

## **FREE PLAY AND HAND WRITING SKILLS ACQUISITION AMONG NURSERY SCHOOL PUPILS IN MUTARE URBAN**

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### **Abstract**

This study examine the relationship between free play and hand writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban. To achieve this broad objective, four research questions were developed and answered while four research hypotheses were formulated and tested. Correlational research design was used to carry out this study. The population for the study consisted of all nursery 2 pupils from the area of the study. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 85 pupils from five selected nursery school. The instrument for data collection was structured questionnaire which was face validated by three experts, two from Early Childhood Development and Education (ECD) Department. To determine the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach alpha method was used and a reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained. Data for the study was collected with the help of Co-researchers. Data collected was analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation to answer the research questions and to test hypotheses. Presentation and analysis of data were made by the use of tables. The result revealed that there exist a statistically significant high relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban Also, there exist a statistically significant high relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban It was recommended among others that government through the Ministry of Education needs to come up with clear policy guidelines regarding play in nursery school centers and clearly define the play activities according to the developmental stages of children. The government should enhance provision of early childhood play materials to enable nursery school children develop holistically.

**Keywords:** play, free play, handwriting, skill, skill acquisition

### **Introduction**

The need for educating children became inevitable since education in a contemporary world is seen as the corner stone for the individual social and economic development. Education forms the basis for literacy, skill acquisition and technical advancement. That is why Osakwe (2016) described education as an indispensable tool for nation building and this involves a systematic training and instruction designed to transmit knowledge, skill, potentials and abilities, which enable an individual to contribute efficiently to his or her growth and development. Based on

this, modern societies show serious concern in the education of their young ones at the primary level. Primary education in the present curriculum is divided into lower section (lower basic) and middle section (middle basic). Education at this level is where basic skills such as writing skill is acquired.

Writing is an especially important area of communication in primary school. At this age, children develop an increased desire to communicate effectively (Copple & Bredekamp, 2019). Writing is an integral component of language, and when a child writes, thoughts and knowledge are synthesized to create a unique message (Jones, Reutzel, & Fargo, 2010). It is at this time of development when children begin to understand that their personal thoughts and experiences can be expressed in written form.

According to Olsen and Knapton (2013), kindergarten is the crucial year to teach good handwriting habits. Writing requires skills with the hands as well as hand-eye coordination (Grissmer et al., 2010). Most students who enter kindergarten are at the beginning stages of reading and writing development. This is an important year for students to gain conceptual understanding of basic writing skills. The earlier that children master the skill of handwriting, the more likely they are to succeed in school (Olsen & Knapton, 2013). Writing is important because it is a basic skill that is incorporated into all subject areas as well as homework, tests, note taking, and classroom assignments (Spear-Swerling, 2016).

Maduwesi (2019) observed that one of the most basic principles of modern teaching is that teachers should find and use the most attractive approaches to help the learner to learn. Thus, the teacher has to devise methods that are sufficiently motivating to persuade the learner to learn

what is necessary. As has been shown, play enables the pupils to be actively involved in the learning process whereby pupils act as stakeholders in an imagined or real scenario.

Play is one of the major preoccupations of children. It is an activity which every child would like to engage in if left alone. It is a worthy activity through which a child explores the world around him/her and which enables the child to acquire some firsthand knowledge and experience about the natural world. Children are never bored with playing. In support of this assertion, Brewer (2017) described play as what young children spend most of their time doing which contributes to cognitive growth, aiding social and emotional development and is essential to physical development. Many of the abilities required to succeed in school setting are gained through play experience.

As earlier observed by the 20th Century Philosopher, Maria Montessori “early childhood training is quite critical at the beginning of school age”. Thus the child should be allowed to express him/herself, especially through play, while the teacher, on the other hand recognises the expressive freedom of the child. That is why Maria Montessori advocated for a prepared environment; a classroom that is sufficiently equipped with learning materials such as building blocks, balls, counting materials, dressing materials, painted pictures, charts, pen, pencil, toys etc. Under this environment, the teacher’s responsibility is to observe the children as they work with these materials. This is known as free play.

Free play is a type of play that is wholly child-directed and based on the interests and needs of the child. The teacher is merely an observer (Veiga, Neto, & Rieffe, 2016). Free play allows the pupils to learn and explore at their own pace. Teachers may take part by the will of the children, but the children create the rules for what they are doing and use their own imaginations to guide their play. Types of free play include playing with blocks, coloring, tracing, playing with toys,

making up games, playing in dramatic play centers, etc. For young children, free play is known to be their most natural activity which not only contributes to their development but also gives them satisfaction, enjoyment as well as helps in developing their potential in full (Ibiam, 2017). Morffitt, (2013) describes free play as a straight exploration or learning activity which provide for information seeking behaviour. It is a powerful inner force through which a child reaches out to interact with his environment and it involves movement and different sensory modes (Aleke, 2011). The child seems to learn more when he/she can move around, handle, and manipulate objects. Through such sensory motor activities, he/she learns much and finds way(s) to adapt to a complex environment through play experiences related to cause and effects.

Play was advocated and was expanded to involve manipulation of objects in the environment which are pleasant to children (Okon 2017). This means that when the activity pleases the children (learners), the tendencies of learning taking place is high at the primary level.

The primary curriculum is changing and the academic expectations for primary pupils are higher than they have ever been (Litty & Hatch, 2016; Morrison, 2017). Primary education now looks like what first and second secondary education did in the recent past (Hatch, 2015). Many professionals agree that this trend will continue, making higher expectations for primary school pupils (Morrison, 2017). As these trends continue it is important that instruction remains developmentally appropriate and meets the needs of students.

According to Morrison (2017), the primary goal of primary education is for children to learn how to read and teachers must instruct, support, and guide them in what is necessary to become successful readers. Writing is a complex skill that is as important to literacy as is reading (Berninger et al., 2015). In order to promote reading, it is vital that writing is also given appropriate attention in school. As reading progress, primary teachers typically move forward in

writing skills. Engaging students in writing helps students increasingly become better readers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2019).

It has been established that all children love to engage in play activities most of the period, when they are awake during the day (Brewer, 2017). There is the feeling that if free play could be developed to teach at basic levels of education, the children's learning and acquisition outcomes in will improve. This study therefore investigated the effect of free play on handwriting skills acquisition among primary school pupils in Mutare Urban.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Good handwriting is a pointer to literacy. A child with good handwriting may be judged to be intelligent, well educated and academically sound where as a child with bad handwriting will be judged mostly as a low achiever. It is unfortunate today that most nursery school pupils lack the prerequisite skills of handwriting. The problem of poor handwriting is seen to be prevalent among nursery school pupils. Handwriting is a source of concern to teachers, caregivers, educators and parents today because poor handwriting may lead to poor performance in almost all fields. The ability to write well is not only a hallmark of literacy, but also an essential aid to individual progress and there is a growing interest in the world today as to the most effective means of helping pupils acquire good handwriting skills that enable children to write legibly. It is not surprising that many nursery school pupils perform poorly in both internal and external examinations.

Pupils performance in general and writing in particular has become the main source of concern in most of the countries because they have grown weaker overtime, this may be due to the fact of neglecting the basic handwriting skills that can be acquired through free play. Play is a natural

activity that helps children develop fine motor skills that will enable them handle writing materials, yet most children are mostly restricted from playing.

It is therefore the intention of this study to begin to address this writing problem from the root which is the nursery school. This study therefore intend to examine the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to find the relationship between free play and hand writing skills acquisition among primary school pupils. Specifically, the study examine:

1. The relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban
2. The relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban
3. The relationship between Free play and uppercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban
4. The relationship between Free play and lowercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban

### **Research Question**

The following research questions guided the study

1. What is the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban?

2. What is the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban?
3. What is the relationship between Free play and uppercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban?
4. What is relationship between Free play and lowercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban

### **Research Hypothesis**

1. There is no significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban
2. There is no significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban
3. There is no significant relationship between Free play and uppercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban
4. There is no significant relationship between Free play and lowercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban

### **Research Method**

The study adopted the correlational research design. A correlational study is a type of research design where the researcher seeks to understand what kind of relationships naturally occurring variables have with one another. The researcher seeks to figure out if the two variables are related.

The research area was Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe. The target population of the study constituted of all the Nursery 2 pupils in Mutare Urban. A sample size of 85 Nursery 2 pupils were randomly selected from five selected nursery schools was used for the study. This comprised of 46 females and 39 male. Simple random sampling technique was used so as to give every pupils equal chance to be selected. This technique was used to select 17 Nursery 2 pupils from five nursery schools. Pieces of paper were folded with 0 and 1 written on the papers. The pupils were asked to pick a paper. Pupils who picked the paper with 1 written on it were used for the study.

A structured questionnaire titled “Free Play and Acquisition of Handwriting Skills Questionnaire’ (FPAHSQ)” was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire had a total of 10 items modeled on a two (2) point scale. This scale was chosen because of the level of the respondents who are pupils of nursery 2. The response options for items were – Yes (Y) and No (N) with numerical values of 2, and 1 points assigned to each of the responses respectively. To establish the validity of the research instrument developed by the researcher to collect data on the relationship between Free Play and Acquisition of Handwriting Skills, the questionnaire was given to three experts, two in the Department of Early Childhood Development department. The experts were requested to assess the instrument with regard to the clarity of items, simplicity of vocabulary and relevance of items to the study. Based on the observations of these experts, the research instrument was modified appropriately. To ascertain reliability of the instrument, the instrument was administered to 20 primary 2 and who were not part of the initial sample. The Cronbach Alpha test was done and the alpha value for the scale was found to be 0.82 which shows the scale was reliable. Data for this study was collected by using the questionnaire items developed by the researcher. The researchers used direct delivery method in the administration

and retrieval of the questionnaire from the respondents with the aid of assistants. The return rate of the questionnaires was 100%. Data collected was analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to answer research questions and to test the research hypotheses. Correlation coefficients of .80 and above was regarded as high relationship, .30 to .79 was regarded as moderate relationship, .01 to .29 was regarded as low relationship and a correlation coefficient of .00 was regarded as no relationship. Also, when the calculated r-value is greater than the critical r-value, the null hypotheses were rejected for the alternative hypotheses. When the calculated r-value is less than the critical r-value, the null hypotheses were accepted.

## Results

### Research question 1

What is the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe?

Table 1: Analysis of the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r
<b>Free play</b>	85	213	3438	23750	0.87
<b>Handwriting skill</b>		279	7573		

Table 1 reveals that the calculated correlation index of free play and handwriting skills on the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils was 0.87. This implies that the relationship between free play enhance handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils.

### Research question 2

What is the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban?

Table 2: Analysis of the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r
Male	39	70	1678	14578	0.82
Female	46	122	2233		

Table 2 reveals that the calculated correlation index on the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils was 0.82. This implies that the male and female response on the relationship between free play enhance handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils.

### Research question 3

What is the relationship between free play and uppercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban?

Table 3: Analysis of the relationship between free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r
Free play	85	193	2756	30125	0.81
Uppercase writing		283	7964		

Table 3 reveals that the calculated correlation index of free play and uppercase writing on the relationship between free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils was 0.81. This implies that the relationship between free play enhance skills acquisition among nursery school pupils.

#### Research question 4

What is relationship between free play and lowercase writing among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban?

Table 4: Analysis of the relationship between free play and lowercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r
<b>Free play</b>		211	3132		
	85			26649	0.85
<b>Lowercase writing</b>		281	78562		

Table 4 reveals that the calculated correlation index of free play and lowercase writing skills on the relationship between free play and lowercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils was 0.85. This implies that the relationship between free play enhance skills acquisition among nursery school pupils.

#### Research hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe.

Table 5: Analysis of the relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal.	r-crit.
Free Play		213	3438				
	85			23750	83	0.77	0.113
Handwriting skills		279	7573				

Table 5 shows that the calculated correlation coefficient on the relationship free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils was 0.77 while the critical r-value is

0.113 at the degree of freedom of 83 at 0.05 level of significance. By comparing, the calculated r-value was found to be greater than the critical r-value, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban.

### Research hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban.

Table 6: Analysis of the relationship between free play and gender

Variables	N	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal.	r-crit.
Male	39	213	3438	23750	83	0.82	0.113
Female	46	279	7573				

Table 6 shows that the calculated correlation coefficient on the relationship free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils was 0.82 while the critical r-value is 0.113 at the degree of freedom of 83 at 0.05 level of significance. By comparing, the calculated r-value was found to be greater than the critical r-value, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe.

### Research hypothesis 3

There is no significant relationship between free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban.

Table 7: Analysis of the relationship between free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal.	r-crit.
Free Play	85	193	2756	30125	83	0.81	0.113
Uppercase writing		283	7964				

Table 7 shows that the calculated correlation coefficient on the relationship free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils was 0.81 while the critical r-value is 0.113 at the degree of freedom of 83 at 0.05 level of significance. By comparing, the calculated r-value was found to be greater than the critical r-value, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe.

#### Research hypothesis 4

There is no significant relationship between free play and lowercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe.

Table 8: Analysis of the relationship between free play and lowercase writing skills acquisition

Variables	N	$\sum x$ $\sum y$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal.	r-crit.
Free Play	85	211	3132	26649	83	0.85	0.113
Lowercase writing		281	78562				

Table 8 shows that the calculated correlation coefficient on the relationship free play and lowercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils was 0.85 while the critical r-value is 0.113 at the degree of freedom of 83 at 0.05 level of significance. By comparing, the calculated r-value was found to be greater than the critical r-value, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between free play and lowercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe.

#### Discussion of Findings

##### Free play and handwriting skills acquisition

In the research question one and hypothesis one, the result finding revealed that there is significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe. This may be because free play could involves the use of materials like paint, brushes, paper with letters of the alphabet in uppercase and lowercase, pencil and pen. Through these, pupils could be able to write, scribble or colour objects, hence develop their handwriting writing skills. This confirms Ndugu's (2013) study that play activities provided should allow children to explore for themselves and use materials provided. This finding is also in line with Kopko (2017) who observed a significant relationship between play way method and academic achievement of pupils.

#### **Free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female**

In the research question two and hypothesis two, the result finding revealed that there is significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe. This may be because male and female participate in the same free play activities. Through these, male and female pupils are able to scribble or colour objects, hence develop their handwriting skills. This is in line with Khoima (2016) who confirmed that learning by doing raises the male and female learner's level of skill acquisition. Kennan's (2015) said that learning and teaching aids increases chances of greater participation, understanding and acquisition of skills.

#### **Free play and uppercase skills acquisition**

In the research question three and hypothesis three, the result finding revealed that there is significant relationship between free play and uppercase writing skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe. This may be because free play could involves the

use of materials like paint, brushes, paper with letters of the alphabet in uppercase and lowercase, pencil and pen. Through these, pupils could be able to write, scribble or colour objects, hence develop their uppercase writing skills. This confirms Ndugu's (2013) study that play activities provided should allow children to explore for themselves and use materials provided. This finding is also in line with Kopko (2017) who observed a significant relationship between play way method and academic achievement of pupils.

### **Free play and lowercase skills acquisition**

In the research question four and hypothesis four, the result finding revealed that there is significant relationship between free play and handwriting skills acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban of Zimbabwe. This may be because free play could involves the use of materials like paint, brushes, paper with letters of the alphabet in uppercase and lowercase, pencil and pen. Through these, pupils could be able to write, scribble or colour objects, hence develop their lowercase writing skills. This confirms Ndugu's (2013) study that play activities provided should allow children to explore for themselves and use materials provided. This finding is also in line with Kopko (2017) who observed a significant relationship between play way method and academic achievement of pupils.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings it was concluded that there is a high relationship between free play and handwriting skill acquisition among nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban This may be due to the fact that free play gave the children opportunity to learn through manipulating and experimenting for themselves. Through these, they are able to acquire all the handwriting skills. The study revealed that there is a high relationship between free play and handwriting skills

acquisition of male and female nursery school pupils in Mutare Urban This may be due to the fact that male and female pupils freely participated and interacted with each other. It was concluded that the handwriting skills correlate with free play children engage in and their interaction with peers is essential if learners are to acquire good handwriting skills.

### **Recommendations**

1. The government through the Ministry of Education should come up with clear policy guidelines regarding play in nursery school and clearly define the play activities according to the developmental stages of children. The government should enhance provision of early childhood play materials to enable nursery children develop holistically.
2. The supervision of ECE centers' need to be enhanced to ensure teachers allocate adequate time and play materials to enable children develop handwriting skills for holistic development of children
3. Teachers should regularly plan and organize free play activities. This will ensure that various play materials are provided to children according to appropriate age and interest play in nursery schools.

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