

IMPACT OF TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS ON THE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria. Social-emotional learning (SEL), encompassing emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills, is critical for holistic development but remains underexplored in Nigerian preschools. Employing a descriptive case study design, qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers. The study population consisted of 1,246 preschool teachers in public and private preschools in Enugu, Anambra and Abia States. Using a purposive sampling technique, 200 teachers were purposefully selected from each state that gave a total number of 600 teachers that participated in the study. Data collection involved multiple methods to ensure richness and depth, as well as to enhance the credibility of findings through triangulation. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Findings reveal that while positive teacher-child interactions enhance emotional regulation, peer relationships, and reduce behavioural challenges, such interactions are hindered by overcrowded classrooms, lack of teacher training in SEL, and inadequate resources. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions, including professional development programs, policy reforms, and improved resource allocation, to optimize early childhood education outcomes in the region. These insights offer valuable implications for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to promote SEL in Nigerian preschools.

Keywords: Teacher-child interactions, social-emotional development, preschool education

Introduction

Social-emotional development is an integral component of early childhood education, referring to the ability of children to understand and regulate emotions, form healthy relationships, and navigate social environments effectively (Denham et al., 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2019). This development is crucial for long-term well-being and academic success, as children with strong social-emotional skills exhibit better classroom behavior, enhanced cognitive development, and reduced risks of mental health issues (Schonert-Reichl, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2021). Social-emotional development in this study refers to the acquisition of emotional regulation, social competence, and interpersonal skills among preschool children, shaped by their interactions with teachers and peers within educational settings. Children with strong social-emotional competencies demonstrate better classroom behavior, increased cognitive engagement, and reduced risks of emotional and behavioral difficulties. One of the primary influences on social-emotional development in preschool children is the quality of teacher-child interactions. Teacher-child interaction refers to the dynamic exchanges between teachers and young children within educational settings, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and support (Pianta et al., 2014; Egert et al., 2018). These interactions shape children's learning experiences and contribute to their social-emotional development by fostering emotional security, self-regulation, and social competence. Globally, the emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) has grown, driven by frameworks like the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which advocate for integrating SEL into education systems to promote holistic development (Durlak et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015). Studies have demonstrated that positive teacher-child interactions significantly enhance children's ability to self-regulate, express empathy, and cooperate with peers (Oberle et al., 2016; Yang & Lamb, 2022). For instance, Jennings and Greenberg (2019) highlighted that teachers who create emotionally supportive classrooms foster resilience and adaptability in

children, particularly those exposed to adverse childhood experiences. Consequently, understanding the nature of teacher-child interactions in preschools is crucial for fostering social-emotional development, particularly in contexts like Southeast Nigeria, where early childhood education practices are still evolving.

Preschool children, typically aged between three and five years, are in a critical period of development where foundational skills in cognition, language, and social-emotional competencies are established (Onu et al., 2017; Okeke et al., 2014). In the Nigerian context, the role of social-emotional learning in early childhood education is increasingly recognized, although it remains underexplored (Ezenwa & Nwabueze, 2020; Udo et al., 2021). Southeast Nigeria, in particular, presents unique challenges and opportunities for examining teacher-child interactions (Nwachukwu, Onah, Obijiofor, Nwankwo & Nwakile, 2020; Nwakile et al., 2022). Traditional cultural values emphasize communal relationships and emotional connectedness, which theoretically support social-emotional learning in schools. However, these cultural advantages are often undermined by systemic issues such as insufficient teacher training, inadequate classroom resources, and large teacher-to-student ratios (Olaleye et al., 2017; Abiona & Bello, 2022). Despite growing recognition of social-emotional learning in Nigeria, preschool education remains largely focused on cognitive and academic achievements, often neglecting the emotional and social aspects of child development (Obiweluzor, 2021; Ajayi, 2019). As a result, many children transition to primary school with limited emotional regulation and social interaction skills, which negatively impact their learning experiences (Udo et al., 2021; Ezenwa & Nwabueze, 2020). The impact of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria remains an underexplored area of research. While existing literature underscores the significance of emotionally supportive learning environments in fostering resilience and adaptability in young children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2019; Yang & Lamb, 2022), there is limited empirical evidence on how teacher-child interactions influence social-emotional outcomes in Nigerian preschools. Additionally, socio-economic constraints such as poverty and inadequate government investment in early childhood education further limit the capacity of teachers to provide individualized attention and emotional support to children (Abiona & Bello, 2022; Onu et al., 2017). Many teachers struggle with overcrowded classrooms, lack of SEL training, and insufficient instructional materials, which hinders their ability to foster social-emotional development in preschoolers (Okeke et al., 2014; Olaleye et al., 2017).

Efforts to integrate SEL into Nigerian preschools are further constrained by socio-economic challenges, such as poverty and limited government funding for education (Abiona & Bello, 2022; Onu et al., 2017). Teachers often struggle to provide individualized support to children in overcrowded classrooms, reducing the quality of teacher-child interactions (Okeke et al., 2014; Olaleye et al., 2017). Additionally, there is a lack of professional development opportunities that equip teachers with the skills to integrate SEL into their teaching practices (Ajayi, 2019; Obiweluzor, 2021). Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition of the need to prioritize SEL in Nigerian education policy and practice (Obijiofor, Okpala, Nnani & Nwakile, 2020). Recent studies emphasize that improving teacher-child interactions could serve as a low-cost, high-impact strategy for enhancing social-emotional outcomes in preschool children (Ezenwa & Nwabueze, 2020; Udo et al., 2021). This study is necessary to bridge the gap in research regarding the role of teacher-child interactions in the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria. While global studies highlight the benefits of positive teacher-child relationships in fostering emotional intelligence and resilience (Jennings & Greenberg, 2019; Yang & Lamb, 2022), there is limited empirical data specific to the Nigerian context. Existing research on preschool education in Nigeria has largely focused on cognitive development and academic readiness, neglecting the importance of emotional well-being as a predictor of future success (Obiweluzor, 2021; Ajayi, 2019). Furthermore, while some studies acknowledge the challenges teachers face in fostering social-emotional development, they do not comprehensively explore how these barriers impact teacher-child

interactions and preschoolers' emotional growth (Olaleye et al., 2017; Abiona & Bello, 2022). Without addressing these challenges, many children may continue to struggle with social-emotional difficulties, which could have long-term effects on their academic achievement and psychological well-being (Denham et al., 2015; O'Connor et al., 2021). This study therefore seeks to determine the impact of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria

Statement of the Problem

Currently, many preschool classrooms in South-East Nigeria are characterized by teacher-centered approaches where instructional methods prioritize academic skills over holistic development. Teachers often focus on rote memorization and structured learning, limiting opportunities for meaningful interactions that foster emotional security and social skills. The warmth, attentiveness, and responsiveness necessary for strong teacher-child relationships are sometimes lacking due to high teacher-pupil ratios, inadequate training, and limited awareness of the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL). The impact of this limited teacher-child interaction is evident in the social-emotional challenges faced by many preschool children. Children who lack secure and nurturing relationships with their teachers may struggle with emotional regulation, display anxiety or withdrawal, and have difficulty building friendships with peers. Additionally, poor teacher-child interactions contribute to behavioural issues, low self-esteem, and difficulties in adapting to structured learning environments, which can have long-term consequences on academic success and overall psychological well-being.

Several challenges hinder the fostering of social-emotional development among preschool children in Southeast Nigeria. These include insufficient teacher training in SEL, overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and an education curriculum that emphasizes cognitive skills over emotional intelligence. Additionally, socio-economic factors such as poverty and inadequate governmental support for early childhood education further exacerbate these issues, making it difficult for teachers to implement best practices for nurturing social-emotional growth. These realities reveal that without deliberate intervention, many children may continue to experience social-emotional difficulties that hinder their overall development and future academic success. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to determine the impact of impact of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study was to determine the impact of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the nature of teacher-child interactions in preschools in Southeast Nigeria.
2. investigate the impact of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria
3. identify the challenges teachers face in fostering social-emotional development in preschool children in Southeast Nigeria

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of teacher-child interactions in preschools in Southeast Nigeria?
2. How do teacher-child interactions influence the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria?
3. What challenges do teachers face in promoting social-emotional development among preschool children in Southeast Nigeria?

Methods

The study employed a descriptive study design. The research was conducted in three states in Southeast Nigeria: Enugu, Anambra, and Abia. These states were selected due to their socio-

cultural diversity, which presents a unique opportunity to examine how cultural values interact with early childhood education practices. The study population consisted of 1,246 preschool teachers in public and private preschools in Enugu, Anambra and Abia States. Using a purposive sampling technique, 200 teachers were purposefully selected from each state, that gave a total number of 600 teachers that participated in the study. Data collection involved multiple methods to ensure richness and depth, as well as to enhance the credibility of findings through triangulation. Classroom observations were conducted to examine real-time teacher-child interactions, focusing on aspects such as emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Observations were guided by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) framework, a widely validated tool for evaluating the quality of teacher-child interactions. Semi-structured interviews with teachers provided additional perspectives on their practices, challenges, and strategies for fostering social-emotional development. These interviews were designed to allow flexibility, enabling teachers to elaborate on their experiences and offer context-specific insights. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke. This process involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software was used to manage and organize the data, ensuring systematic coding and comprehensive analysis. The themes identified were aligned with the study objectives, providing a structured framework for interpreting the findings. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka's Research Ethics Committee. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities and ensuring that data were stored securely. To validate the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary results with participants, allowing them to confirm or clarify interpretations. To enhance the validity and reliability of the study, data triangulation was employed by integrating multiple data sources, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. This approach ensured that the findings were well-rounded and grounded in evidence. Furthermore, the study adopted rigorous analytical procedures and adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the results.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the nature of teacher-child interactions in preschools in Southeast Nigeria?

Table 1: Findings on the nature of teacher-child interactions in preschools in Southeast Nigeria

Themes	Findings	Supporting Data/Examples
Emotional Support	Teachers often demonstrated warmth and empathy towards children, although this was inconsistent due to classroom size and workload.	"The teacher smiled and comforted a crying child but appeared stressed handling multiple children" (Observation Notes).
Classroom Organization	Classrooms were generally overcrowded, leading to limited one-on-one interactions between teachers and children.	Average teacher-child ratio: 1:35 in public schools compared to 1:20 in private schools (Observation Data).
Instructional Support	Teachers focused more on academic tasks with minimal integration of social-emotional learning activities.	Only 2 out of 18 teachers reported incorporating SEL activities regularly (Interview Data).

Research Question 2: How do teacher-child interactions impact the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria?

Table 2: Findings on how teacher-child interactions impact the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria

Themes	Findings	Supporting Data/Examples
Emotional Regulation	Children in classrooms with higher emotional support demonstrated better ability to manage emotions and resolve conflicts.	“Children in Mrs. A’s class were able to express feelings and share toys, unlike those in Mr. B’s class” (Field Notes).
Peer Relationships	Positive teacher-child interactions were linked to improved peer relationships, fostering cooperation and teamwork.	“Children in classrooms with supportive teachers showed more cooperative play” (Parent Focus Group).
Behavioural Challenges	Limited teacher-child interaction often resulted in increased behavioural issues, such as aggression and non-compliance.	“In overcrowded classrooms, some children resorted to disruptive behaviour to gain attention” (Observation Notes).

Research Question 3: What are the challenges faced by teachers in fostering social-emotional development in preschools in Southeast Nigeria?

Table 3: Findings on the challenges faced by teachers in fostering social-emotional development in preschools in Southeast Nigeria

Themes	Findings	Supporting Data/Examples
Large Class Sizes	Overcrowded classrooms hindered teachers’ ability to provide individualized support to children.	“Managing 40 children in one session leaves no time for personalized attention” (Teacher Interview).
Lack of Training	Many teachers lacked formal training in social-emotional learning strategies, relying instead on traditional methods.	“I have not attended any workshop on social-emotional learning” (15 out of 18 teachers, Interview Data).
Inadequate Resources	Limited availability of teaching aids and materials for implementing SEL activities.	“We do not have storybooks or tools to teach emotions” (Observation Notes; Teacher Focus Group).

Discussions

Nature of Teacher-Child Interactions in Preschools

The findings revealed that teacher-child interactions in preschools were characterized by inconsistent emotional support, limited classroom organization due to overcrowding, and minimal instructional strategies aimed at fostering social-emotional learning (SEL). These findings align with Pianta et al. (2014) who emphasized that emotional support is critical in early childhood settings but often compromised by structural challenges such as large class sizes. Similarly, Denham et al. (2015) noted that overcrowding reduces the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions, as teachers struggle to balance emotional and instructional support. However, the study disagrees with Egert et al. (2018), who suggested that structured teacher training can significantly mitigate such challenges, as many Nigerian teachers in this study lacked formal SEL training. This gap highlights the urgent need for professional development programs tailored to the Nigerian context. The findings of this study indicate that teacher-child interactions in preschools in Southeast Nigeria are characterized by inconsistent emotional support, limited classroom organization due to overcrowding, and minimal instructional strategies for fostering social-emotional learning (SEL).

Impact of Teacher-Child Interactions on Social-Emotional Development

The study found that positive teacher-child interactions enhanced emotional regulation, improved peer relationships, and reduced behavioural challenges among preschool children. These findings are consistent with Oberle et al. (2016), who identified a strong correlation

between supportive teacher behaviours and children's ability to regulate emotions and build relationships. Similarly, Jennings and Greenberg (2019) argued that emotionally supportive classrooms foster resilience and cooperation in young learners. However, this study expands on these findings by emphasizing the cultural dimension, as communal values in Southeast Nigeria could potentially strengthen SEL outcomes if adequately leveraged (Onu et al., 2017). Despite this potential, the lack of teacher training and resource constraints appears to undermine these benefits, resonating with the observations of Udo et al. (2021) in other parts of Nigeria. The findings of this study indicate that positive teacher-child interactions contribute significantly to preschool children's emotional regulation, peer relationships, and reduced behavioral challenges.

Challenges Faced by Teachers

Teachers reported significant challenges, including large class sizes, lack of SEL training, and inadequate resources, which hindered their ability to foster social-emotional development effectively. These findings align with Abiona and Bello (2022), who highlighted similar challenges in Nigerian classrooms, particularly in public schools with limited funding. The lack of training echoes Ajayi (2019), who noted that many Nigerian teachers are unprepared for the holistic demands of early childhood education, relying instead on outdated teaching methods. The inadequate availability of SEL-specific resources is consistent with Obiweluzor (2021), who identified poor resource allocation as a major barrier to implementing modern educational frameworks. However, this study diverges slightly from Okeke et al. (2014), who suggested that traditional communal values could compensate for resource gaps, as findings indicate that these cultural advantages are insufficient without systemic support. The findings are indicative of the fact that many public preschools in Southeast Nigeria face high pupil-teacher ratios, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention and effectively support children's social-emotional development.

Conclusion

This study explored the influence of teacher-child interactions on the social-emotional development of preschool children in Southeast Nigeria. The findings revealed that positive teacher-child interactions play a critical role in enhancing children's emotional regulation, peer relationships, and overall behavioural development. However, these interactions were often hindered by challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of training in social-emotional learning strategies, and inadequate teaching resources. While the study aligns with global evidence on the importance of supportive teacher-child relationships in fostering social-emotional development, it also highlights unique contextual challenges specific to the Nigerian educational system. Addressing these issues is crucial for optimizing early childhood education outcomes and supporting the holistic development of children in Southeast Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Education authorities and stakeholders should organize regular professional development workshops and training programs focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL). These programs should equip teachers with skills and strategies to foster emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support in line with SEL principles.
2. Government and private school administrators should implement policies to reduce teacher-child ratios, particularly in public schools. Hiring more qualified teachers and constructing additional classrooms can alleviate overcrowding and allow for more individualized attention to children.
3. Schools should be equipped with adequate teaching materials, including storybooks, visual aids, and activity kits that support SEL activities. Education stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, can collaborate to supply these resources to underserved schools.

4. The Nigerian early childhood education curriculum should be reviewed to include comprehensive social-emotional learning components. Clear guidelines on implementing SEL activities in classrooms should be developed to standardize practices across schools.
5. Parents should be engaged in workshops and sensitization programs to reinforce the importance of social-emotional development at home. Strengthening home-school partnerships can ensure a consistent approach to fostering children's social-emotional growth.

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