

## PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF OUTDOOR PLAY IMPORTANCE AND TEACHERS' ROLE IN ABEOKUTA METROPOLIS, OGUN STATE

**Tolu O. OKORUWA**

*Dept of Early Childhood Care and Education,  
Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Nigeria.  
t\_okoruwa@yahoo.com, tokoruwa@gmail.com  
+2348023659217*

### **Abstract**

*Outdoor play should be a right of every child because it enables them to acquire physical and motor skills, gain independence and freedom, while preventing obesity and associated health issues. It is observed, however, that Nigerian children are denied the opportunity for outdoor play, particularly at home. The responsibility, therefore, rests on the school to fill this gap by providing more opportunities for outdoor play for children while in school. This study, therefore, investigates preschool teachers' perception of the benefits of outdoor play for children's overall development, and of their roles during children's outdoor play. It adopted the descriptive survey research design. The sample comprised of 439 pre-primary school teachers who were selected from Abeokuta Metropolis in Ogun State, Nigeria, using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. A self-constructed questionnaire tagged 'Outdoor Play Teachers' Questionnaire' (OPTQ) was used for data collection which had Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.873. The findings revealed that most of the respondents had correct perception of the benefits of outdoor play for children even though they had their fears about it. Children mostly played outdoors during break time or at the close of school while children wait for their parents to pick them up. As children played outdoors, teachers believed that their roles include supervision, giving instruction and ensuring that adhere to such instruction. The recommendations include the need to provide opportunities for children's outdoor play.*

**Key words:** Play, Outdoor play, Pre-primary, Teachers' perception, Children, Preschool teachers.

### **Introduction**

Outdoor play is one major characteristic of the childhood years; and a fully enjoyable childhood is among the best preparations for adulthood. Parents and teachers are likely to have fond memories of their childhood outdoor activities including taking the family dog for walks, climbing trees and learning to turn old tyres and cartwheels with friends. Every child needs opportunities to explore, jump, roll, climb, experiment, play hide and seek, run, swing and manipulate objects. Many of these needs cannot be met indoors because large open spaces are needed to fulfil these basic childhood needs which are crucial to development (Okoruwa, 2017).

The benefits of outdoor play to children could be physical, cognitive, social and emotional. As summarised by Okoruwa (2016), the physical benefits include improving vision, enhancing motor fitness, strong immunity as well as better coordination of the various body parts. Cognitively, the benefits include improved long-term memory, better academic performance, as well as enhanced problem-solving and creative thinking skills. Socio-emotionally, the benefits include conflict resolution skills, cooperation, autonomy, independence and minimised aggression and anxiety. In addition, children's outdoor play was found to result in better appreciation for wildlife and support for conservation, even into adulthood (DeVillie et al, 2021). Therefore, children must not be denied these benefits from adequate outdoor play experiences.

Unfortunately today, children are spending more and more time indoors (McCurdy *et al.*, 2010; Teare, 2021) being confined to small apartments while watching television and playing computer games as well as intense academic instruction. Also, parents are usually overworked and too tired to supervise their children, which translates to fewer opportunities to play outdoors and be children. For the Nigerian child, like the counterparts all over the world, outdoor play is fast disappearing from their lives, especially while at home. Reasons that could be adduced for this include the fact that parents return home from work totally fatigued as a result of overloaded work schedule, fear of kidnapping, traffic and injury (Little & Wyver, 2008; Brussoni et al, 2012). This consequently raises a concern about the negative impact (social, emotional and cognitive) of spending less time in the company of friends and peers, as well as in the natural environment. The answer to this concern seems to lie with the school, and specifically the teachers, who are in the position to make up for these inadequacies in the school by providing children with more opportunities to play outdoors.

Teachers determine children's daily schedule and make the decision whether to take them outdoors to play or not, thereby serving as gatekeepers to the playground. Moreover, preschool-aged children's play behaviour is influenced by the teachers' attitudes and beliefs about play, since their opportunities to be active lay entirely in the hands of their teachers and care-givers. Teachers' underlying perceptions of the benefits and barriers to children's physical activity could determine their attitude and behaviour around children during physical activity. An understanding of their perceptions may, therefore, provide insight about ways by which children's physical activity in school could be increased, and outdoors in particular. This is very important because it is the

teachers that make daily decisions about when children use the outdoor playground and how long they spend playing there.

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

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the importance and contribution of outdoor play to children's total development as perceived by preschool teachers?
2. What are the opportunities provided for preschoolers to play outdoors in school?
3. How do preschool teachers' perceive their roles during children's outdoor play?

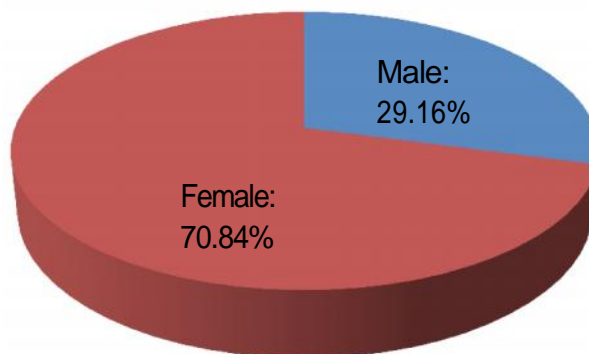
### **Methodology**

The research design adopted in this study was the descriptive survey. All teachers of pre-primary school children within Abeokuta Metropolis of Ogun State, Nigeria, made up the population for the study. The location was purposively selected being typically representative of the different community types found in the state because it features urban, semi-urban and rural areas communities. Stratified and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the participating schools. There are two strata within Abeokuta metropolis – Abeokuta South and North. The total of 16 public (government-owned) and 30 private schools that participated in the study were purposively selected from each stratum based on the following criteria: that the private schools had preschool sections and were government-approved, and that the public schools had preschool sections. All the preschool teachers in the selected schools were involved in the study, giving a total sample of 439 teachers. One instrument was used for data collection – a self-designed questionnaire tagged 'Outdoor Play Teachers' Questionnaire' (OPTQ). This questionnaire was divided into four sections - A, B, C and D. Section A focused on the respondents' demographic data. Section B, which was made up of 20 items, sought information on the teachers' perception of the importance of play to children's holistic development. It adopted a modified 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree. The rating was on a scale of 1-4 where 1 stood for 'Strongly Disagree' and 4 for 'Strongly Agree'. 2.5 was the cut-off point for decision making, where 2.5 and above was regarded

as acceptable for the teachers' perceived knowledge of the importance of play to children's holistic development. Section C, which comprised of 5 items, sought information on the frequency of outdoor play opportunities provided for children in the sampled schools. Section D focused on the teachers' perception of their roles while children played outdoors. Means and simple percentages were used in providing answers to the research questions raised for the study. The face and content validity of the questionnaire was ensured by giving the first draft to experts in Early Childhood Education. Based on their comments, the first draft was revised before the production of the final draft which was used for data collection. The final draft of the questionnaire had Cronbach Alpha Coefficient for internal consistency of 0.873. Five research assistants were involved in the distribution of the questionnaires.

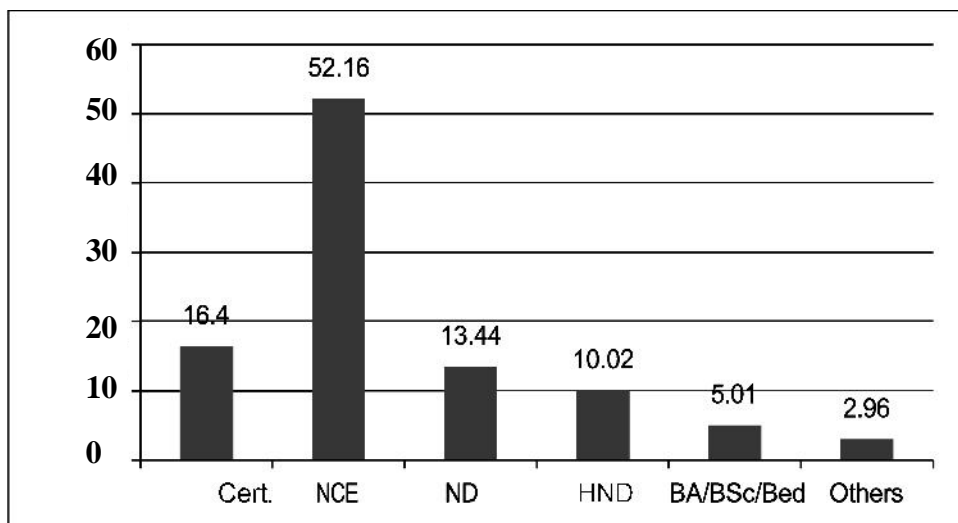
## Results

### Respondents' Demographic Information



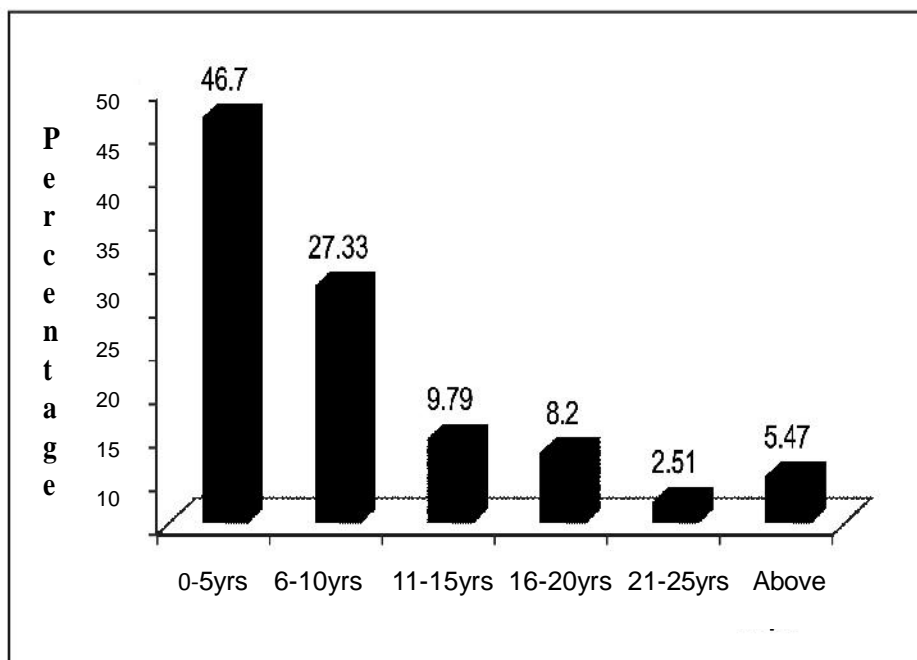
**Figure 1: Respondents' Gender Distribution**

Figure 1 reveals that about 29% of the respondents were males, while females were about 71%; implying that majority of the respondents were females.



**Figure 2: Respondents' Highest Qualification**

Figure 2 reveals that the teachers with Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) made up the largest proportion of the sampled teachers (52%), followed by those with secondary school leaving certificate (16.4%). 13.44% had National Diploma (ND), 10 had Higher National Diploma (HND) while 5% of the sample had first degree from the university.



**Figure 3: Years of Teaching Experience**

As shown in Figure 3, newly employed teachers having maximum of 5 years teaching experience (46.7%) formed the largest majority of the respondents. This was followed by those with 6 to 10 years' experience (27.33%) while those with 11 to 15 years (9.79%). Highly experienced teachers having more than 15 years' experience made up only about 16% of the sampled respondents.

**Research Question 1:** What is the importance and contribution of outdoor play to children's total development as perceived by preschool teachers?

**Table 1: Teacher-perceived importance of outdoor play to children's total development.**

	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1.	Prevention of obesity	169 (38.50)	207 (47.15)	45 (10.25)	18 (4.10)	2.80	Agree
2.	Promotion of decision-making skills	122 (27.1)	259 (58.9)	40 (9.30)	18 (4.70)	2.91	Agree
3.	Improvement of children's mood	183 (41.69)	223 (50.80)	28 (6.38)	5 (1.14)	2.67	Agree
4.	Enhancement of creativity and imagination	184 (41.91)	222 (50.57)	29 (6.61)	4 (0.91)	2.67	Agree
5.	Understanding and respect for nature	150 (34.17)	241 (54.90)	38 (8.66)	10 (2.28)	2.79	Agree
6.	Provides opportunity to use surplus Energy	108 (24.62)	256 (58.30)	52 (11.85)	23 (5.23)	2.87	Agree
7.	Strengthens immunity	198 (45.1)	182 (41.46)	34 (7.74)	25 (5.70)	2.94	Agree
8.	Increases independence	100 (22.78)	190 (43.28)	64 (14.58)	85 (19.36)	2.71	Agree
9.	Provides more opportunities for social interaction	194 (44.19)	174 (39.64)	42 (9.57)	29 (6.60)	2.75	Agree
10.	Acquisition of skills for keeping safe	82 (18.68)	198 (47.61)	126 (28.70)	22 (5.01)	2.93	Agree
11.	Children make disturbing noise	112 (25.52)	187 (42.60)	94 (21.41)	46 (10.47)	2.99	Agree
12.	Hindrance due to shortage of free open space	70 (15.94)	227 (51.71)	114 (25.97)	28 (6.38)	2.79	Agree
13.	Frequent injuries	80 (18.22)	179 (40.77)	124 (28.25)	56 (12.76)	2.81	Agree
14.	Overloaded scheme of work	75 (17.08)	127 (28.93)	159 (36.22)	78 (17.77)	2.45	Agree
15.	Children could get lost or kidnapped	94 (21.41)	187 (42.60)	94 (21.41)	64 (14.58)	2.92	Agree
16.	Children unsafe due to absence of school fence	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.	Insufficient teachers for children's supervision	97 (22.10)	181 (41.23)	118 (26.88)	43 (9.79)	2.64	Agree
19.	Lack of play equipment	78 (17.77)	197 (44.87)	121 (27.56)	43 (9.79)	2.89	Agree
20.	Money should be spent on teaching aids rather than outdoor play equipment	138 (31.44)	156 (35.54)	112 (25.51)	33 (7.52)	2.91	Agree
<b>Weighted average</b>						<b>2.79</b>	

*Values in parenthesis are in percentage (%)*

Table 1 reveals that the teachers agreed that outdoor play improves children's mood, prevents obesity, encourages creativity and imagination, gives children opportunity to use surplus energy, obesity, promotes decision-making skills and helps children to understand and respect nature. This shows that they had a correct perception of the benefits of outdoor play for children.

They also believed that outdoor play teaches children how to keep themselves safe and that it strengthens their immunity. They also perceived that it provides children with more opportunities for social interaction than indoor play and increases their independence.

However, they opined that while playing outdoors, children could be lost or kidnapped as well as get injured. They also felt that children make noise to disturb neighbours during outdoor play. In their opinion, hindrances to outdoor play include the absence of school fence, shortage of free open space, lack of outdoor play equipment, insufficient teachers for children's supervision while at play and overloaded scheme of work.

**Research Question 2:** What are the opportunities provided for preschoolers to play outdoors in school?

**Table 2: Frequency of opportunity for children's outdoor play**

Item	Always	Sometimes	Never
1. Prior to 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. At close of school	104 (23.70)	183 (41.70)	152 (34.60)
4. By class 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 shown in Table 2, children were mostly given opportunity to play outdoors during break time. It also reveals that teachers hardly allowed the children to engage in activities outdoors during classroom teaching. This is probably because most teachers, rather than incorporate outdoor activities into their teaching, believed that outdoor play was meant for recreational and relaxation purposes only.

**Research Question 3:** How do preschool teachers' perceive their roles during children's outdoor play?

**Table 3: Roles of teachers while children play outdoors**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1. Supervision	369 (84.05)	70 (15.95)
2. Prevention of accidents	363 (82.69)	76 (17.31)
3. Instruction on how to play	361 (82.23)	78 (17.77)
4. Joining in play	225 (51.25)	214 (48.75)
5. Settling disputes	348 (79.27)	91 (20.73)
6. Use of cane to enforce obedience to instruction	234 (53.30)	205 (46.70)
7. Opportunity to rest	184 (41.91)	255 (58.09)
8. Opportunity to do other school assignments	226 (51.48)	213 (48.52)

*Values in parenthesis are in percentage (%)*

As revealed in Table 3, most of the respondents believed that their roles were supervision of the children, settle disputes among them, instruct them on how to play (contrary to free play) and prevention of accidents. While others preferred to spend outdoor play time doing other school duties, about half of the sampled teachers believed they should join the children in their play.

### **Discussion of Findings**

From the demographic characteristics of the sampled preschool teachers, the gender distribution of the preschool teachers presented in Figure 1 revealed that there were more female than males among the sampled teachers. This supports the findings from other parts of the world like Turkey and Sweden, stating that female teachers are more in preschool classrooms than male teachers (Hedline & Aberg, 2013; Ramazan, Ikbal & Betul, 2012). This is probably because women are generally believed to be more nurturing than men as reported by Eisenmann (2017).

Figure 2 revealed that a large proportion of the sampled preschool teachers were well qualified, having the requisite Nigeria Certificate in Education. This is contrary to the findings of Ige (2013) and Omotuyole (2011) cited in Sopekan, Ashimolowo & Dagunduro (2016) stating that majority of the teachers employed to teach pre-primary classes are not certified. This difference could be due to the fact that Ogun State is known to have many tertiary institutions compared to other states in Nigeria. This translates to the availability of many graduates of these institutions to readily take up the available teaching jobs.

Table 1 shows a weighted average value of 2.79, revealing a fairly good perception of the respondents about the contribution of outdoor play and its importance to children's holistic



development. They, however, believed that spending money on the purchase of teaching aids is better than doing so on outdoor play equipment. This is possibly due to the general belief that outdoor play is only for recreation, having no cognitive gains whatsoever, and therefore contributing nothing to children's learning.

Table 2 reveals that children were mostly given the opportunity to play outdoors during break time only. This finding corroborates the submissions of Brown *et al.* (2009), Thigpen (2007) and Pate *et al.* (2008) stating that in spite of the fact that children spend long hours in childcare centers, they are vigorously active for only 12 to 46 minutes, making up 2–3% of their day in school.

The table also reveals that children were seldom allowed to participate in outdoor activities as part of classroom teaching. This is possibly as a result of most teachers' perception of outdoor play as a means of recreation and relaxation only. They were of the opinion that neither learning nor cognitive development could occur during children's outdoor play. Contrary to this belief, Burdette & Whitaker (2005), Robson & Rowe (2012) and Chawla & Escalante (2007) submitted that outdoor play offers children opportunities to make decisions, solve problems and think creatively. These are cognitive gains which children may not easily find in the more static indoor environment. Moreover, these authors reported that playing and learning in outdoor settings resulted in learners' improved performance on tests, fewer classroom disruptions as well as higher grade point averages (GPAs).

As revealed in Table 3, most of the teachers viewed their roles while children play outdoors as supervisory in order to prevent accidents, settling disputes and instructing the children on how to play (rather than allowing them to play freely). About half of the respondents expressed willingness to join in the children's play, while others preferred spending time that could be used for outdoor play doing other school duties. In a similar study, Waite (2009) found that too much paper work which focuses on covering the syllabus, leaving insufficient time for child-centered activities, was a major constraint preventing teachers from allowing children go out of the classrooms for play or outdoor learning.

Generally, the quantity and quality of play that children engage in during outdoor play is influenced by the roles played by teachers because they are the ones that determine the type, level and duration of play activities that occur on the playground. This is why the perception of the

teachers about their roles during children's outdoor play is important. Specifically, increasing the amount of time for children to play outdoors may not result in concrete cognitive, physical and social gains for them if the teacher is too restrictive.

### **Conclusion**

The perception of the teacher about the importance of outdoor play to children's development will determine the opportunities provided by the teacher for children's outdoor play. Similarly, the teacher's perceived role during children's play would have a great influence on the quality of children's outdoor play. Children cannot enjoy the benefits of outdoor play if the teacher rarely brings them outdoors for active play, even though the school may have plenty of space and equipment. However, with teachers having the right perception of the importance of outdoor play to children's development, and of the influence of their role during play on the quantity and quality of children's play, a preschool that lacks adequate play equipment could still make outdoor play possible for children through improvised equipment, games and activities. This would go a long way in enabling the children to enjoy all the benefits of outdoor play.

### **Recommendations**

Teachers did not perceive the role of outdoor play in children's cognitive development. That was why they felt that spending money on teaching aids was better than spending it on outdoor play equipment. There should be workshops and seminars organised by the government and school proprietors to reveal to teachers how important play is for children's cognitive development. This should also serve as opportunity to train teachers about how to skilfully inculcate outdoor activities into their teaching. School management should significantly increase the quantity and quality of outdoor time for children. They should also train and support teachers and caregivers in the use of outdoor environments for children's learning and development.

The fact that teachers preferred to remain indoors doing other school duties rather than play outdoor with the children could be as a result of too much work load leaving limited time for outdoor play. Common teacher-perceived barriers to going outdoors such as shortage of teachers to supervise children during outdoor play as well as overloaded scheme of work should, therefore, be addressed. This is important because many children do not have the opportunity to play outdoors at home since some neighbourhoods are unsafe for children. Also, many parents cannot supervise

their children's play having returned from work over-stressed themselves. As such, the only opportunities for children to experience the benefits of outdoor play may be those opportunities provided in the school.

Teachers' perception of their roles during children's play could determine the quality and quantity of outdoor play that children enjoy in schools. Teachers should therefore be trained to enlighten them about their expected roles during children's outdoor play so that the latter can benefit maximally from the gains of such play opportunities for their all-round development.

Furthermore, owing to the benefits of play for children's holistic development, it is imperative for the government to provide safe playgrounds for children in their various neighbourhoods. The adults in children's lives should also be more tolerant about children's noise and hyper-activity, recognising their needs for movement and free play, not only in backyards and on school playgrounds, but in public spaces as well.

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