hinder growth. These included risks associated with unsafe or inappropriate play, excessive screen time and sedentary behaviours, and challenges caused by limited play materials and space. The discussions brought to light how parents balance encouraging play while mitigating factors they believe may negatively affect their children's well-being. Three main sub-themes emerged: risks of unsafe or inappropriate play activities, impact of screen time and sedentary behaviours, and challenges with limited play materials and space.

Risks of Unsafe or Inappropriate Play Activities

Parents voiced strong concerns about certain types of play that they viewed as risky or harmful. Many reported monitoring the kind of games their children engaged in, especially those involving physical danger or aggressive behaviour. P4 remarked, *"Sometimes children imitate what they see on TV and play rough games, which can lead to injuries."* Similarly, P9 noted, *"I discourage play that involves fighting or throwing things because someone might get hurt."* Teachers supported this view, highlighting the need to guide children toward constructive and educational forms of play. T1 stated, *"Children learn through imitation, so when they engage in unsafe play, it often reflects what they have seen or experienced. Supervision and redirection are key."*

Impact of Screen Time and Sedentary Behaviours

Another significant concern raised by parents was the growing influence of screens on children's play habits. Many reported that television, phones, and tablets had replaced traditional forms of active play, resulting in less physical movement and face-to-face interaction. P7 explained, *"My child prefers watching cartoons or playing on the phone instead of going outside to play."* P12 added, *"Too much screen time makes them quiet and less interested in playing with others."* Teachers also observed similar trends, expressing concern over the reduction in physical and imaginative play. T3 commented, *"Excessive screen use limits opportunities for hands-on learning and weakens social development. It's important for children to play actively and interact with others."*

Challenges with Limited Play Materials and Space

The study also found that some parents felt frustrated by their inability to provide adequate play materials or space. Families living in crowded environments or with limited financial resources reported that these constraints affected the quality of play. P6 shared, *"We don't have toys, and the space is too small. My child plays with whatever is available."* P11 added, *"I wish I could buy more learning toys, but we have to make do with homemade things."* Despite these limitations, teachers observed that many children still found ways to play creatively. T5 noted, *"Even in homes with limited resources, children find ways to invent games and interact with their surroundings. However, better materials and space would enhance the quality of play."*

These findings illustrate that while parents recognise the value of play, they are also deeply aware of the challenges and risks associated with non-supportive play environments. Their concerns reflect a desire to create safer, more meaningful, and developmentally appropriate play experiences, despite limitations in resources or space.

DISCUSSION ON CULTURAL AND FAMILY BELIEFS ABOUT PLAY

The study revealed that cultural and family beliefs play a substantial role in shaping how play is understood, valued, and facilitated within home environments. During interviews and focus group discussions, it became evident that many families in Mazabuka hold traditional views that frame play primarily as leisure rather than a developmental tool. This perception was particularly strong among older generations, who often saw play as something that distracts children from more serious tasks like schoolwork or household chores. These findings echo the work of Kalinde, Banda, and Munsaka (2024), who noted that in many Zambian and African communities, play is often seen as separate from formal learning, with limited recognition of its educational value.

The influence of cultural norms was also apparent in how families chose which types of play to encourage. Certain games that align with community values such as those teaching respect, cooperation, or obedience were more readily promoted. This reflects the argument by Ndlovu and Mthembu (2021) that African parenting often embeds cultural identity and moral education into play activities. In Mazabuka, families who valued these cultural traditions encouraged structured games passed down through generations, reinforcing communal norms and behaviours.

Gendered expectations emerged as another strong theme, with clear differences in how boys and girls were allowed or encouraged to play. Boys were generally afforded more physical and outdoor play opportunities, while girls were directed toward domestic, quiet, or imaginative play that mirrored adult responsibilities. This division is consistent with the findings of Kalinde (2023), who explored how sociocultural beliefs influence play roles and noted that traditional gender roles are often reflected and reinforced through play. In this study, such expectations were not only enforced by parents but were also internalised by children themselves, shaping their understanding of gender roles from an early age.

An important insight from the study was the intergenerational transmission of beliefs about play. Parents reported that their own childhood experiences, shaped by their elders' views, influenced how they now approach play with their children. While some parents strictly adhered to these inherited beliefs, others expressed a willingness to adapt. Several participants shared that they now view play as a means of learning, even though they were not raised with that understanding. This shift suggests a gradual change in attitudes, possibly influenced by modern education systems and early childhood programmes that promote play-based learning. As noted by Munsaka and Kalinde (2017), changing parental beliefs around play often results from increased exposure to new pedagogical models that emphasise play as a cornerstone of early learning.

The findings show a tension between traditional views of play as frivolous and emerging perspectives that acknowledge its developmental benefits. This complexity reflects the need for culturally responsive educational strategies that respect long-standing beliefs while introducing new understandings of play. As

Maynard and Waters (2023) point out, the successful integration of play-based learning requires acknowledging the cultural contexts in which families operate, rather than dismissing them.

In summary, the cultural and family beliefs surrounding play in Mazabuka create both challenges and opportunities for early childhood development. While traditional views may limit the perceived value of play, there is evidence of shifting perceptions as parents begin to recognise its importance for learning. Understanding and working within these belief systems is essential for promoting effective play-based learning at home and ensuring that educational interventions resonate with family values and lived realities.

DISCUSSION ON FAMILY PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING BENEFITS

The findings of this study reveal that families in Mazabuka hold generally positive perceptions about the value of play-based learning within the home. These perceptions align with broader research indicating that caregivers increasingly acknowledge play not merely as a leisure activity, but as a meaningful contributor to a child's development. The participants' insights correspond closely with the theoretical frameworks outlined by Berk and Winsler (2019), who highlight play as a social and cognitive scaffold through which children develop higher-order thinking skills and communication abilities. Families in this study identified cognitive, emotional, and educational benefits, suggesting a growing understanding of the integral role of play in holistic child development.

Parents frequently associated play with enhanced cognitive and social development. Activities such as puzzles, building blocks, and group play were cited as tools for problem-solving, language acquisition, and socialisation. These observations are consistent with findings by Niklas, Cohns, Lehl, and Napoli (2021), who argue that children learn best through active engagement within enriched home environments. Parents' emphasis on how play helps children "figure things out" and learn to "share and work together" illustrates a lived recognition of these principles. Likewise, teachers supported this perspective, noting that play fosters essential thinking and communication skills, preparing children for more structured academic learning.

The theme of emotional well-being and confidence building also emerged strongly. Caregivers observed that play allows children to manage frustration, express feelings, and become more independent. These findings resonate with the work of Ginsburg (2023), who emphasised that emotional development is supported through playful interactions that allow children to explore autonomy and initiative. Educators in the study reinforced this view, linking regular play engagement with emotional balance and a willingness to tackle challenges traits essential for both personal development and school readiness.

A significant insight from this study is the perceived role of play in preparing children for formal education. Families described play as foundational for developing literacy, numeracy, and classroom behaviours such as concentration and listening. These views align with Keung and Cheung (2019), who argue that play provides a natural context for children to acquire foundational academic skills while maintaining intrinsic motivation. Participants noted that children who engaged in play at home adjusted more smoothly to school routines, suggesting that parents recognise play as both a developmental bridge and a preparatory platform for structured learning environments.

Taken together, these findings indicate a notable shift from traditional beliefs that often marginalise play, toward a more informed appreciation of its multifaceted benefits. While some tensions remain, especially when juxtaposed with cultural values that prioritise discipline and household contributions, there is growing awareness among families of the educational potential embedded in play. This supports the argument by Whitebread and Basilio (2023) that families can be powerful allies in early learning when their beliefs are engaged and respected through culturally sensitive educational practices.

In conclusion, the positive family perceptions of play-based learning observed in this study suggest a promising foundation for promoting early childhood development in home settings. Recognising play as a legitimate form of learning enhances not only children's cognitive and emotional growth but also prepares them effectively for future academic success. Therefore, educational stakeholders must continue to empower

families with knowledge and resources that support meaningful and culturally appropriate play-based learning practices.

DISCUSSION ON PARENTAL CONCERNS ABOUT NON-SUPPORTIVE PLAY

The findings of this study reveal that while families in Mazabuka generally appreciate the developmental value of play, they also express considerable concern about certain types of play that they perceive as non-beneficial or even harmful. These concerns reflect an emerging awareness among caregivers of the complex role that play occupies in a child's life not all play is inherently constructive. This theme corresponds with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, as cited in Munsaka and Kalinde (2017), which emphasises the influence of environmental contexts, including family, media, and physical surroundings, on a child's development. Parents' concerns about unsafe play, screen time, and material limitations illustrate their efforts to protect and promote healthy development in less-than-ideal circumstances.

One major area of concern was the risk of unsafe or inappropriate play. Many parents reported actively supervising their children's play to prevent injury or aggressive behaviour, often citing media influence as a contributing factor. This aligns with findings by Morrongiello and Lasenby-Lessard (2023), who noted that children's exposure to violent or chaotic content can shape their behaviour in play, increasing risks. Parents' efforts to redirect children towards more constructive forms of play demonstrate an instinctive understanding of Ginsburg's (2023) position that adult facilitation and guidance are crucial in supporting healthy emotional and social development. Teachers also recognised the importance of supervision and role modelling, noting that unsafe play often reflects the child's environment or unsupervised screen exposure.

The impact of screen time and sedentary behaviours emerged as a second significant sub-theme. Caregivers expressed concern that increasing access to televisions, smartphones, and tablets had displaced traditional, active, and social forms of play. This concern mirrors research by Niklas et al. (2021), which links excessive screen use in early childhood with reduced physical activity, limited peer interaction, and delayed language development. Parents in the study observed that children who spent more time on screens were often quieter, less socially engaged, and less interested in imaginative play. These observations underscore the challenge of balancing the convenience of digital devices with the developmental risks of passive consumption.

The third sub-theme, challenges with limited play materials and space, highlights a structural barrier to effective play-based learning. Parents living in high-density housing or low-income settings reported feeling restricted by inadequate space and a lack of toys or educational resources. These findings are supported by Banda and Chanda (2018), who noted that children's play in resource-constrained environments is often shaped by access to improvised tools and the spatial arrangements of the home. Despite these limitations, some parents and teachers observed that children demonstrated resilience and creativity by repurposing household items for play. However, the disparities in material access still point to broader issues of inequality in opportunities for enriching early development.

Together, these findings portray parents as proactive and observant stakeholders in their children's development, despite the constraints they face. Their concerns reflect a nuanced understanding of the double-edged nature of play its potential to either support or hinder development depending on context, content, and supervision. As such, their perspectives echo Wood (2023), who advocates for a culturally and contextually sensitive approach to early childhood education one that values both the theoretical benefits of play and the lived experiences of families navigating challenges in real-world contexts.

In summary, while families value play, they are deeply concerned about environmental and behavioural factors that may compromise its developmental benefits. Addressing these concerns through community education, safe play guidance, and improved access to materials can help maximise the positive outcomes of play-based learning, especially in resource-constrained settings like Mazabuka.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this study reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of play within Mazabuka families, shaped strongly by cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and evolving perceptions of play-based learning. While many families hold traditional views that see play primarily as leisure or distraction, there is an emerging shift toward recognising play as vital for cognitive, emotional, and social development. Parents value the benefits of play but remain concerned about unsafe or non-supportive play practices, particularly those influenced by screen time and limited resources. These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive and contextually relevant strategies that both respect existing family values and support parents in facilitating enriching, safe, and educational play environments at home. Empowering families with knowledge and resources will be key to strengthening the role of play in early childhood development in Mazabuka.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations on Strengthening Home-School Collaboration

Engage Policy and Practice Stakeholders: The study recommends involving policymakers, early childhood educators, and parent-teacher associations to co-develop strategies that strengthen home-school partnerships. These may include community forums, co-designed curricula, and collaborative feedback mechanisms that promote shared responsibility in children's learning.

Develop and Pilot Culturally Responsive Parent Programmes: Parent sensitisation initiatives should be informed by the research findings and tailored to the cultural context. Piloting such programmes in selected schools can help refine delivery methods and assess their impact before scaling.

Recommendations on Cultural and Family Beliefs about Play

Educational programmes and community initiatives should engage families by acknowledging and respecting traditional views on play while gently introducing evidence-based understandings of its developmental importance. Parenting workshops could incorporate discussions on how play supports cultural values such as respect and cooperation, helping parents integrate structured and unstructured play into daily life without compromising cultural identity. Intergenerational dialogue sessions may also encourage older family members to embrace evolving attitudes toward play-based learning.

Recommendations on Family Perceptions of Play-Based Learning Benefits

Schools and early childhood centres should continue to strengthen parental awareness of the cognitive, emotional, and educational benefits of play through regular parent-teacher meetings, demonstration sessions, and take-home materials that link common play activities with learning outcomes. Providing parents with practical strategies to incorporate play into busy schedules can reinforce positive perceptions and encourage sustained engagement. Community media campaigns could highlight success stories showing how play nurtures children's readiness for school and lifelong learning.

Recommendations on Parental Concerns about Non-Supportive Play

To address concerns about unsafe or inappropriate play, community education programmes should equip parents with tools to monitor and guide their children's play behaviours, including managing screen time and identifying constructive alternatives to violent or chaotic play. Local governments and NGOs could support the development of safe, accessible play spaces and provide low-cost materials or play kits to families with limited resources. Additionally, training for parents on creating hazard-free environments and promoting positive social play could further mitigate risks and maximise developmental benefits.

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