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## Article

# Free Play as Pedagogical Praxis in Finnish Early Childhood Education: Examining Its Association on Children's Perceived Developmental Outcomes and Teachers' Instructional Beliefs

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**Abstract:** This study examined free play as a pedagogical praxis in Finnish early childhood education and its association with children's perceived developmental outcomes and teachers' instructional beliefs. Specifically, it assessed the extent of classroom practices of free play, children's perceived developmental outcomes, teachers' instructional beliefs, and the relationships among these variables. A descriptive-correlational research design was employed among thirty-three (33) early childhood education teachers from selected Norlandia Päiväkodit Oy daycare centers in Finland using purposive sampling. Data were collected through a researcher-adapted questionnaire based on the works of Fisher et al. (2011), Hyvönen (2011), Kim (2004), Pyle and Danniels (2017), Weisberg et al. (2016), and Zosh et al. (2018). Frequency count, percentage, weighted mean, standard deviation, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient were used in the analysis of the data. The findings revealed that free play classroom practices were generally highly evident, while children's perceived developmental outcomes and teachers' instructional beliefs regarding free play were assessed at very high levels. Significant relationships were found between classroom practices of free play, teachers' instructional beliefs, and children's perceived developmental outcomes. The study concluded that effective free play practices and positive instructional beliefs contributed to children's holistic development. It was recommended that the proposed Enhancement Program for Strengthening Free Play Practices in Finnish Early Childhood Education be implemented to sustain and further improve play-based pedagogical practices.

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**Keywords:** Free play, pedagogical praxis, play-based learning, early childhood education, Finnish early childhood education, teacher facilitation, classroom practices, learning environment

## Introduction

Free play has increasingly been recognized as a vital pedagogical praxis in early childhood education, serving as a foundation for children's holistic development across social, emotional,

and cognitive domains. In this study, pedagogical praxis refers to the integration of theoretical understanding and actual teaching practice, where free play is not only viewed as a concept but also implemented meaningfully in real classroom situations (Alila et al., 2022; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2022). Contemporary studies highlight that play-based approaches enhance creativity, social interaction, and cognitive engagement, positioning play as a central mechanism for active and experiential learning.

In the Finnish context, free play is deeply embedded within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) framework, emphasizing child agency, participation, and experiential learning (Ferreira, 2021). Moreover, research indicates that children's creative participation during play supports the development of essential 21st-century skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Nikkola et al., 2024), making free play not only a developmental tool but also a strategic pedagogical approach for preparing learners for future academic and life demands. Globally, early childhood education is widely recognized as a critical foundation for lifelong learning and development, as it shapes children's cognitive, social, and emotional competencies during their most formative years. UNESCO (2022) reports that over 175 million children worldwide remain unenrolled in pre-primary education, highlighting persistent inequities in access to quality early learning opportunities. This highlighted the urgent need to strengthen early childhood programs that are both inclusive and developmentally appropriate. Empirical studies further reveal that children exposed to play-based learning demonstrate higher levels of socio-emotional competence, improved language acquisition, and stronger cognitive performance compared to those in more rigid, teacher-directed environments. Play-based approaches also foster intrinsic motivation, active engagement, and a positive attitude toward learning, which are essential for long-term academic success.

At the national level, Finland is widely regarded as a global leader in early childhood education due to its strong emphasis on play-based pedagogy. The Finnish ECEC system operates under an "educare" model that integrates education, care, and teaching, ensuring that children's learning is holistic and developmentally appropriate (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Research further indicates that play serves as a central activity in Finnish preschools, where learning occurs through exploration, interaction, and child-initiated experiences (Brotherus et al., 2021; Kangas et al., 2021).

However, despite this strong foundation, variations in teachers' facilitation strategies and instructional beliefs may influence how free play is implemented in practice. Teachers who hold more child-centered beliefs are more likely to support open-ended, exploratory play, while those with more teacher-directed beliefs may structure or limit play experiences, thereby affecting children's learning opportunities (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2021; Salminen et al., 2021). Locally, within Norlandia Päiväkodit Oy, free play is consistently integrated into daily classroom routines as part of pedagogical practice. This study aims to understand teachers' perceptions of free play and how these perceptions are reflected in their pedagogical practices. In particular, teachers' instructional beliefs about learning and development may shape how free play is valued, facilitated, and implemented in classroom settings (Muhonen, 2025; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2022).

Through the responses gathered from teachers, the study seeks to provide insights into how free play is currently understood and utilized as a tool for supporting children perceived developmental outcomes. This study is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education, which emphasizes the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities. Free play contributes to this

goal by fostering foundational competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, and social interaction, which are essential for future learning and workforce readiness.

In particular, early childhood experiences rooted in play-based learning support children's ability to adapt and thrive in an increasingly complex global society. Despite the recognized benefits of free play, several challenges remain evident. Teachers often struggle to balance free play with structured instruction, ensure meaningful learning outcomes, and manage diverse learner needs within play-based environments. Smedsrud (2023) revealed that while teachers play a critical role in supporting children's play, there is still limited clarity on how facilitation strategies influence developmental outcomes. Additionally, inconsistencies in instructional beliefs and classroom practices may affect the effectiveness of free play as a pedagogical approach. Moreover, a significant research gap exists in quantitatively examining the relationship between free play practices and children perceived developmental outcomes, particularly within the Finnish context. While previous studies have emphasized the importance of play qualitatively, there is limited empirical evidence linking specific classroom practices such as implementation, facilitation, and learning environment to measurable outcomes in social-emotional and cognitive-language development. This gap highlights the necessity for a structured and quantitative investigation. Teachers have important roles in assuring that learners achieve optimal developmental outcomes. As primary facilitators of learning, they are responsible for creating environments that support children's growth across multiple developmental domains. In the context of this study, teachers' practices in implementing and facilitating free play significantly influence children's learning experiences and developmental progress.

It has also been observed by teachers in the research environment that parents increasingly rely on educators for the success of their children, particularly in supporting foundational skills such as language and early numeracy development. This reliance highlights the critical responsibility of teachers in ensuring that pedagogical practices effectively address perceived children's developmental needs. Furthermore, it is evident that many learners, as they progress through their educational journey and eventually enter the workforce, encounter difficulties in critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. These challenges often stem from insufficient early developmental experiences. Hence, it is imperative that the extent of free play implementation and its association with children perceived developmental outcomes be examined, as early childhood education plays a crucial role in shaping lifelong competencies. In view of these considerations, this study aims to examine free play as pedagogical praxis in Finnish early childhood education, focusing on its implementation, teacher facilitation, and learning environment, and its association with children's

## Literature Review

Recent literature emphasizes that free play becomes a meaningful pedagogical practice when teachers intentionally provide time, space, materials, and classroom conditions that allow children to make choices, explore ideas, interact with peers, and construct their own learning. Hamer & Ross (2024) explained that learning through play supports holistic learning because it combines active engagement, social interaction, meaning-making, joy, and experimentation. In early childhood classrooms, this means that the implementation of free play should not be viewed as an unstructured break from learning but as a developmentally appropriate approach that promotes children's participation and agency (Mentzer, 2022). Similarly, Mohamed (2023) that play-based approaches, particularly when appropriately supported by

adults, can enhance children's learning and developmental progress compared with purely passive or highly teacher-directed instruction. These findings support the need to examine classroom practices of free play in terms of implementation, teacher facilitation, and the quality of the learning environment.

Recent studies also show that children's developmental outcomes are closely connected to the quality of play experiences and the beliefs teachers hold about play (Parker et al., 2022). Play provides opportunities for children to practice social and emotional skills such as cooperation, turn-taking, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and relationship-building, while also strengthening cognitive and language development through conversation, imagination, storytelling, classification, and symbolic thinking (Odey et al., 2025). According to Kalkush & Perren (2025), playful learning environments support broad developmental competencies, including communication, collaboration, creativity, and self-regulation. Skene et al. (2022) further reported that adult-supported play can positively influence children's learning outcomes, especially when teachers guide children without removing their freedom to explore. Thus, teachers' instructional beliefs regarding free play are important because these beliefs influence how they plan activities, facilitate interactions, organize the environment, and interpret children's developmental progress.

## Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive–correlational research design to examine the implementation of free play as a pedagogical praxis and its association with children's perceived developmental outcomes and teachers' instructional beliefs in Finnish early childhood education. The descriptive approach was used to determine the extent of free play classroom practices in terms of implementation, teacher facilitation, and learning environment, while the correlational approach was employed to test the relationship between free play practices and children's perceived developmental outcomes in the social-emotional and cognitive-language domains. The study followed the Input–Process–Output model to guide the flow of data gathering, analysis, and the development of the proposed enhancement program. The study was conducted among thirty-three (33) early childhood education teachers from selected Norlandia Päiväkodit Oy daycare centers in Finland. A structured researcher-adapted questionnaire served as the primary data-gathering instrument. The instrument was adapted from Fisher et al. (2011), Hyvönen (2011), Pyle and Danniels (2017), Weisberg et al. (2016), Kim (2004), and Zosh et al. (2018), which provided the theoretical basis for assessing free play practices, developmental outcomes, and teachers' instructional beliefs. A five-point Likert scale was used for scoring. The questionnaire underwent content validation and pilot testing among twenty-five (25) preschool teachers who were not part of the actual respondents. Reliability results showed Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.797 to 0.885, indicating acceptable to high internal consistency. Data were collected through an anonymous Finnish-translated Google Forms survey. Ethical standards, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and GDPR compliance were strictly observed. Weighted mean, standard deviation, and Pearson product–moment correlation were used to analyze the data.

## Results

Table 1 shows that free play implementation is generally practiced, with an aggregate mean of 4.20 and standard deviation of 0.78. The highest rating was obtained by the regular

integration of free play into the daily classroom schedule (WM = 4.91), indicating strong consistency among teachers.

Table 1. Extent of Classroom Practices of the Respondents of Free Play in Terms of Implementation

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
Free play is regularly integrated into my daily classroom schedule.	4.91	0.28	Highly Practiced
Children are provided sufficient time for uninterrupted free play.	4.15	0.67	Practiced
Children are allowed to choose their own play activities.	4.21	0.74	Highly Practiced
Play activities are primarily child-initiated.	4.27	0.63	Highly Practiced
Free play is given equal importance as structured learning activities.	4.09	1.18	Practiced
Classroom routines are flexible to accommodate extended play.	3.55	1.15	Practiced
Aggregate Mean	4.20		Practiced
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.78	

However, flexibility in classroom routines received the lowest mean (WM = 3.55), suggesting some limitations in extending playtime. Overall, free play is embedded in classroom practice, though scheduling flexibility may still be improved further.

Table 2. Extent of Classroom Practices of the Respondents of Free Play in Terms of Facilitation

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
I observe children's behavior during free play to assess their development.	4.30	0.85	Highly Practiced
I provide guidance without interrupting children's play.	4.15	0.80	Practiced
I ask questions that stimulate children's thinking during play.	4.18	0.98	Practiced
I support collaboration and interaction among children.	4.64	0.49	Highly Practiced
I scaffold children's learning during play when needed.	4.52	0.57	Highly Practiced
I document children's learning experiences during free play.	3.61	1.12	Practiced
Aggregate Mean	4.23		Highly Practiced
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.80	

Table 2 reveals that facilitation of free play is highly practiced, with an aggregate mean of 4.23

and standard deviation of 0.80. The highest mean was on supporting collaboration and interaction among children (WM = 4.64), showing that teachers actively promote peer engagement during play. Scaffolding children's learning also received a high rating (WM = 4.52). However, documenting children's learning experiences had the lowest mean (WM = 3.61), suggesting that record-keeping during free play may need further strengthening.

Table 3. Extent of Classroom Practices of the Respondents of Free Play in Terms of Learning Environment

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
The classroom environment supports independent and active play.	4.21	0.82	Highly Practiced
Play materials are accessible and appropriate for children's age.	4.48	0.62	Highly Practiced
The classroom includes diverse play areas, e.g., dramatic, sensory, constructive.	4.06	1.06	Practiced
Outdoor spaces are utilized for free play activities.	4.39	0.90	Highly Practiced
The learning environment encourages exploration and creativity.	4.06	1.03	Practiced
Play materials are regularly updated to maintain children's engagement.	4.24	1.00	Highly Practiced
Aggregate Mean	4.24		Highly Practiced
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.90	

Table 3 shows that the learning environment for free play is highly practiced, with an aggregate mean of 4.24 and standard deviation of 0.90. The highest rating was on the accessibility and age-appropriateness of play materials (WM = 4.48), indicating that classrooms are well-equipped for children's play needs. Outdoor spaces were also highly utilized (WM = 4.39). However, diverse play areas and exploration/creativity both obtained the lowest means (WM = 4.06), suggesting room for further enrichment of learning spaces.

Table 4. Level of the Children's Perceived Developmental Outcomes as Observed by Teachers in Terms of Social and Emotional Development

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
Free play enhances children's social interaction skills.	4.94	0.24	Very High
Children develop emotional regulation during play.	4.85	0.36	Very High
Free play promotes cooperation and sharing among children.	4.85	0.36	Very High
Children express their emotions freely during play.	4.67	0.60	Very High
Free play builds children's confidence and independence.	4.73	0.52	Very High
Children learn conflict resolution through play.	4.79	0.42	Very High

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
Aggregate Mean	4.80		Very High
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.42	

Table 4 indicates that children's perceived social and emotional development is very high, with an aggregate mean of 4.80 and standard deviation of 0.42. The highest rating was on free play enhancing children's social interaction skills (WM = 4.94), showing that teachers strongly observed improved peer engagement. Emotional regulation and cooperation also received very high ratings (WM = 4.85). Although expressing emotions freely had the lowest mean (WM = 4.67), it remains very high, indicating strong social-emotional benefits of free play.

Table 5. Level of the Children's Perceived Developmental Outcomes as Observed by Teachers in Terms of cognitive and language Development

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
Free play enhances children's problem-solving abilities.	4.79	0.42	Very High
Children demonstrate creativity and imagination during play.	4.79	0.42	Very High
Free play supports early literacy development.	4.21	0.89	Very High
Language development is enhanced through peer interaction in play.	4.64	0.55	Very High
Children engage in critical thinking during play activities.	4.61	0.58	Very High
Free play contributes to overall cognitive development.	4.73	0.52	Very High
Aggregate Mean	4.63		Very High
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.56	

Table 5 shows that children's perceived cognitive and language development is very high, with an aggregate mean of 4.63 and standard deviation of 0.56. The highest ratings were given to problem-solving abilities and creativity/imagination during play, both with a WM of 4.79. This suggests that free play strongly supports children's thinking skills and creative expression. Early literacy development obtained the lowest mean (WM = 4.21), but it is still very high, indicating that free play contributes positively to cognitive-language growth.

Table 6. Level of the teachers' instructional beliefs regarding free play in early childhood education

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
Free play is an important part of children's learning.	4.85	0.44	Very High
Free play supports children's social and emotional development.	4.91	0.29	Very High
Free play supports children's cognitive and language development.	4.82	0.46	Very High
Children learn effectively through play-based activities.	4.79	0.48	Very High

Indicators	WM	SD	Verbal Description
Teachers play an important role in guiding and supporting children's play.	4.79	0.42	Very High
Free play should be included in daily classroom practices.	5.00	0.00	Very High
Aggregate Mean	4.86		Very High
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.35	

Table 6 reveals that teachers' instructional beliefs regarding free play are very high, with an aggregate mean of 4.86 and standard deviation of 0.35. The highest rating was on the inclusion of free play in daily classroom practices (WM = 5.00), indicating unanimous agreement among teachers. Teachers also strongly believed that free play supports children's social-emotional development (WM = 4.91). Overall, the findings show that respondents highly value free play as an essential pedagogical approach in early childhood education.

Table 7. Test of relationship between the classroom practices of free play and the children perceived developmental outcomes

Variables	r-value	Strength of Correlation	P-value	Decision	Remarks
Classroom Practices and Developmental Outcomes	0.538*	Moderate Positive	0.001	Reject Ho	Significant

Significant at  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed)

Table 7 revealed an r-value of 0.536 and a p-value of 0.001, which was lower than the 0.05 level of significance. The correlation coefficient indicated a moderate positive relationship between the variables. Since the computed p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. Thus, there was a significant relationship between the classroom practices of free play and the children's perceived developmental outcomes. The findings suggested that as the quality and extent of free play practices increased, the level of children's perceived developmental outcomes also tended to increase. The moderate positive correlation indicated that classroom practices such as effective implementation of free play, appropriate teacher facilitation, and the provision of supportive learning environments were associated with higher levels of social-emotional, cognitive, and language development among children. Although the relationship was not perfect, the results demonstrated that free play practices contributed meaningfully to children's developmental outcomes as observed by the teachers.

These findings implied that the manner in which free play was implemented within early childhood education settings played an important role in supporting children's holistic development. Classrooms that provided opportunities for child-initiated play, meaningful teacher support, and stimulating learning environments were more likely to foster positive developmental outcomes. Through free play, children are given the freedom to explore their interests, make decisions, solve problems, and interact with peers, all of which contribute to the development of essential life skills. At the same time, teachers who actively facilitate and enrich play experiences can help extend children's thinking, encourage communication, and promote deeper engagement in learning activities.

The findings further implied that strengthening classroom practices related to free play may enhance children's learning experiences and contribute to improvements in their social, emotional, cognitive, and language competencies. Moreover, the positive relationship observed in the study suggests that play should not be viewed merely as a recreational activity but as a meaningful and effective approach to learning and development. Consequently, educators and administrators may benefit from prioritizing high-quality play-based practices as part of their educational programs, ensuring that children have access to supportive environments that nurture both academic readiness and overall well-being.

Table 8. Test of relationship between the teachers' instructional beliefs and the children's perceived developmental outcomes

Variables	r-value	Strength of Correlation	p-value	Decision	Remarks
Teachers' Instructional Beliefs and Developmental Outcomes	0.349*	Weak Positive	0.046	Reject Ho	Significant

Significant at  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed)

Table 8 revealed an r-value of 0.349 and a p-value of 0.046, which was lower than the 0.05 level of significance. The correlation coefficient indicated a weak positive relationship between the variables. Since the computed p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. Thus, there was a significant relationship between teachers' instructional beliefs and the children's perceived developmental outcomes. The findings suggested that teachers who held stronger positive beliefs regarding free play tended to observe more favorable developmental outcomes among children. Although the relationship was weak, the statistical significance indicated that teachers' instructional beliefs were associated with children's social-emotional, cognitive, and language development. Further, it implied that educators' beliefs about the value of free play may influence how they organize learning experiences, interact with children, and support developmental growth within the classroom. However, the relatively low correlation coefficient suggested that children's developmental outcomes may also be influenced by other factors such as family background, classroom environment, peer interactions, and the quality of pedagogical implementation. These findings implied that teachers' instructional beliefs served as an important element in shaping educational practices and children's learning experiences. Educators who strongly valued free play were more likely to provide opportunities for child-centered learning, exploration, collaboration, and active engagement. Such beliefs may influence the extent to which teachers support autonomy, creativity, and meaningful interactions during play activities. Teachers who recognize the developmental value of play are also more likely to integrate play-based strategies into daily classroom routines, allowing children to learn through hands-on experiences and social interactions. Through these practices, children are provided with opportunities to develop problem-solving skills, communication abilities, self-regulation, and confidence in expressing their ideas. Moreover, positive instructional beliefs can encourage teachers to create inclusive and responsive learning environments that address the diverse needs and interests of young learners. Consequently, fostering positive instructional beliefs regarding play-based learning may contribute to improving the quality of early childhood education and supporting children's holistic development.

## Discussions

The findings indicate that free play is meaningfully integrated into the classroom practices of the respondents. Teachers regularly include free play in the daily classroom schedule, showing that play is treated as an essential part of early childhood learning rather than merely a recreational activity. Children are also given opportunities to choose their own play activities, and many play experiences are child-initiated, which supports independence, decision-making, and personal engagement. However, the results also suggest that classroom routines may still limit the extension of playtime, indicating a need for greater flexibility in allowing children to continue meaningful play experiences when learning is still actively taking place. In terms of facilitation, teachers highly support children during free play by observing their behavior, encouraging collaboration, providing guidance, and scaffolding learning when needed. This shows that teachers do not simply leave children to play on their own; instead, they guide learning while still respecting children's autonomy. The learning environment is also supportive, with accessible and age-appropriate materials, outdoor play opportunities, and resources that encourage active participation. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that documentation of children's learning and the enrichment of diverse play areas may still be improved to strengthen free play as a pedagogical practice.

The results further show that teachers perceive free play as highly beneficial to children's holistic development. In the social and emotional domain, free play helps children interact with others, cooperate, share, express emotions, build confidence, develop independence, and learn conflict resolution. These outcomes suggest that play provides a natural context where children can practice social skills and emotional control through real interactions with peers. In the cognitive and language domain, free play supports problem-solving, imagination, creativity, critical thinking, early literacy, communication, and overall cognitive growth. Through play, children are able to use language meaningfully, explore ideas, make decisions, and develop understanding through hands-on experiences. Teachers' instructional beliefs also strongly favor free play, as they recognize its value in supporting learning and development. The results show that teachers believe free play should be part of daily classroom practice and that teachers have an important role in guiding and supporting children's play experiences. The relationship results also indicate that better classroom practices of free play are connected with better perceived developmental outcomes. Teachers' beliefs are likewise associated with children's development, although other factors may also contribute. Overall, the findings affirm that free play is a valuable pedagogical approach that supports children's social, emotional, cognitive, and language development.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was concluded that free play served as an important pedagogical praxis in Finnish early childhood education, as reflected in its effective implementation, facilitation, and supportive learning environment. The very high levels of children's perceived social-emotional, cognitive, and language development suggested that free play contributed significantly to children's holistic growth and learning. Likewise, teachers demonstrated strong instructional beliefs regarding the value of free play, reinforcing its role in creating meaningful learning experiences. These findings demonstrated the importance of sustaining play-based practices through continuous professional development, program enhancement, and policies that support child-centered approaches in early childhood

education.

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