

OUTDOOR PLAY FOR CHILDREN: PROVISION AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTION

by

OKORUWA, Tolu O. Ph. D

*Dept of Early Childhood Care and Education,
Federal College of Education,
Abeokuta, Nigeria.*

*t_okoruwa@yahoo.com, tokoruwa@gmail.com
+2348023659217*

A Paper Presented at the 20th International Play Association Triennial Play
Conference held in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Theme- UNLEASH THE POWER OF PLAY

Date-Wednesday 13th September – Saturday 17th September, 2017.

Abstract

Outdoor play is important for children to master physical and motor skills. It helps them express freedom and independence, while preventing obesity and health related issues. Unfortunately, outdoor play is fast disappearing from Nigerian children's lives, particularly at home. This is as a result of parents' tiredness due to overloaded work schedule, fear of injury, traffic and the threat of kidnapping. This leaves the school with the responsibility of making up for the inadequacies by providing more opportunities for children to play outdoors in school. This study, therefore, examines preschool teachers' perception of the importance of outdoor play for children, the opportunities provided in schools for outdoor play as well as the roles of the teacher during outdoor play.

The descriptive survey research design was adopted. Stratified and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the sample of 439 preschool teachers involved in the study from Abeokuta Metropolis of Ogun State, Nigeria. A questionnaire tagged 'Outdoor Play Teachers' Questionnaire' with Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.873 was used for data collection.

The results revealed that majority of the sampled teachers believed that outdoor play prevents obesity, improves children's mood, enhances creativity and helps children understand and respect nature among others. However, it was believed that children make a lot of noise that disturbs neighbours, get injured and could be lost or kidnapped during outdoor play. Children mostly played outdoors during break time (of about 40 minutes) or after school hours while waiting for their parents to pick them up from school. Outdoor play never occurred before morning assembly or during teaching hours in many schools. The roles of the teacher whenever outdoor play occurred include supervision and passing instruction to children. However, about a third of the teachers reported using cane to enforce obedience to instruction and spent the time either resting or doing other school duties.

It was recommended that more opportunities should be provided for children's outdoor play. Teachers also need to be educated about their roles during outdoor play as well as how to integrate outdoor play into their teaching so that children could benefit maximally.

Key words: Outdoor play, perception, preschool teachers, early childhood.

Introduction

Outdoor play is one of the things that characterize childhood. And the best preparation for adulthood is to have a full and enjoyable childhood. When parents and teachers think back to their own childhoods, chances are some of their fondest memories are of outdoor places and activities which might include climbing a favourite tree or a secret hiding place, learning to turn cartwheels with a friend or playing with the family dog. Thus childhood must include outdoor play. Children need opportunities to explore, experiment, manipulate, jump, run, climb, swing, race, yell, roll, hide and make a big mess. Using open space to fulfil basic childhood need is what childhood is all about. For a variety of obvious reasons many of these things cannot occur indoors.

Teachers serve as gatekeepers to the playground because they determine daily schedules and ultimately make the decision whether to take the children outdoors or not. Moreover, teachers' attitudes and beliefs also influence the behaviours of the children they care for, as these preschool-aged children are entirely dependent on their caregivers for opportunities to be active. A better understanding of teachers' underlying perceptions that contribute to their behaviour around children's physical activity, including perceptions of benefits and barriers to children's physical activity, may provide insight about potential ways to increase children's physical activity levels, particularly outdoors. This is so important since individual teachers make daily decisions about when and how long children use the playground.

Outdoor play offers many benefits to children physically, cognitively and socio-emotionally. As summarised by Okoruwa (2016), the physical benefits include better vision, more motor fitness, better coordination and immunity. Cognitive benefits include enhanced long term memory, improved academic performance, problem solving and creative thinking skills. Socio-emotional benefits include greater levels of cooperation, conflict resolution and leadership skills, independence and autonomy as well as minimized anxiety and aggression. Children must not be denied these important experiences and benefits.

Unfortunately today, children's lives are more and more contained and controlled by small apartments, television, computer games, intense academic instruction as well as tense, tired, and overworked parents which translate to fewer opportunities to be children. As a result of these, there is concern about the negative social, cognitive and emotional impact of spending less time interacting with others in the natural environment. There is a need, therefore, to find

a variety of ways to provide quality outdoor play experiences for children, particularly, infants through age eight years.

The purpose of this study was to determine what preschool teachers perceived as the primary benefits and barriers to children's outdoor play. It also investigated the opportunities provided by teacher for children to play outdoors as well as the teachers' perception of their roles while children played outdoors.

Research Questions

1. What is the perception of preschool teachers of the importance and contribution of outdoor play to children's all-round development?
2. How often do teachers provide opportunity for preschoolers to play outdoors in school?
3. What is the preschool teachers' perception of their roles during children's outdoor play?

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all preschool teachers in Abeokuta Metropolis of Ogun State, Nigeria. The location was purposively selected because it features communities that can be classified as urban, semi-urban and rural areas which represent all the types of communities found in the state. The schools involved were selected using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. Abeokuta metropolis is stratified into two local government areas – Abeokuta North and South. From each local government area, 16 public (government-owned) and 30 private schools were purposively selected. This was based on the criteria that the private schools had been registered with the government while the public schools had preschool sections. In the schools selected, all the available preschool teachers were selected giving a total sample of 439 teachers for this study. One self-designed questionnaire tagged 'Outdoor Play Teachers' Questionnaire' was used for data collection. The questionnaire had four sections: section A has items which measure the demographic data of the teachers. Section B has 20 items which sought information on the teachers' perception of the importance and contribution of play to children's all-round development. This section adopted a 4-point modified Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The rating was on a scale of 1-4 where 1 stood for 'Strongly Disagree' and 4 for 'Strongly Agree'. The cut-off point for the decision making was 2.5. Therefore, 2.5 and above were regarded as acceptable for the perceived knowledge of the importance and contribution of play to children's all-round

development. Section C has 5 items which sought information on opportunities available to children for outdoor play in the sampled schools. Section D sought information on the teachers' perceived roles during children's outdoor play. Simple percentages and means were used in answering the research questions. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the internal consistency of the questionnaire was 0.873. The questionnaires were distributed to the teachers with the help of five research assistants.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Information on Teachers

Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Teachers

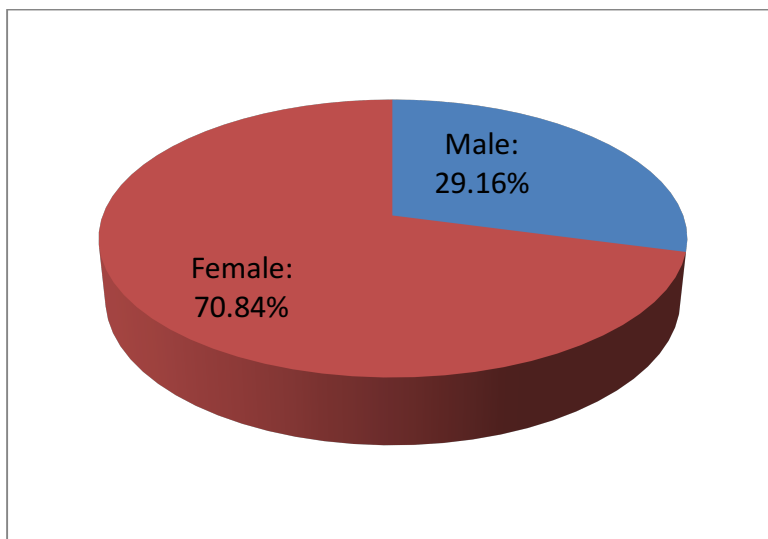


Figure 1 shows that about 71% of the teachers who participated in the study were females while males were about 29%. This implies that, in the sample, there were more female teachers than male teachers. This corroborates other findings from different parts of the world such as Sweden and Turkey (Hedline & Aberg, 2013; Ramazan, Ikbal & Betul, 2012) which stated that there are more female preschool teachers than male.

Figure 2: Highest Qualification of Teachers

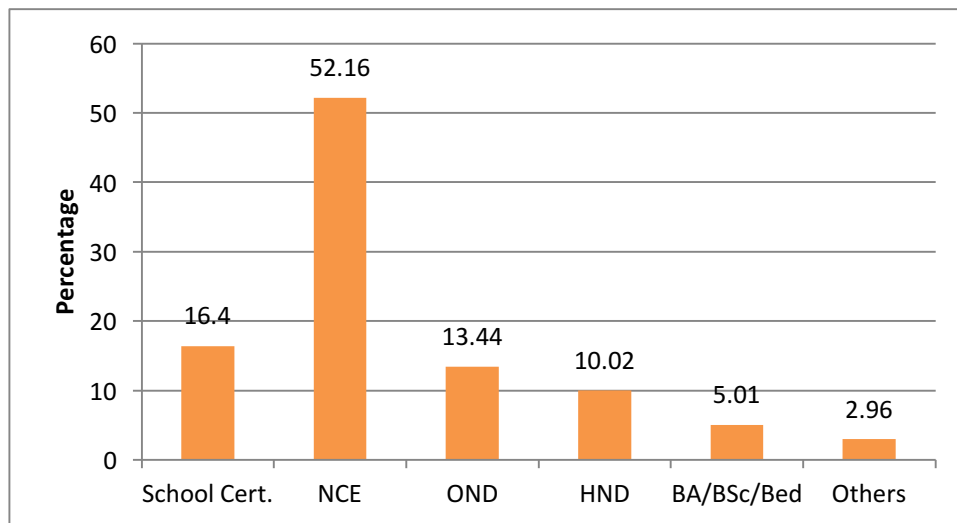
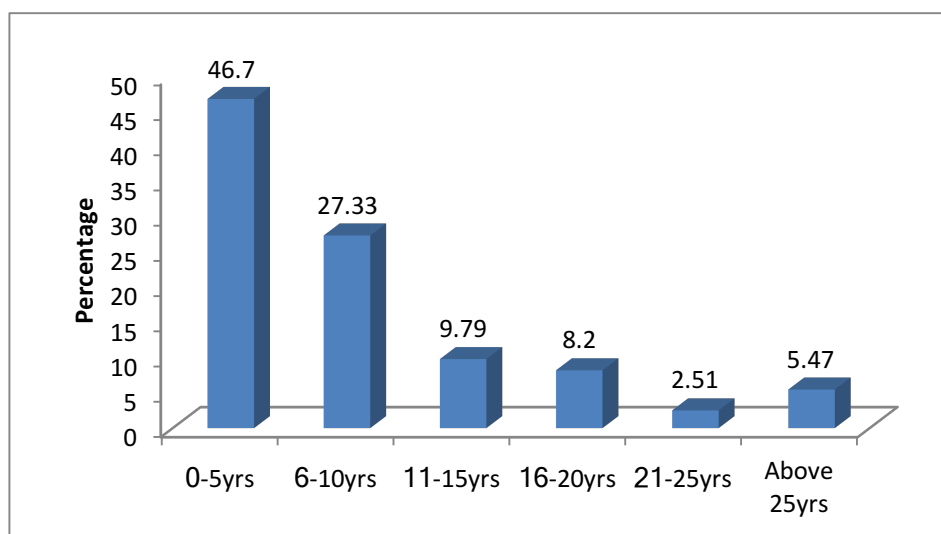


Figure 2 reveals that the largest proportion of the sampled teachers (52%) had Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), followed by those with high school leaving certificate (16.4%), those with Ordinary National Diploma (OND) were 13.44%, those with Higher National Diploma (HND) were about 10% while those with first degree from the university made up about 5% of the sample. This finding is in contrast with those of Omotuyole (2011) and Ige (2013) cited in Sopekan, Ashimolowo & Dagunduro (2016) who reported that most of the teachers in preschools are unqualified. The difference is probably because Ogun State has the highest number of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. As a result, many of the products of these institutions are readily available to take up teaching jobs.

Figure 3: Years of Teaching Experience



As revealed in Figure 3, a larger majority of the sampled teachers had between 0 and 5 years teaching experience (46.7%), followed by those with 6 to 10 years experience (27.33%) and those with 11 to 15 years (9.79%) while those with more than 15 years experience made up about 16% of the sample.

Research Question 1: What is the perception of preschool teachers of the importance and contribution of outdoor play to children's all-round development?

Table 1 shows that the teachers had a good perception of the benefits of outdoor play in that they agreed to the fact that outdoor play prevents obesity, promotes decision-making skills, improves children's mood, enhances creativity and imagination, helps children to understand and respect nature and it gives children opportunity to use surplus energy. They also agreed that children who play outdoors fall ill less often than others, and that children feel more independent and interact more during outdoor play than indoors. The teachers also believed that outdoor play teaches children the skill of keeping themselves safe.

However, they opined that children make noise to disturb neighbours, get injured and could be lost or kidnapped. They reported the hindrances to outdoor play such as shortage of free open space, overloaded scheme of work, the absence of school fence, non-availability of outdoor play equipment and insufficient teachers to supervise children's outdoor play. Considering the value of the weighted average which is 2.79 (69.75%), it can be inferred that the preschool teachers' perception about the importance and contribution of outdoor play to children's all-round development was fairly good. Surprisingly, however, they concluded that it is better to spend money on teaching aids than on outdoor play equipment. This is probably because they do not believe that outdoor play contributes to children's learning in any way, but that it only serves recreational purpose.

Table 1: Teachers' Perception of the importance and contribution of outdoor play to children's all-round development.

	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1.	Outdoor play prevents obesity	169 (38.50)	207 (47.15)	45 (10.25)	18 (4.10)	2.80	Agree
2.	It promotes decision-making skills	122 (27.1)	259 (58.9)	40 (9.30)	18 (4.70)	2.91	Agree
3.	It improves children's mood	183 (41.69)	223 (50.80)	28 (6.38)	5 (1.14)	2.67	Agree
4.	It enhances creativity and imagination	184 (41.91)	222 (50.57)	29 (6.61)	4 (0.91)	2.67	Agree
5.	It helps children to understand and respect nature	150 (34.17)	241 (54.90)	38 (8.66)	10 (2.28)	2.79	Agree
6.	It gives children opportunity to use surplus energy	108 (24.62)	256 (58.30)	52 (11.85)	23 (5.23)	2.87	Agree
7.	Children who play outdoors fall ill less often than others	198 (45.1)	182 (41.46)	34 (7.74)	25 (5.70)	2.94	Agree
8.	Children feel more independent during outdoor play	100 (22.78)	190 (43.28)	64 (14.58)	85 (19.36)	2.71	Agree
9.	Children interact more when they are outdoors than indoors	194 (44.19)	174 (39.64)	42 (9.57)	29 (6.60)	2.75	Agree
10.	Outdoor play teaches children the skill of keeping themselves safe	82 (18.68)	198 (47.61)	126 (28.70)	22 (5.01)	2.93	Agree
11.	Children make noise to disturb neighbours when playing outdoors	112 (25.52)	187 (42.60)	94 (21.41)	46 (10.47)	2.99	Agree
12.	Shortage of free open space prevents outdoor play	70 (15.94)	227 (51.71)	114 (25.97)	28 (6.38)	2.79	Agree
13.	Children always get injured during outdoor play	80 (18.22)	179 (40.77)	124 (28.25)	56 (12.76)	2.81	Agree
14.	The scheme of work leaves no time for outdoor play	75 (17.08)	127 (28.93)	159 (36.22)	78 (17.77)	2.45	Agree
15.	Children can be lost or kidnapped during outdoor play	94 (21.41)	187 (42.60)	94 (21.41)	64 (14.58)	2.92	Agree
16.	The absence of school fence makes outdoor play unsafe for children	143 (32.57)	196 (44.65)	179 (18.00)	21 (4.78)	2.95	Agree
17.	Children should not play outdoors so that they do not get dirty	64 (14.58)	157 (35.76)	151 (34.40)	67 (15.26)	2.50	Agree
18.	There are insufficient teachers to supervise children's outdoor play	97 (22.10)	181 (41.23)	118 (26.88)	43 (9.79)	2.64	Agree
19.	Outdoor play equipment are not available	78 (17.77)	197 (44.87)	121 (27.56)	43 (9.79)	2.89	Agree
20.	It is better to spend money on teaching aids than on outdoor play equipment	138 (31.44)	156 (35.54)	112 (25.51)	33 (7.52)	2.91	Agree
Weighted average		2.79					

Values in parenthesis are in percentage (%)

Research Question 2: How often do teachers provide opportunity for preschoolers to play outdoors in school?

Table 2: Frequency of opportunity for children’s outdoor play

	Item	Always	Sometimes	Never
1.	Before morning assembly	90 (20.50)	139 (31.70)	210 (47.80)
2.	During break time	269 (61.30)	92 (21.00)	78 (17.70)
3.	After school hours	104 (23.70)	183 (41.70)	152 (34.60)
4.	When it appears on the time table	137 (31.20)	203 (46.20)	99 (22.60)
5.	During classroom teaching	37 (8.40)	100 (22.80)	302 (68.80)

Values in parenthesis are in percentage (%)

As revealed in table 2, children only had the greatest opportunity to play outdoors during break time. This corroborates the findings of Thigpen (2007), Pate et al (2008) and Brown et al (2009) that many children spend long hours in child care programmes having limited opportunities to engage in outdoor activities while being vigorously active for only 2–3% (12–46 minutes) of their school day.

The table also shows that children had the least opportunity to participate in outdoor activities during classroom teaching. This is because most teachers viewed outdoor play as serving a recreational purpose only. They did not believe that children could learn and develop cognitively during outdoor play. This belief is contrary to the reports of Robson & Rowe, 2012; Chawla & Escalante, 2007 and Burdette & Whitaker, 2005, cited in Okoruwa (2016) which states that during outdoor play, children encounter opportunities for decision making that stimulate problem solving and creative thinking, opportunities that are not as easily found in the more static indoor environment. Moreover, students who play and learn in outdoor settings were found to perform better on tests, have higher grade point averages (GPAs) and to cause fewer classroom disruptions.

Research Question 3: What is the preschool teachers’ perception of their roles during children’s outdoor play?

Table 3 shows that the perceived roles of majority of the preschool teachers were to supervise the children prevent accidents, instruct them on how to play (as opposed to free play) and

settle disputes among them. About half of the sampled teachers viewed their role to include joining the children in their play, while others would rather spend the time doing other school duties. This supports the assertion of Waite (2009), cited in Okoruwa (2016), that teachers were constrained from bringing children out of the classrooms for play or learning mainly due to too much paper work which focuses on academics over outdoor play and leaves insufficient time for child-centered activities.

Table 3: Teachers’ perceived roles during children’s outdoor play

	Item	Yes	No
1.	Supervises them	369 (84.05)	70 (15.95)
2.	Prevents accidents	363 (82.69)	76 (17.31)
3.	Instructs them on how to play	361 (82.23)	78 (17.77)
4.	Joins their play	225 (51.25)	214 (48.75)
5.	Settles dispute among them	348 (79.27)	91 (20.73)
6.	Uses the cane to enforce obedience to instruction	234 (53.30)	205 (46.70)
7.	Spends the time resting	184 (41.91)	255 (58.09)
8.	Does other school duties	226 (51.48)	213 (48.52)

Values in parenthesis are in percentage (%)

While on the playground, the teachers recognized that they could play various roles that could influence the amount and quality of play in which children engaged. The importance of the level and type of engagement of the teacher on the playground; and the extent to which they do not restrict activities on the playground may have profound influence on the quantity and quality of outdoor play. Specifically, if children are under the care of an overly restrictive teacher, increasing children’s outdoor time may not necessarily translate into concrete physical, social and cognitive gains for them.

Conclusion

The role played by the teacher in providing opportunities for children’s outdoor play is very crucial. This is because a preschool could have plenty of space and equipment but if the teachers rarely bring children outside for active play, they would not enjoy the benefits of outdoor play. However, with highly creative and activity-oriented teachers, who have the right perception of the importance and contribution of play to children’s development, a preschool having minimal equipment could still provide children with opportunities for

outdoor play through improvised races, games and activities in an empty parking lot or during nature walks.

Recommendations

Intervention programmes should focus more on improving teachers' self-confidence and efficacy on the playground. Common teacher-perceived barriers to going outdoors should also be addressed, including overloaded scheme of work, the absence of school fence, non-availability of outdoor play equipment and insufficient teachers to supervise children's outdoor play. Such interventions are crucial because many parents return from work overstressed, while some neighbourhood are actually unsafe for children to play outdoors. As such, the opportunities provided in the school may be the children's only opportunities to experience the benefits of outdoor play.

Preschools should also use outdoor environments for learning and development; significantly increase time and activity in the outdoors, and support teachers and caregivers in learning how to use outdoor play areas as part of the curriculum. Architects and landscape designers for preschools should be more informed regarding the needs of young children and the importance of designs that will make room for movement, motion and physical activity, particularly outdoors. Furthermore, the government should provide neighbourhood playgrounds for children, while the society in general should be more tolerant of the needs of infants and toddlers for movement, mobility and free play, not only on playgrounds and in backyards but in public spaces, as well.

REFERENCES

- Brown, W. H., Pfeiffer, K. A., McIver, K. et al. (2009). Social and environmental factors associated with preschoolers' nonsedentary physical activity. *Child Development*, 80, 45-58.
- Hedline, M. & Aberg, M. (2013). The call for more male preschool teachers: Echoed and questioned by Swedish student teachers. *Journal of Early childhood Development and Care*, 183(1), 149-162.
- Okoruwa, T. O. (2016). Outdoor Play: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child. *Journal of Early Childhood Association of Nigeria*, 5(2), 295-304.
- Pate, R. R., McIver, K., Dowda, M. et al. (2008). Directly observed physical activity levels in preschool children. *Journal of School Health*, 78, 438-44.
- Ramazan, S., Ikbal, T.S. & Betul, K.S. (2012). Views of female preschool pre-service teachers about male teaching colleagues. *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 47, 586-593.
- Sopekan, S., Ashimolowo, A &Dagunduro, O. (2016). Preschool Activities and Wholistic Developmnt of the Child. *JECAN*, 5(1), 93-110.