

Early Childhood Education and Care Teachers' Experiences of Outdoor Play for Young Children's Social and Cognitive Development: Opportunities and Barriers in Lagos, Nigeria

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Research Article

Keywords: outdoor play, social and cognitive development, early childhood education and care teachers, Nigeria, parents, curriculum

Posted Date: October 14th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11072982/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Despite growing evidence of the benefits of outdoor play for young children's holistic development, empirical research from diverse global contexts, including Nigeria, remains limited. This qualitative study explored Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers' understandings and experiences of outdoor play in relation to young children's social and cognitive development, alongside opportunities and barriers shaping provision. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers across two ECEC settings in Lagos, Nigeria, using Microsoft Teams. Thematic analysis identified teachers' strong professional knowledge of outdoor play and commitment to supporting children's social interaction, confidence, independence, cooperation, problem-solving and learning through outdoor play. Although provision was shaped by resource limitations, cultural contexts, safety considerations and curriculum expectations, participants demonstrated resourcefulness in enabling outdoor play within these constraints. Significantly, while parental concerns are frequently positioned as barriers within existing literature, participants described parents as potential partners and emphasised communication, trust and shared recognition of outdoor play's developmental value. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, the study contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched context and adds complexity to deficit-oriented accounts of Nigerian outdoor-play provision by identifying existing professional knowledge, commitment and resourcefulness. While the small, context-specific sample does not permit generalisation, the findings offer transferable insights for considering how professional knowledge, parental relationships and contextual conditions shape outdoor-play provision in other ECEC contexts. Further research across diverse Nigerian settings is required. The findings support stronger recognition of outdoor play within ECEC curricula, policy and professional development as a meaningful context for children's holistic learning and development.

Introduction

The importance of outdoor play for young children's holistic development has long been recognised within early childhood education and care. Building on the work of pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel and Margaret and Rachel McMillan, a growing body of research demonstrates the contribution of outdoor and nature play to children's social and cognitive development (Kiviranta et al., 2024; Miranda et al., 2017; Prins et al., 2022) and advocates for a holistic understanding of outdoor play, wellbeing, development, and learning within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Undiyaundeye, 2014). However, this research is predominantly based in North American, European, Australian, and New Zealand contexts, with strong Scandinavian traditions (Gill, 2014; Kiviranta et al., 2024; Sandseter et al., 2020a). Evidence from professional practice is still limited, especially from the African continent (Sella et al., 2023; Wyver, 2024). To address this gap, the article presents the perspectives of six Nigerian ECEC teachers, examining their experiences of outdoor play, its perceived influence on young children's cognitive and social development, and the opportunities and barriers affecting outdoor play practice in two school settings in Lagos.

Both international and Nigerian research identify limited resources, inadequate outdoor spaces, hazards, and parental concerns as significant barriers to outdoor play in ECEC (Eseyi et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2024; Prins et al., 2022; Sandseter et al., 2020b; Wyver, 2024). Furthermore, outdoor play is frequently disregarded in favour of academic learning (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Dietze & Kashin, 2019; Prins et al., 2022). Eseyi et al. (2020) and Leigh et al. (2024) identify how academic ability and classroom learning is prioritised over outdoor play and learning in Nigerian ECEC, though not presenting empirical data to support this.

Having worked in ECEC in Nigeria, the first author became interested in how academic expectations often limited and shaped opportunities for children's outdoor play. Subsequent postgraduate study in the United Kingdom (UK) provided exposure to alternative pedagogical perspectives on the relationship between outdoor play, learning, and development. These experiences, together with the limited empirical evidence on outdoor play in Nigerian ECEC settings, prompted an exploration of teachers' understandings of outdoor play and its role in supporting young children's development within the Nigerian context.

Understanding teachers' values, perspectives, and practices is essential, as they play a central role in shaping and co-constructing children's experiences of outdoor play (Dietze & Kashin, 2019; Sandseter et al., 2020b). As highlighted in Kiviranta et al.'s (2024) review, teachers are key enablers of outdoor play and its contribution to children's holistic development. The article begins by sharing selected and established international research knowledge on young children's outdoor and nature play for social and cognitive development, before positioning the study within Nigerian ECEC and relevant international policy contexts. The research methods are then presented, followed by analysis and discussion of the findings, sharing verbatim quotes to fully represent the voices and perspectives of the participants. In doing so, the article not only foregrounds and recognises teachers' professional knowledge and practice but also contributes to ongoing discussions about the opportunities, barriers, and pedagogical approaches that shape outdoor play for young children's holistic development across diverse national contexts and based directly in practice experiences and knowledge.

Outdoor Play for Social and Cognitive Development

A growing body of research highlights the contribution of outdoor play and outdoor learning environments to young children's holistic development, although much of this literature is based on small-scale qualitative studies (Sandseter et al., 2020a). Within outdoor and environmental education research, outdoor play and nature-based experiences are often intertwined, reflecting the role of natural environments as important contexts for children's learning, development, and wellbeing.

In a systematic review Ernst et al. (2021) brought together evidence on how nature play supports children's self-confidence, independence, attention, decision-making, collaboration, and communication. Similarly, Sella et al. (2023) identified positive effects of nature-based experiences on children's negotiation, sharing, and problem-solving skills, which are important aspects of social competence.

Coates and Pimlott-Wilson's (2019) study of children's experiences of Forest School further suggests that playing in outdoor environments provides opportunities for cooperative and communicative interactions that support both social and cognitive development, promoting cognitive functions like critical thinking and problem-solving.

Research highlights the role of outdoor environments in shaping children's social interactions and experiences of play. Miranda et al. (2017) found that outdoor play was associated with lower levels of conflict and aggression, while Nguyen et al. (2025) reported more active play and fewer conflicts among children attending a nature preschool compared with a traditional preschool. Studies of risky play in outdoor environments have similarly demonstrated benefits for children's prosocial behaviour, resilience, stress reduction, and psychological wellbeing (Brussoni et al., 2015). More broadly, experiences of play and learning in natural environments have been associated with reduced stress, improved attention, and enhanced academic performance (Kuo et al., 2019). Gill's (2014) review further identified links between outdoor play and children's creativity, problem-solving abilities, and capacity to cope with challenges and adversity. Outdoor play has been found to have positive effects on the children's ability to concentrate, their memory and creativity, helping them improve thinking and academic abilities, though this depends on the learning environment and the professionals' attitudes and pedagogies (Ernst et al., 2021; Miranda et al., 2017; Prins et al., 2022).

The affordances of outdoor environments may help explain the developmental benefits. Nature play engages children's senses and imagination, supporting symbolic thinking and other cognitive processes associated with learning and development (Kuo et al., 2019). Outdoor environments often provide greater space and freedom for exploration, movement, and interaction than indoor environments. This can allow for more open and relaxed encounters with peers and adults, enabling more cooperation, companionship, shared knowledge and skills which can support the development of empathy (Bento & Dias, 2017). Through these experiences, children negotiate, communicate, and construct knowledge alongside peers and adults, fostering both social and cognitive development. Consequently, outdoor play is increasingly understood not only as a recreational activity but also as an important pedagogical context for learning, development, and wellbeing within ECEC.

Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) in Nigeria

The Universal Basic Education framework states that most children start elementary school at age six and ECCDE is acknowledged as the first educational phase for children in Nigeria, where the curriculum is divided into kindergarten/ nursery/ crèche for children aged under two, and ECEC for children aged three to six (Federal Ministry of Education [FMoE], 2014).

Even with the backing of national policy, ECEC enrolment is still low, especially in state schools and only 36% of Nigerian children between the ages of three and five are taking part in ECEC (UNICEF, 2022). Significant disparities exist between urban and rural areas, and most ECEC services are private and

provided in metropolitan areas (UNESCO, 2021). Access is significantly shaped by demographic and geographic differences. In contrast to northern Nigeria, where enrolment and involvement are impacted by problems including hunger, instability, and traditional roles, southern Nigeria generally reports greater attendance rates and better infrastructure (UNICEF, 2021). The likelihood that children will attend ECEC is also influenced by factors like gender, parental education, and socioeconomic status.

International Context of Outdoor Play in the Nigerian Curriculum

‘Play’ is cited as being essential to early childhood development in the Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE) (FMoE, 2014). The policy promotes an integrated plan that incorporates both indoor and outdoor play, stating how activities that involve ‘outdoors/nature’ should be prioritized to promote physical health, creativity, and discovery. ‘To inculcate in the child, the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, and the use of toys among others’ (FMoE, 2014, p. 7). The minimum standards also declare that there must be enough space for children to play and that the playground should be covered with either grass or sand. However, infrastructure and culturally shaped educational beliefs can make the realistic execution of policies difficult, even with the backing from policymakers (Eseyi et al., 2020). To address this, outdoor play has been suggested to be ingrained in the syllabus as a fundamental component (Omoli & Nwaoyibo, 2025; Undiyaundeye, 2014).

From an international perspective outdoor play practices are prevalent in Scandinavian countries and endorsed in curricula policies (Sandseter et al., 2020a). In Canada and Australia, there are policies for children’s natural outdoor play environment within urban areas, enhancing children’s potential contact with and appreciation of nature (Brussoni et al., 2015). ‘Forest Schools’ philosophy influences ECEC practice in the UK as experienced by the first author, although currently the curriculum requirements are rather vague, with only one mention of outdoor play: ‘Providers must provide access to an outdoor play area. If that is not possible, they must ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis (unless circumstances make this inappropriate)’ (Department for Education, 2024, p. 36). This is noteworthy in context of the first author’s practice experiences of outdoor play in Nigeria and England, and suggests, how internationally there is a great variety in the policy framework for outdoor play in ECEC curricula and not always in line with practice and research knowledge.

In this context, the study aimed to explore Nigerian teachers’ experience and practice of outdoor play. The Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) is a three-year post-secondary qualification and the minimum requirement for pre-primary educators, but according to the latest Universal Basic Education Commission’s (UBEC) 2018 National Personnel Audit (UBEC, 2018), more than 60% of ECCE teachers lacked the necessary credentials, with many having no formal training in early childhood pedagogy, and concerns are raised about their pedagogical understanding of outdoor play (Leigh et al., 2024). The pre-school teachers will most often work across the nursery, ECEC and year one classes/age groups (working with children aged two to six), as was the case for the participants in this study. As an explorative study and acknowledging that identifying qualification might impact the confidence of the participants, they were not asked about their qualifications.

Barriers to Outdoor Play

Nigerian ECEC tends to be oriented towards academic performance and formal indoor classroom learning. Historically, education has been largely seen as a cognitive exercise with a heavy emphasis on academic accomplishment (Omoli & Nwaoyibo, 2025). Quantifiable academic achievement is seen as a means of gaining access to better possibilities, which affects school regulations and family expectations (Leigh et al., 2024). Eseyi et al. (2020) have identified how rote learning and academic tasks and assessments, including homework set the agenda in ECEC, where the importance of outdoor environments for children's holistic development and learning often stands unrecognised, and outdoor play is perceived only as a reprieve from learning rather than as a formative process. However, the benefits of outdoor play are starting to be recognised in research and practice. Undiyaundeye, in her (2014) position paper, proposes practice initiatives to enable children's opportunities for outdoor play to support children's physical fitness, brain development, and social relations. Similar recommendations come from Omoli and Nwaoyibo (2025) quantitative survey.

Nevertheless, insufficient facilities and unsafe spaces, infrastructural issues, and conservative perceptions toward learning continue to remain barriers to outdoor play (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Leigh et al., 2024). Urban schools are frequently located near major roadways, where security-related problems present a risk. Meanwhile the danger of natural hazards like open sewers, dirty water and wildlife might discourage outdoor activities in more rural locations. Funding is a major obstacle exacerbated by economic inequities, where state schools, which serve the bulk of the population, often have insufficient funding for the construction and upkeep of secure, outdoor play spaces (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Eseyi et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2024).

These barriers to outdoor and nature learning and play are equally recognised in other international studies (Sandseter et al., 2020b), where Kiviranta et al. (2024), in their overview of studies established main external barriers: space and equipment, weather conditions, parental concerns, administrative work, safety and prevention, alongside the teachers' internal barrier such as lack of knowledge, perceived time constraints and motivation. Dietze and Kashin's (2019) Canadian research participants added to these, collegial collaboration as important factor to enable or disallow outdoor play and unease with messiness were added barriers.

Methods

Teachers play an important role in shaping children's opportunities for outdoor play and the learning and developmental experiences associated with it (Ernst et al., 2021). This study specifically explored Nigerian ECEC teachers' understandings and experiences of outdoor play and its relationship to young children's social and cognitive development, alongside the opportunities and barriers that shaped outdoor-play provision in their settings. Given the limited empirical evidence concerning teachers' experiences of outdoor play within Nigerian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), the study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm. This approach enabled attention to teachers' subjective

understandings and lived professional experiences within a socially and culturally situated context (Cohen et al., 2018).

A qualitative research design was adopted using semi-structured interviews. This method was selected to enable teachers to describe, in their own words, how they understood and experienced outdoor play as contributing to children's social and emotional development. The interviews also explored teachers' experiences of facilitating outdoor play and the contextual factors that enabled or constrained these opportunities. Semi-structured interviewing allowed participants to elaborate on experiences they considered significant while maintaining a clear focus on the study's research questions (Cohen et al., 2018)

Purposive sampling was used to recruit six ECEC teachers working with children aged two to six years in two schools in Lagos, Nigeria. Three participants worked in a private ECEC school and three in a state ECEC school. Participants were selected on the basis of their active involvement in ECEC practice and their capacity to provide practice-based perspectives on children's outdoor play. As the study was exploratory and recognising that disclosure of qualifications might have affected participants' confidence in discussing their practice, participants were not asked about their professional qualifications. The interpretivist approach was particularly appropriate because the purpose was not to measure the developmental effects of outdoor play, but to examine how teachers understood, experienced and interpreted its relationship with children's social and cognitive development within their particular educational and cultural contexts.

Semi-structured interviews of approximately 25 minutes were conducted using Microsoft Teams. The interviews provided opportunities for participants to describe their experiences and observations of outdoor play, including examples of how children interacted with peers and adults and how teachers perceived outdoor play as supporting aspects of social and cognitive development. Participants were also encouraged to discuss factors affecting their ability to provide outdoor-play experiences. Microsoft Teams provided a flexible means of interviewing participants in different locations and facilitated the recording and secure storage of interview data. However, online interviewing may involve technical difficulties or differences in participants' confidence with digital technology that can influence the flow of an interview and opportunities to articulate experiences fully (Archibald et al., 2019).

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles relating to informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and data protection (British Educational Research Association, 2024). Participants received information about the study and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written consent was obtained, and participants confirmed that they had been informed about and understood the University's Data Privacy Notice for Research Participants. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams, with transcription accuracy checked during the data-analysis process. All personally identifiable information was removed to protect the anonymity of participants and participating schools. Participants were

assigned numbers from one to six, and references that could identify individual schools were removed. Data were stored in anonymised form on password-protected computers and the University's OneDrive.

The interview data were analysed thematically to identify patterns in how teachers understood the relationship between outdoor play and children's social and cognitive development, as well as the opportunities and barriers shaping outdoor-play practice. Initial coding combined inductive and deductive approaches (Nowell et al., 2017). Deductive coding was informed by the research questions and included participants' accounts of social interaction, confidence, cooperation, relationships, independence and conflict resolution, while inductive coding enabled additional meanings and experiences to emerge from the data. The analysis also identified contextual themes concerning the provision of outdoor play, including curriculum expectations, resources, cultural context and parental relationships.

Themes were developed according to their relevance to the research questions and their capacity to represent the richness and complexity of participants' accounts (Cohen et al., 2018). A reflexive approach to analysis was adopted, with the second author re-examining the coding and themes, and a coding table was maintained to support the transparency and traceability of the analytical process. Peer debriefing was also used to consider potential researcher bias. Nevertheless, thematic analysis is inherently interpretive and relies upon researchers' engagement with and interpretation of participants' accounts (Nowell et al., 2017).

Discussion of Findings

Using verbatim interview quotations to authentically represent the perspectives of six Nigerian ECEC practitioners (Nowell et al., 2017), the following analysis addresses the study's research questions: How do preschool teachers in Lagos, Nigeria, understand outdoor play and its contribution to young children's social and cognitive development? What opportunities and barriers shape outdoor play provision in two school settings in Lagos?

Research on outdoor play and outdoor learning is often characterised by small-scale studies, with outdoor play, nature play, and nature-based learning frequently presented as overlapping concepts (Kiviranta et al., 2024; Prins et al., 2022; Wyver, 2024). Consistent with this literature, participants often referred to nature when discussing outdoor play. However, the interviews did not specifically examine the characteristics of the outdoor environments available to children, such as whether these were predominantly natural, purposefully designed, or mixed spaces. Consequently, the focus of the analysis is on teachers' understandings of outdoor play and its educational and developmental significance, rather than on the qualities of their particular outdoor environments. Nevertheless, the findings highlight how practitioners understand and utilise outdoor spaces as contexts for children's exploration, interaction, learning, and development, contributing to wider discussions within outdoor and environmental education about the role of educators in shaping children's experiences of outdoor environments (Sandseter et al., 2020b).

Participants one, three, and five were employed in private ECEC settings, while participants two, four, and six worked in state (in Nigeria called public) settings. As no substantial differences emerged between these groups in relation to their views of outdoor play, the findings are presented collectively. Together, their accounts provide insight into how outdoor play is understood, enacted, and valued within Nigerian ECEC settings, and how educators navigate the opportunities and constraints associated with providing meaningful outdoor experiences for young children's holistic development and learning.

How Do ECEC Teachers in Lagos, Nigeria, Understand Outdoor play and Social and Cognitive Development?

In addressing the first research question, the analysis brings together codes relating to social confidence, peer relationships, teamwork, and conflict resolution within the broader theme of social development. Participants' accounts, however, reflected a holistic understanding of children's experiences in outdoor environments, where social and cognitive development were frequently intertwined. Concepts such as independence, creativity, problem-solving, and conflict resolution were therefore coded across both themes, reflecting teachers' perceptions of outdoor play as a context in which learning, cognitive, and social development occur simultaneously. The findings presented below illustrate how participants understood outdoor environments not only as spaces for play and recreation, but also as important contexts for children's exploration, collaboration, learning, and holistic development.

Consistent with existing research highlighting the social affordances of outdoor environments (Bento & Dias, 2017; Ernst et al., 2021), participants viewed outdoor play as an important context for children to build relationships, develop social confidence, collaborate with peers, and negotiate conflicts independently. The teachers described outdoor spaces as environments that supported meaningful social interaction, enabling children to engage with others in ways that fostered confidence, communication, empathy, and problem-solving. Participant two reflected that she had "seen children become more socially confident after engaging in outdoor play", while participant six emphasised the significance of the social and emotional learning that emerged through children's outdoor experiences:

They become more confident and capable of initiating and maintaining interactions with peers... invaluable lessons in empathy, communication, and problem-solving... Children learn to express feelings, listen to others and find mutually acceptable solutions to their disputes, hopefully without needing adult intervention.

These accounts suggest that teachers viewed outdoor play not only as an opportunity for physical activity and recreation, but also as an important pedagogical context in which children develop social relationships, learn to negotiate with peers, and build the confidence and independence needed to participate in social life.

Nguyen et al.'s (2025) findings suggest that children attending nature preschool experienced fewer conflicts than those attending traditional preschool. The settings in the present study were not nature preschools, and the study did not measure the frequency of children's conflicts. Nevertheless, participants perceived outdoor play as providing opportunities for children to negotiate and resolve disagreements. Participant six described children learning to "find mutually acceptable solutions to their disputes," while participant one explained that "Outdoor play teaches children to negotiate and resolve conflicts independently."

Rather than suggesting equivalence between nature preschool provision and the Lagos ECEC settings, these accounts indicate that teachers perceived opportunities for negotiation and conflict resolution through outdoor play across a different educational context. Their observations position outdoor play as a context for communication, negotiation and independent problem-solving, illustrating the interconnected social and cognitive dimensions of development identified by participants.

Participant three similarly associated outdoor play with interpersonal and problem-solving skills, referring to children's capacity to "cooperate" and "communicate effectively" and explaining that they "practice resolving issues through discussions and compromises. .. which helps them to develop an important social skill which is very crucial for their overall development and future interactions." Participant four similarly described "numerous opportunities for children to practice cooperation and conflict resolution in natural settings. .. [they] might negotiate, share resources and resolve conflicts independently, which are valuable skills for social development."

As in Bento and Dias (2017) and Ernst et al. (2021) and Sella et al. (2023) reviews, the teachers shared how they experienced outdoor play interactions supporting the children's ability to solve occurring conflicts, and participant five noted the benefit for a child who would otherwise struggle socially: 'but during this outdoor play, he learns to, you know, to engage.'

At this recognition, participant five linked the physical development with the social reiterating the need for a holistic approach and understanding of child development: "I've observed that children become more physically active and socially confident... Yeah, I feel children at that point, they learn how to communicate, negotiate and resolve conflicts independently."

The references above to problem solving, conflict resolution and independence display a holistic understanding of the physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. The social and cognitive themes overlap, codes such as resilience, creativity, imagination, curiosity, logical and critical thinking presented in context of cognitive development. Participant five, highlighting 'Outdoor play builds resilience—they learn to handle minor challenges on their own', the teachers identifying similar traits as findings by Brussoni et al.'s (2015) study of outdoor play in promoting self-regulation and independence. Kiviranta et al. (2024) and Gill (2014) propose how children benefit from outdoor play's open-ended structure, which encourages creativity and higher-order thinking abilities, which was similarly identified by participant four in: "Children become more creative when they play outdoors, using their imagination freely."

The participants in the current study highlighted the perceived cognitive advantages of outdoor play in encouraging autonomous thought. Gill, (2014) identified how critical thinking and problem-solving may be particularly powerful when coupled with social engagement. This integrated viewpoint was emphasized by the fourth participant where she experienced how social and cognitive development occurred during outdoor play, supporting one another holistically rather than existing in isolation: “Children work together to create and solve problems, which naturally integrates social skills with critical thinking.”

Further integration of logical and structured thinking as socially developed was explained by Participant three: “you can see them figuring out puzzles and how to structure their games logically... communicating ideas and building on each other’s suggestions while solving puzzles or playing group games.”

As in Kiviranta et al.’s (2024) findings, the teachers perceived and experienced that children learn through engaging with peers in situations that require both creative and logical thinking. Participant six reflected on this wider holistic learning:

Outdoor play also stimulates their curiosity and observational skills, leading to a deeper understanding of natural phenomenon and environmental science. Additionally, it supports language development as they describe’ their activities, ask questions and engage in conversations with peers and adults.

Participant two brought forward further consideration of learning and memory in the outdoors: “what they remember that they have done because if they are having fun about it then they will be able to umm remember it. Children remember what they learn more outside”.

The participants’ holistic understanding of outdoor play and development aligns with existing research (Miranda et al., 2017) while providing much-needed knowledge from a Nigerian ECEC context. Their accounts demonstrate how teachers understand outdoor play as a context for children’s social interaction, learning, and holistic development.

Barriers to and Opportunities for Supporting Young Children’s Outdoor Play

In the above, it was evident how the ECEC teachers understood and positioned outdoor play for young children’s holistic development. When further analysing the interviews, the exemplified opportunities and barriers were organised within the key themes discussed below: bringing attention to balancing curriculum and academic expectations, resource limitations, cultural context and parental collaboration.

Balancing curriculum expectations and academic pressures

Participants consistently emphasised freedom and independence as important characteristics of outdoor play, while recognising the need to balance child-led experiences with adult guidance and curriculum expectations. Participant one captured this tension: “So, in as much as we want them to learn something, we also want them to be free.” Similarly, participant six described free play as allowing children to “choose their activities based on their interest and imagination,” while emphasising the importance of balancing guided learning with “the freedom to explore and create independently.” These accounts suggest that teachers did not position freedom and adult involvement as opposing approaches, but instead recognised children’s autonomy within pedagogically supported outdoor play. This resonates with Coates and Pimlott-Wilson’s (2019) findings, where children experienced freedom outdoors while adult involvement centred primarily on scaffolding and risk management.

However, achieving this balance was complicated by curriculum expectations. Participant five identified: “One challenge is in ensuring that outdoor play and learning objectives integrated complete with indoor activities,” while participant six described “the challenge... balancing outdoor play with other curriculum requirements and showing that outdoor type complements, rather than detract from other learning objectives.” Participant four similarly framed this as a curricular challenge: “One challenge is ensuring that outdoor play is integrated seamlessly into the curriculum without disrupting the flow of lesson.” Together, these accounts indicate that participants valued outdoor play but perceived responsibility for demonstrating how it could be accommodated within, and contribute to, established curriculum expectations.

Although Nigerian curriculum policy includes outdoor play and learning, participants’ accounts suggest challenges in translating this into practice, reflecting barriers identified in Nigerian and international research (Dietze & Kashin, 2019; Eseyi et al., 2020; Kiviranta et al., 2024; Leigh et al., 2024; Sandseter et al., 2020b). This highlights the potential value of clearer curriculum guidance and professional learning that supports practitioners in integrating outdoor and classroom-based learning without diminishing opportunities for child-led play.

Participant two also positioned outdoor play as a potential counterbalance to academic pressures, explaining that “learning is mentally stressing and I think one thing I’ve noticed is that outdoor play is very instrumental when it comes to teaching children cooperation and conflict resolution.” While research on nature-based and risky play has identified associations with reduced stress and wellbeing (Brussoni et al., 2015; Kuo et al., 2019), these contexts differ from the Lagos ECEC settings. Nevertheless, participant two’s account suggests that she perceived outdoor play as offering opportunities not only for curriculum-related learning, but also for supporting children in navigating the social and emotional demands associated with learning.

Resource barriers and cultural context for outdoor play

Safety concerns and limited resources are recognised barriers to outdoor play in Nigerian and international research (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Eseyi et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2024; Prins et al., 2022;

Sandseter et al., 2020b; Wyver, 2024). Participants similarly identified weather, safety, resources and children's individual needs as challenges, but their accounts also demonstrated proactive approaches to managing them. Participant one described practical preparations: "we're going to be wearing protective gears we're going to be having allergy medication you know, first aid, you know this this kind of things so sometimes getting past this hurdles umm tend to be certain challenges that we face and you know a lot of." Participant four similarly emphasised the need for flexibility in response to weather conditions, while participant six explained that "Weather conditions can limit outdoor activities and ensuring safety during play requires constant supervision and careful planning." Participant one also identified leadership support as important in addressing such challenges, although this was not raised by other participants.

Children's individual needs presented further complexities. In participant three's setting, for example, a child's allergies had resulted in alternative indoor provision, highlighting tensions between managing individual needs, available resources and inclusive access to outdoor experiences. Such accounts reflect established barriers relating to safety, weather, curriculum structures and resources (Dietze & Kashin, 2019; Eseyi et al., 2020; Sandseter et al., 2020b). However, participants did not present these barriers as necessarily preventing outdoor play. As participant six summarised: "Weather can be a challenge, but the benefits of outdoor play make it worth it."

Importantly, participants six's accounts also situated outdoor play within their cultural context, reflecting on how: "Outdoor play teaches children how to work together as a community, which is important in our culture." This highlights how teachers' approaches to outdoor play were shaped not only by practical constraints but also by understandings of its relevance within their communities. This aligns with Kiviranta et al. (2024), who identify teachers' competence alongside cultural, resource and policy contexts as important influences on outdoor provision. Similarly, Rogoff's perspective, presented by Petrone (2020), positions play and social interaction as culturally situated. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of understanding outdoor-play provision as contextually negotiated practice, shaped by teachers' professional knowledge, environmental and resource constraints, children's needs and local cultural values.

Opportunities for parental collaboration

Although parental concerns are frequently identified as a barrier to outdoor play in Nigerian and international research (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Kiviranta et al., 2024; Leigh et al., 2024; Sandseter et al., 2020b), participants' accounts presented a more nuanced picture of parents as potential partners who could be responsive to dialogue about its value. Teachers recognised parental concerns, particularly around safety, but described building trust and communicating the benefits of outdoor play. Participant five explained, "we need to make sure that the children are, well, safe during the outdoor play because some of that parents are, you know, insecure with the activities going on, but we need to give them the maximum trust." Rather than positioning these concerns as fixed barriers, teachers described communication as important in developing parental confidence. As participant two explained, "generally, they [parents] respond positively to explanation and justification of the necessity of how to do activities.

Many parents appreciate the physical activity provides the social skills they foster... how much their children enjoy playing outside and how it has helped them sleep better at night.”

Participants also perceived parents as recognising changes in their children associated with outdoor play. Participant three reflected that “they [parents] actually appreciate the physical, social and cognitive benefits that it provides for their children. Many parents actually report their children that are that are more active when they get back home happier and better at interacting with peers.” Similarly, participant six described parents as “generally very supportive of our emphasis on outdoor play,” noting perceived changes including “increased physical fitness, better social interactions and the greater interest in nature.”

These accounts add complexity to literature that predominantly identifies parental concerns, academic pressures and limited policy support as barriers to outdoor play (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Bento & Dias, 2017; Dietze & Kashin, 2019; Kiviranta et al., 2024; Leigh et al., 2024; Sandseter et al., 2020b). Rather than dismissing parental concerns, the Lagos ECEC teachers described trust, dialogue and communication as ways of negotiating them. The findings therefore suggest that parental concerns and parental support are not necessarily opposing positions; instead, teachers play an important role in developing collaborative relationships through which parents become partners in supporting children’s outdoor play opportunities and experiences.

Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

This study contributes much-needed empirical insight into Nigerian preschool teachers’ understandings and experiences of outdoor play and its relationship with young children’s social and cognitive development. Participants viewed outdoor play as an important context for social interaction, cooperation, confidence, independence, problem-solving, creativity and critical thinking. Importantly, the study challenges predominantly deficit-oriented accounts of outdoor-play provision in Nigeria. Rather than positioning teachers primarily in terms of limited knowledge or resources, the findings reveal practitioners as knowledgeable, committed and resourceful professionals valuing the importance of outdoor play and recognising and navigating contextual constraints. Their accounts demonstrate the importance of recognising teachers’ existing professional knowledge and agency when developing outdoor-play pedagogy, curriculum guidance and professional learning.

Equally significant is the study’s emphasis on collaboration between practitioners and parents. While Nigerian and international literature frequently identifies parental concerns as a barrier to outdoor play, participants presented parents as potential partners and emphasised communication, trust and shared understanding of the value of outdoor experiences. This suggests the value of moving beyond positioning parental concerns simply as barriers to be overcome. Instead, practitioners’ professional knowledge can provide a foundation for constructive dialogue with families, enabling teachers and parents to develop shared understandings of the purposes, benefits and practicalities of outdoor play. Strengthening such partnerships may support more contextually responsive outdoor-play practice.

The study's small-scale qualitative design, involving six practitioners across two ECEC settings in Lagos, necessarily limits the breadth of its claims. The findings represent situated professional accounts and should not be interpreted as representative of Nigerian ECEC practice or as evidence that outdoor play causes particular developmental outcomes. Rigour lies instead in attention to practitioners' lived experiences, verbatim accounts, systematic thematic analysis, reflexive engagement with coding and themes, and peer debriefing. These methodological boundaries provide a transparent basis for interpreting the findings while recognising the interpretive nature of qualitative research.

The study nevertheless offers potential transferability through contextualised insight. Tensions surrounding academic expectations, resources, safety and environmental conditions, alongside teachers' professional knowledge, agency and relationships with parents, provide analytical points for consideration in other ECEC contexts. Their relevance elsewhere should be assessed in relation to local cultural, educational, environmental and resource conditions rather than assumed.

Further research across diverse Nigerian regions and ECEC settings is needed and should incorporate teachers', parents' and children's perspectives alongside observational approaches. Research could explore how practitioners' professional knowledge shapes outdoor provision and how teachers and parents negotiate expectations, concerns and understandings of outdoor play.

Overall, the study strengthens the case for recognising outdoor play within ECEC policy, curriculum and professional development as a meaningful context for holistic learning. Policy and practice should recognise teachers as knowledgeable agents in developing outdoor-play provision, while ensuring access to appropriate time, space, resources and professional learning. Equally, sustained dialogue with parents can build trust and shared understanding. Bringing practitioners' professional expertise together with meaningful parent-practitioner collaboration offers a more strengths-based and contextually responsive foundation for strengthening outdoor play within Nigerian ECEC.

Declarations

Author Contribution

AAO carried out the data collection, and did the initial data analysis and discussion. SBC reviewed the data, coding and themes to ensure reliability and consistency. SBC and AAO wrote the main manuscript text and reviewed the manuscript.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the six ECEC Teachers from Lagos, Nigeria, for taking the time to share their experiences of supporting young children's opportunities for outdoor play.

Data Availability

The interview data that support the findings of this study are held by the authors, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, however coding table can be made, and examples of 'raw' interview data available upon request and with the permission of both authors

Clinical trial number

Clinical trial number: not applicable.

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