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UTILIZING PLAY SPACES FOR HERITAGE PRESERVATION IN PRESCHOOLS

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Abstract
Play is fundamental to childhood providing more than entertainment, but nurturing cognitive, social, and emotional abilities crucial for growth. Through play, children actively explore and interact with their surroundings, forming the basis for their holistic development. In the past, children not only explored but also learn cultural values and traditions through play. As societies advance, indigenous cultures especially among children are being eroded through global integration. This also brings about several forms of digital entertainment that creates room for inactive lifestyles. Therefore, by incorporating traditional elements in a designed game play space within preschools, it is possible to harness the crucial role of play environments as a promising strategy for reviving cultural practices, traditions and healthy lifestyles, through children's play activities. This study aims to examine how a designed game play space can impact the physical activity levels of children in preschool settings of Lagos State, Nigeria. Observation of children's physical activity levels in the designed game play space across five preschools in Lagos state was carried out. Data was analysed and grouped through thematic headings of; physical activity promotion, motivating competition, social collaboration, game acceptance, physical activity variety, high level engagement, learning facilitation, and agility. These findings demonstrate how intentionally designed play environments positively influences children's physical activity, behaviours, and retention of cultural heritage that is increasingly being lost

Keywords: Child Development, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Play, Play Spaces, Preschools.

Introduction
Play spaces for children are integral to preschool environments, as they offer a dynamic avenue for engaging children heritage preservation activities. Edward (2017) noted that Children explore their surroundings, learn, develop skills, and construct their understanding of the world through play, which includes a variety of activities. In addition to being a source of delight, play serves as the cornerstone for a

child's holistic development in both the early and later phases of life (Edward, 2017). Therefore, rather than being mere recreational areas, these spaces can become interactive learning environments where children explore and interact with elements of their cultural heritage.

Left unaddressed, globalization risks diminishing links of the Nigerian young population with the artistic wisdom, values and remarkable diversity of over 250 ethnic civilizations. Rethinking outdoor playtime on educational campuses such as preschools provides a platform to counteract such loss by infusing cultural traditions through games and creative free play. Embedding localized concepts to address health goals that deliver energetic and enriched daily routines, with this paper looking to examine the impact of such an intervention.

The need for cultural preservation cannot be overstated, as integrating cultural heritage into early childhood education is an innovative approach that not only nurtures a sense of cultural identity but also fosters an appreciation for history and tradition from a young age. leveraging play spaces for heritage preservation in preschools by embedding cultural concepts into play-based activities can cultivate a sense of pride in one's heritage, instil a lifelong appreciation for diverse cultures, and lay the groundwork for responsible global citizenship from the earliest stages of development.

This study aims to examine how a conceptualized game play space impacts the physical activity levels of children in preschool settings of Lagos State, Nigeria. The conceptualized game play space seeks to incorporate elements from traditional games to preserve cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage preservation and Globalization Challenges in Nigeria.

Globalization has increased Nigeria's integration into international markets, technology access, and exposure to foreign cultures (Ezeh, 2020). While there are economic benefits, studies show these factors have accelerated a loss of traditional identity and loose connections with ethnic cultural heritage amongst urban youth. Studies have found that only 26% of school children in a metropolitan city like Lagos could name three traditional games, suggesting a decrease in the communication of indigenous recreational practices between elders and youngsters (Lewis & Sheppard, 2006). Similarly, participation in traditional festivals and rituals has dropped over time, especially in cities. Children in Nigeria's rural villages demonstrate higher retained affinity to historical customs, attire, culinary habits, spiritual practices and creative arts endemic to their ethnic communities, according to (Rice et al., 2016). This difference shows how globalization is affecting the culture of young people in diverse cities, making a big impact on their impressionable minds.

Modernization has also had physical health consequences. The influx of videogames and several forms of digital entertainment has created room for inactive lifestyles. A rising obesity prevalence over the past decade noted in large Nigerian cities, indicates the outcome of nutritionally poor diets and low activity levels (Adeloye et al., 2021). Studies have found just 50% of students meet minimum physical activity thresholds in their recess periods within Lagos' public schools (Rodríguez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Education policymakers seeking to

address both cultural erosion as well as physical fitness decline issues have suggested re-imagining playgrounds as dynamic learning environments beyond conventional classrooms (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007)

The Play Environment and Heritage Preservation.

Play spaces, integral to preschool environments, offer a dynamic avenue for engaging children. Early childhood developmental programmes and concepts, including the environments in which they are nurtured such as preschools are paramount in facilitating the growth and well-being of children. Kulic et al. (2019) underscore the advantages associated with early childcare participation, with particular emphasis on the significance of high-quality settings that foster children's educational development and social engagement. These high-quality settings refer to child play spaces in the context of the physical environment in which play activities take place. Herrington & Brussoni (2015) describe how the play environment is important for children's play, what they prefer to play and the opportunities they have to engage in different kinds of play. This environment is an integral aspect of play as it transcends beyond just mere spaces and serves as a key influence on play levels.

Cultural Education through Play space Integration

Educationists highlight schools' unique opportunity to reverse fading awareness of indigenous play-based tangible heritage through inserting cultural themes within available campus spaces (Berti, 2023). Dedicated play zones can integrate story art and props to pique curiosity about otherwise unknown legends associated with traditional games in students' ethnic communities. Open air amphitheatres with folklore murals and seating pods encourage roleplay. Sand pits with ethnic toy models promote pretend kitchens. Herb gardens allow cultivation of plants applied in therapeutic games. Floating boats and landscaped streams guide imaginative river fishing narratives. The principles entail repurposing grounds by incorporating artifacts, flora, activities and backstories linked to oral traditions and beliefs of Nigeria's civilizational mosaic. Knowledge of games can build social interactions and bonding. Instilling play areas with crafts, colours, tasks and concepts permeating indigenous worldviews turns recreation time into critical windows for sustaining intergenerational heritage communication channels beyond what classroom hours allow. The core premise entails surrounding play areas with cultural concepts to spark inquiry, meaning-making and cross-generational bonds beyond physical exertion alone during valuable non-classroom hours.

Evaluating Playscape Integration Models

A handful of studies have examined integrating cultural elements into school play areas to quantify impact. In Northern Nigeria, public schools faced added barriers for girl child participation in physical activity during school hours due to socio-cultural norms on gender mixing (Obafunso, 2014). Displays of heritage helped justify broader recreational access for girls as teachers welcomed efforts aligning with ethnic values. Over two terms, 20% more girls reported satisfaction with play provisions to enable free movement games or jump rope

teams on campus (Boyle et al., 2003). Such small case studies indicate integrating historical concepts or symbolic artifacts onto grounds children already occupy daily facilitates inherent exposure to cultural knowledge their textbooks or homes may no longer actively introduce.

Heritage Preservation Challenges in Schools

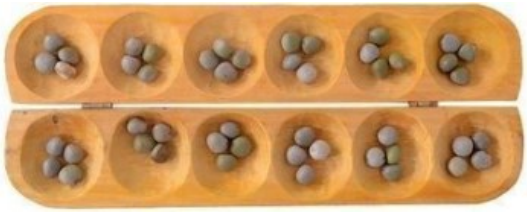
While such games encode indigenous wisdom, ritual symbolism and community ethics, the play heritage faces sustainability threats (Fernández-Llamazares & Virtanen, 2020). Infrastructural limitations constrain outdoor play provisions in schools. Classroom cultural teachings relying on passive textbook content rather than activity-based lessons. Technology production diverts leisure time towards mobile gaming over social games. Globalization leads to preferences for English games over traditional games in south-south Nigeria for instance (Onyebueke, 2015). Children are losing memories their ancestors may have passed down informally during play sessions.

Nigerian Traditional Games and Play Forms

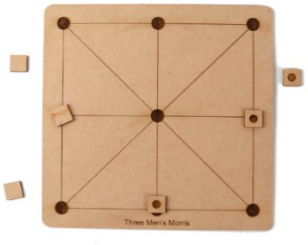
Nigeria has a rich variety of traditional indoor and outdoor games played across generations to foster communal bonds, pass on folk stories through role play, and develop agility, coordination and strategy skills (Adebara, 2023). Traditional games have long been a vibrant part of Nigerian culture, reflecting the country's rich history and diversity. Historically major forms of play expressions in children can be linked into current conventional child play space designs. One major such as connection to nature relates to the context of playing with sand and water, going into the forests and bushes to gather natural objects such as stones and snail shells, inclusive of intensive activities such as the pursuit of animals in nature. Therefore, in a bid to attempt particular practices to promote play experience in child play spaces in Nigeria, the design looks towards Nigerian traditional game concepts. These games are not only a source of entertainment but also serve as educational tools, fostering social interaction, strategic thinking, and cultural bonding. The recreational activity, competitive spirit and cultural symbolism woven around traditional play has been crucial for socialization, identity formation and value transmission for youth (Amlor, 2016). Games can involve songs, chants and dance synchronized with movement too. Common examples include:

Strategic Games

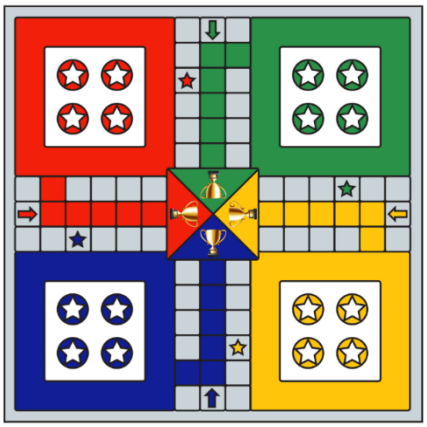
Variants of Mancala board games like “Ayo olopon”, “Dara” in Hausa, a variant related to tic-tac-toe or “Okwe” in igbo reflects across cultures to build numerical, pattern recognition, strategic thinking and social interaction skills. Ludo boards incorporate numeric and spatial elements to strategize around game constructs. Draft games like 3 Men’s Morris teach analysis and evaluation abilities (Lim & Lee, 2007).



Ayo/Dara/Okwe



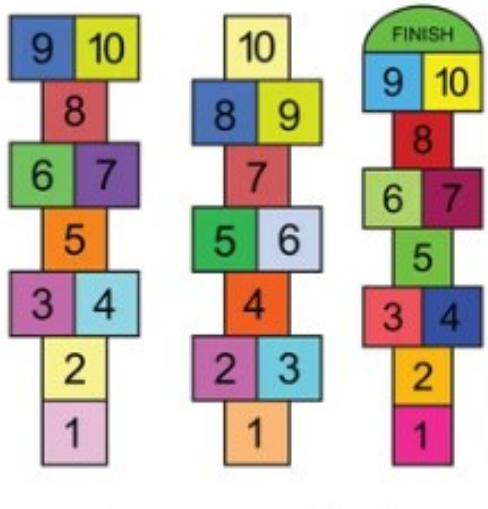
3 Men’s Morris



Ludo

Physical Games:

Highly active jumping, hoping, running and chasing games build motor skills, speed and strength. Tag-based Dara/Wanjo tests reflexes through complex feints and dodging (Tomporowski et al., 2015). Target accuracy matters in stone throws like Rogun rogun. Stilt walking races called Peke in the north, Target accuracy hoping and jumping game called suwe (hop scotch). Wrestling games like Abula in southwest Nigeria or Kokawa in Hausa regions foster resilience, technique and power (Afrotradosports, 2017).



Suwe (Hop Scotch)

Imaginative Games

Roleplaying hunter-prey pursuit adventures like Kura and Murege or recreating war sequences through Dije/Eshin Jogede games allows improvisational socio-dramatic performances (Punday, 2005). Chanting rhymes while rhythmic clapping in Atilogwu dance play boosts linguistic and cognitive capacities. Replicating farming, marriage or festival rituals promotes cultural learning.

Recitation Games

Riddle games, lullaby and folktale narration sessions encode indigenous knowledge across generations and strengthen memory, listening and comprehension aptitudes (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2021)

Therapeutic Games

Yoyo/Ganga and spinning top- Bambaram toys build hand-eye flexibility and visual tracking. Straw weaving into masks or horses boosts creativity. Sand moulding clay into pots and buildings assists tactile therapeutic development (Stone & Schaefer, 2019)

METHODOLOGY

The methodology involves literature review of academic papers and policy documents as well as observations across a sample of five preschool play spaces in Lagos State. Observation was made to access the influence of a proposed game play space on play experience via its impact on physical activity levels. Ten kids in five sets of two were selected from each school to

participate in the game play space. A structured observational protocol tailored to capture physical activity levels of the children in relation to the game play space was used. For each preschool, forehand notice and permissions was requested from the operators to carry out research. Childrens physical activity levels were observed during the time spent in the game play space. In addition to the proposed data to be collected, certain factors were noted. Such as total periods of play engagement, so as to carter for all factors that influence data collection. Thematic analysis was used to gather insights, underlying causes and interventions from findings. Thematic analysis involves a systematic process of identifying patterns, themes, or categories within the observed data. The process seeks to gather real-world evidence on how activity stimulation and heritage integration within available outdoor school infrastructure may promote both physical activity levels and cultural retention. Alongside existing literature, the observations can inform frameworks for conceptualizing heritage-anchored play areas.

Research Design

Concept: A Physical Puzzle Approach

The concept of puzzles in the context of play refers to activities or games that involve problem-solving, critical thinking, and cognitive engagement. Puzzles are designed to challenge the mind, promote learning, and offer a sense of accomplishment when solved. Whether as a solitary activity or a social game, puzzles play an essential role in fostering cognitive development, creativity, and mental agility. The proposed “puzzle play space" concept relates the child play space as a canvass for adventure, which aims to stimulate play experience. Taking cues from the game of suwe, the child play space can be conceptualized as a life-sized game of interactive challenging play levels.

Suwe: Traditional games like Suwe which cuts across different ethnic and socio-cultural groups, hold a special place in Nigerian culture, connecting generations and providing opportunities for learning and entertainment. Suwe also known as Hop Scotch, is a traditional Nigerian playground game played by children. It involves drawing patterns of numbered squares on the ground with chalk, creating a grid. Players toss a small object, such as a stone or bottle cap, onto the grid and then hop through the grid in turns while following specific rules. The game requires players to maintain balance, coordination, and agility while also incorporating elements of strategy and timing. It is often played outdoors and is enjoyed by children for its simplicity and entertainment value, promoting physical activity, social interaction among participants, coordination, and creative play.

The game promotes a healthy and active lifestyle, reinforcing cultural values of physical fitness and well-being, providing the opportunity for social interaction, cooperation, and bonding among players. The game is typically played in a spirit of friendly competition, with players adhering to rules, taking turns, and respecting each other's space. The game promotes fair play, honesty, and good sportsmanship, by this, children develop social skills, forge friendships, and build a sense of community within their neighbourhoods. It is a traditional game that has been passed down through generations in many cultures in Nigeria. By playing Suwe, children connect with their cultural heritage and uphold a cherished tradition that has endured over time. It serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving and celebrating cultural practices and customs.

The Puzzle play space

In the puzzle play spaces, physical challenges that require children to hop or step through a path while adhering to a set of rules and patterns is incorporated. This concept is based off creating an interactive path on the ground where children can hop and jump as in suwe, each level of the interactive path represents a part of the puzzle space. As they hop from one point to another, they complete the challenges associated to each level as they go, making it a fun and learning experience. The challenges are designed to be age-appropriate and educational, encouraging collaboration and social interaction amongst themselves while promoting both recreational and instructional physical activities via hopping, running, and jumping. The incorporation of educational components into the play space, such as signages, labelling shapes, colours, or numbers on the puzzle space to help children understand the concept and purpose of each level as they move through the play space, promoting learning through play.

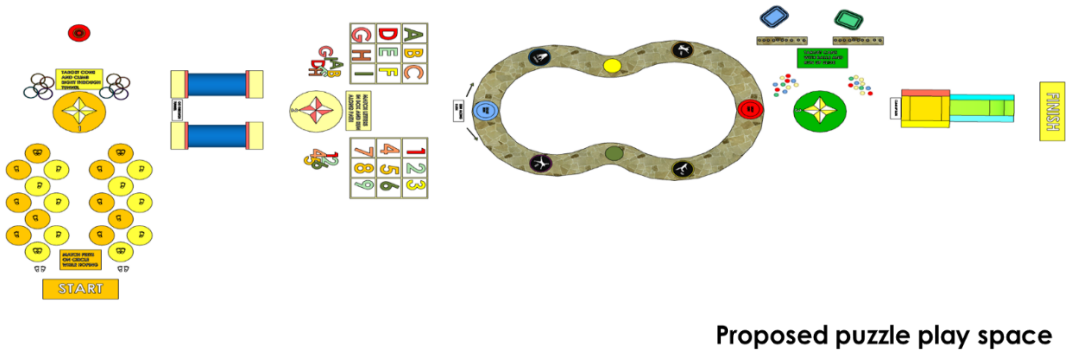


Figure 1: Proposed Puzzle play Space

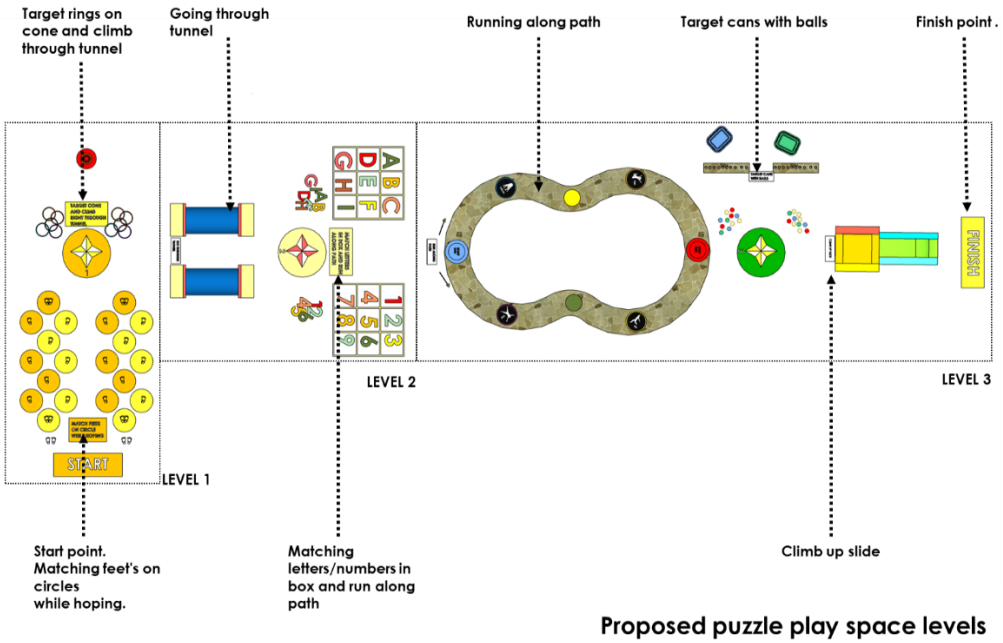


Figure 2: Proposed Puzzle play Space Levels

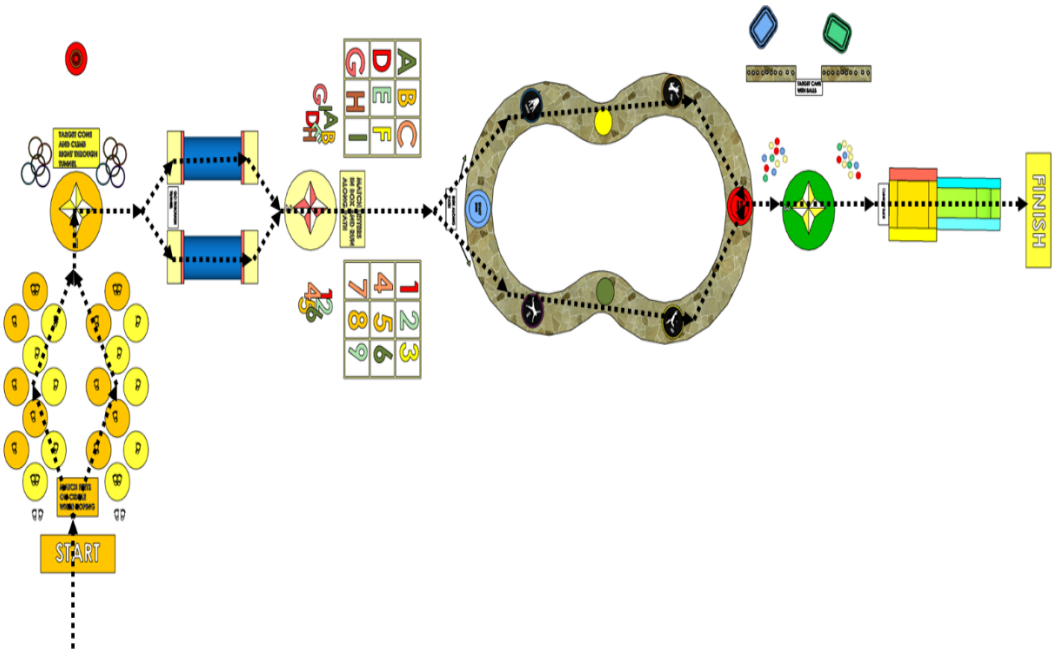


Figure 3: Proposed Puzzle play Space Levels Direction of Movement



Figure 4: Proposed Puzzle play Space Levels 1

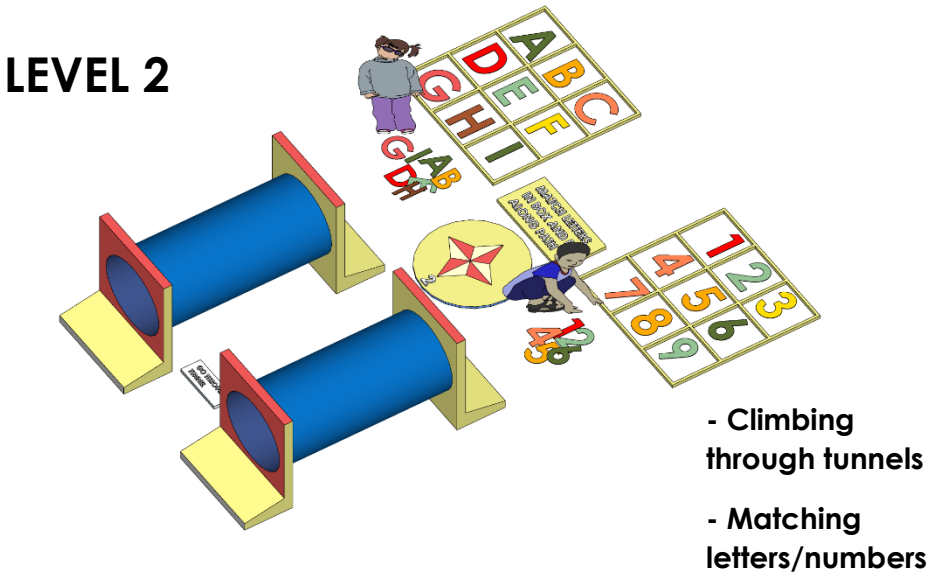


Figure 5: Proposed Puzzle play Space Levels 2

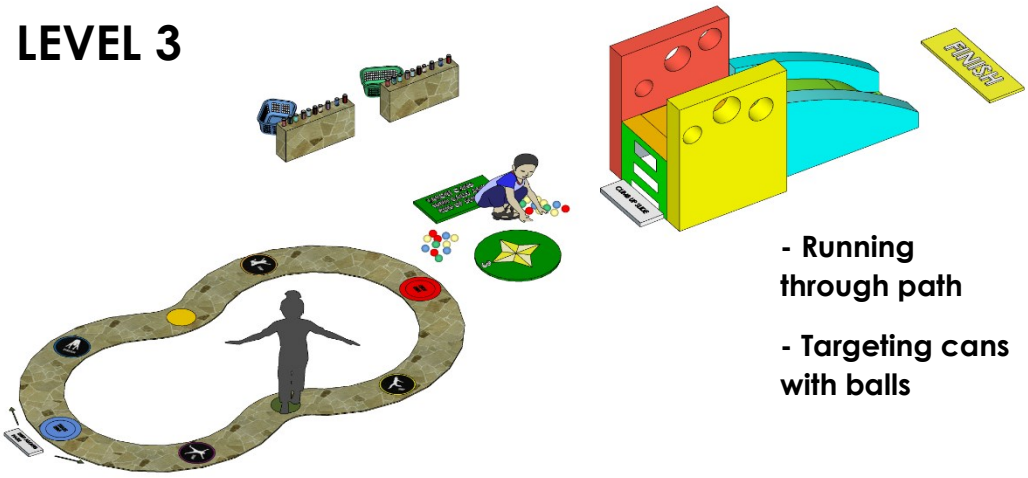


Figure 6: Proposed Puzzle play Space Level 3

The game is played in turns of two children at a time as seen by the directional movement in figure 3, children's interaction with the game elements as they go along the play space are split in two after the start point but ends in one path at the end to determine a timely winner. Star points on large circles are introduced to serve as communal points and level markers to give a sense of attainment.

Deductible skills form level one portrays the game of suwe which includes physical activities of hoping and jumping. As children match each or both feet on the designated circle feet path, they are required to sing rhymes as they go along, learning balance and coordination, hand eye coordination is gotten from targeting the cone with rings. Level two starts by climbing through

a tunnel. This gives room for adaptable spatial awareness and upon climbing out, they are met with a game of pattern recognition that requires them to call out letters and numbers while matching them into a box grid. This helps literacy and numeracy skills. The box Grid adapted can be adapted for the purpose of playing the tic-tac-toe game, Level three opens up with an opportunity to run along a path a key avenue for physical fitness. This level also ends with a game of targeting cans at a height from a distance, helping-eye coordination.

For visibility, ash is used to represent an interactive path on sand. The path follows a predetermined path from a start point to a finish point. play space amenities like slides, tunnels, hoops, movable sized cones, regular tin cans that clatter upon fall are used. All to achieve adaptability. This is to keep the play area refreshable and exciting. This helps to create spaces that can be adapted to different layouts and sizes while offering appropriate levels of challenges to maintain children's interests. From the use of simple space arrangements to more complex designs, each level space can be part of a puzzle or challenge. Safety is a top priority, and as such ground area to be used is examined to ensure that there are no sharp edges or small parts that could pose as hazards.

RESULT AND DISCSSION

Demography

The five schools chosen were chosen to show a range of early childhood learning environments in Lagos State. The sample schools are spread out across Lagos to show differences in location, and socioeconomic background, in both high- and low-income areas. 10 kids from each school were randomly selected for the purpose of data collection, children went through the proposed game in sets of two for five turns.

Table 1: School Demography

School	Location (L.G.A)
Corona Day School	Ikoyi
Babyville Child Care Centre	Victoria Island
Iponri Grammer School Daycare	Ebute Metta
De-Royal school	Lagos island
Self-starters House Montessori School Masha	Surulere

Data Report and Analysis

School 1: Corona Day School Ikoyi, Lagos State.

The kids were observed to have moderate activity levels, intensity levels recorded for climbing, hopping and jumping was moderate, while the performance was low in running. As the puzzle play space was introduced to the kids, ranking their play behaviours during interaction noted that the children interacted with the game in a competitive manner, followed by social interaction, physical engagement and lastly solitary engagement. The children were noted to be very excited when they started the game, also, some of them who understood the game, willingly taught the others. This took them longer time going through the game initially but later went faster after full understanding of the game play.

School 2: Babyville Child Care Centre Victoria Island, Lagos State.
The kids were given an age-appropriate exercise where the physical activity levels for climbing, hopping, jumping and running was high. Beyond their high level of engagement, it was observed that the kids had a good understanding of the game. Furthermore, their behaviour during the game was observed, using a scale of 1-5, the children had a high level of physical engagement and competitive engagement (5) followed by social interaction (3) and solitary engagement (1)

School 3: Iponri Grammer School Iponri, Lagos State.
Similarly, to school 2, children in Iponri Grammer School were observed to have a high level of physical activity like climbing, running, hopping and jumping. The children behaviour during the game was observed, using a scale of 1-5, the children had a high level of physical engagement, social interaction and competitive engagement (5) followed by social and solitary engagement (1). It was also observed that excluding their high level of physical engagement, the time when the observation was conducted must have played a role in influencing their physical activity level as they were supposed to have their outdoor game time which is considered as a period when games, exercises and fun activities are performed.

School 4: De-Royal school Lagos Island, Lagos State.
This school produced a different result as there were mixed level of physical activity. The children's physical activity levels were only high for jumping, moderate for running and low for hopping and climbing. The children behaviour during the game was observed, using a scale of 1-5, the children had a high level of social interaction (5) followed by physical engagement (3), competitive engagement (2) and solitary engagement (1). It was observed that the children were less competitive which could be ascribed to their low level of physical activity level but they were eager to help each other know and play the game showing a positive review of their social interaction.

School 5: Self-starters House Montessori School Masha, Lagos state
In school 5, their physical activity level across all activities (climbing, hopping, running and jumping) were moderate while the children behaviour during the game using 1-5, with 5 being the highest was observed; competitive engagement was rated (4) followed by physical engagement and social interaction rated (3) respectively and solitary engagement rated (1).

Data Organisation
Insights from report analysis are grouped into 3 categories
i. Physical activity levels.
ii. Specific game play space categories.
iii. Influence on Physical Activity Levels.

The results from each of the data sources are described in the sections that follow, along with an explanation of how those results relate to the stated research objectives.

Group	Observations	Themes
1.	"Children are highly engaged in various physical activities, particularly climbing and dancing."	Physical Activity Promotion
1.	"Quick understanding led to high intensity and competition throughout the game."	Motivating Competition
1.	"Children were less competitive as the puzzle game space involved a closely-knit class of children rather social interactions at peak."	Social Interaction vs. Competition
1.	"Children are eager and excited at the beginning of the puzzle play space."	Game Acceptance
2.	"Children are highly engaged in various physical activities, particularly climbing and dancing."	Physical Activity Variety
2.	"Full on children engagement amongst the puzzle game space, participants, and other children."	High Level Engagement
3.	"Took the children longer time of going through the game play initially but later fell within the range after all understood the game play."	Learning Progression
3.	"Children went through the puzzle game space with agility resulting in lesser time for competition."	Agility and Time Management

Theme Development

Thematic analysis of the observational data findings yielded eight prominent themes that shed light on how the play space influenced physical activity engagement.

Theme 1: Physical Activity Promotion

A key finding was the ability of the puzzle play space to promote a diverse range of physical activities among the children. Across the observed schools, children were highly engaged in various locomotor movements, particularly climbing, running, jumping, and dancing. As noted at School 2, "Children were highly engaged in various physical activities, particularly climbing and dancing." This aligns with existing evidence highlighting the importance of incorporating open, multifunctional play spaces and movable components to enable diverse physical activities that enrich development (Menconi & Grohmann, 2018; Luchs & Fikus, 2018).

Theme 2: Motivating Competition

The level of competition and intensity of physical activity appeared to be influenced by the children's comprehension of the puzzle game's rules and objectives. Schools where children quickly grasped the game mechanics exhibited higher levels of competition and intensity throughout the play sessions. For instance, School 2 noted that "Quick understanding led to high intensity and competition throughout the game." This aligns with theories of games promoting motivation and competence development, as clear goals and objectives facilitate concentration and spark competitive engagement (Kelso et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Theme 3: Social Collaboration
While some schools emphasized competitive behaviours, others observed higher levels of social interaction and collaborative play among the children within the puzzle play space. School 4 noted that "children were less competitive as the puzzle game space involved a closely-knit class of children rather social interactions at peak." This cooperative play aligns with the value of open-ended environments that enable different interaction styles and promote socioemotional development (Kirk & Jay, 2018; Skovbjerg & Bekker, 2018).

Theme 4: Game Acceptance
All schools shared observations of initial excitement and eagerness among the children when introduced to the puzzle play space, indicating high initial participation and positivity. As School 1 noted, "children are eager and excited at the beginning of the puzzle play space." This joyfulness reinforces the sentimental quality central to school readiness and divergent thinking (Gardner, 1982; Cheng et al., 2023).

Theme 5: Physical Activity Variety
The puzzle play space facilitated a range of physical activities by incorporating integrated structures that enabled different types of movement, such as running, dancing, balancing, and climbing. School 5 observed children "highly engaged in various physical activities, especially climbing and dancing." This variety aligns with theories on play personalization, catering to different play styles and developmental needs (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2018).

Theme 6: High Level of Engagement
The level of involvement and participation among the children was noteworthy, with School 3 describing "full-on children engagement amongst the puzzle game space, participants, and other children." This high level of engagement can be attributed to the behaviour settings created by the play environment, acting as a "behavioural magnet" that encourages participatory quality and risk-taking, essential for overall development (Schlüter et al., 2017; Langham, 2020; Lunga et al., 2022).

Theme 7: Learning Progression
Observations revealed a learning progression in understanding the puzzle game's rules and mechanics. Initially, children took longer to comprehend the game, but their engagement and intensity increased as they mastered the mechanics. As School 1 noted, "it took the children longer time of going through the game play initially but later fell within the range after all understood the game play." This aligns with cognitive constructivism theories, where understanding develops through active exploration and problem-solving (Lin et al., 2020; Parker & Thomsen, 2019).

Theme 8: Agility and Time Management
Some schools highlighted the development of agility and time management skills among the children as they navigated the puzzle play space with dexterity, completing tasks more efficiently over time. School 2 observed that "Children went through the puzzle game space with agility resulting in lesser time for competition." This theme of agility relates to theories

of risky outdoor play, where exciting physical challenges improve functioning and stress management (Harper, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The conceptualized puzzle play space positively influenced children's physical activity levels by promoting diverse physical activities, fostering competition and motivation, enabling social collaboration, sparking initial excitement, offering activity variety, encouraging high engagement, facilitating learning progression, and developing agility and time management skills. These findings contribute to the understanding of how intentionally designed play environments can shape children's physical activity behaviours and support their overall development.

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