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Original Research Article

CAREGIVERS VARIABLES AND SOCIAL INTERACTION OF PRESCHOOLERS IN RIVER SOUTH-EAST SENATORIAL DISTRICT, RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT: The social interaction of preschoolers in Early Childhood centres is of great significance to education. This paper examined the influence of caregivers variables on preschoolers social interaction in public Early Childhood centres in Rivers South-East Senatorial District. The research design adopted was a descriptive survey research. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study and were assessed at 0.5 alpha levels of significance. 23,192 subjects made up of 311 caregivers and 22, 881 preschoolers drawn from 210 Early Childhood centres in River South-East Senatorial Districts, Rivers state formed the population. Both stratified sampling technique and simple random sampling technique were used to select the sample size for the study. The instrument for data collection was an observation inventory titled: Caregivers Variables and Social Interaction of Preschoolers' Observation Inventory (CVSIPOI). The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0 75. The study's results which were obtained using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that there is a significant influence of caregivers' qualification on preschoolers' social interaction, also there is a significant influence of caregivers gender on preschoolers' social interaction in public Early-childhood Centres in Rivers South-East Senatorial District, Rivers state.

K**eywords:** Caregiver Variables, Caregiver, Qualifications, Preschoolers, Social Interaction, Gender.

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INTRODUCTION

Social interaction during early childhood, particularly in preschool settings, is a critical aspect of a child's development. Between the ages of 3 to 5 years, children experience significant growth in cognitive, emotional, and social domains. This period is characterized by developing social skills through play, communication, and the formation of relationships with peers and adults. The intellectual abilities and social skills inherent in humans need to be nurtured through a learning process, allowing individuals to fulfill their roles effectively and this process is facilitated by education.

Early childhood education is a vital aspect of Nigeria's National Policy on Education. It plays a significant role in promoting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical

development, providing a strong foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. This education covers children from birth to five years of age, a stage referred to as preschool-age, which is considered a critical period in a person's life (Hastuti, 2015). Experts consider this phase, especially for children aged 0-2 years, to be the "golden age" of human development, as brain development during this time reaches 70-80 percent.

In early childhood, specifically during the preschool years (ages 2-5), children undergo significant development in social skills, emotional understanding, and interaction styles. These formative years lay the groundwork for future socialization and relationship-building. The understanding of social interaction in preschoolers is crucial for parents, educators, and caregivers, as it aids in nurturing their growth and ensuring healthy social development.

During preschool years, social skills essential for navigating the world are developed through social interaction. These interactions help children to form connections with peers, adults, and family members, laying the foundation for future friendships and social networks. One important skill preschoolers develop through social interaction is communication. They learn to express their thoughts and feelings both verbally and non-verbally, which is crucial for effective interaction. Additionally, preschoolers develop emotional awareness through these interactions, enabling them to understand and manage their own emotions while recognizing those of others. This fosters empathy and social awareness.

During social play, preschoolers engage in activities that enhance their communication skills, help them solve social problems, and enable them to build friendships. Initially, they may engage in solitary play, such as parallel play, where they play alongside one another without direct interaction. However, as they mature, they begin to share toys, take turns, and participate in group activities that require coordination and communication. This shift from solitary to cooperative play allows children to learn teamwork, sharing, and negotiation skills. Such interactions reflect their growing understanding of social norms and the importance of collaboration, which are essential as they prepare for more structured environments like kindergarten.

Social interaction also enables preschoolers to cultivate conflict resolution skills that helps them learn to manage disagreements, which is a critical ability for navigating social dynamics throughout life. Studies have shown that key indices of social interaction in preschoolers include non-verbal communication, emotional understanding, social play, verbal communication, and conflict resolution. Together, these skills contribute to a preschooler's overall development and readiness for future social environments.

Nonverbal communication is the way children express themselves and convey messages without using words, primarily through facial expressions, body language, gestures, and physical proximity, allowing them to communicate their needs, emotions, and intentions even before they can speak fluently (Rachelle, 2025). Non-verbal cues in preschoolers include facial expressions such as smiles and frowns, gestures like pointing, body posture such as leaning forward, eye contact, vocalizations, and physical touch, each playing a crucial role in their interactions (Rachelle, 2025).

Facial expressions such as smiles, frowns, furrowed brows, wide eyes, and raised eyebrows can indicate emotions like happiness, sadness, anger, or confusion. Similarly, gestures like pointing to indicate something they want, waving goodbye, reaching for a hug, or shaking their head to signify "no" enhance their communication. Body posture also plays a significant role; for instance, leaning forward can show interest, while crossing arms may indicate discomfort, and slumping can suggest tiredness. Eye contact further emphasizes engagement and

attention, whereas looking away might signal disinterest or discomfort. Additionally, vocalizations, such as squealing, grunting, or babbling, can express various emotions without using words. Physical touch, such as a pat on the back, a hug, or a gentle touch, conveys affection, comfort, or reassurance. Preschoolers heavily rely on these nonverbal cues, as they often lack the sophisticated verbal skills of older children, making these cues essential for their interactions with each other and their environment. Together, these nonverbal forms of communication play a crucial role in how preschoolers express themselves and connect with those around them.

For preschoolers, emotional understanding refers to how the child develops the ability to recognize, label, and express their own feelings, as well as understand and interpret the emotions of others, often through facial expressions and body language, laying the foundation for healthy social interactions and emotional regulation during this critical developmental stage (Denham et al., 2003). Often preschoolers make use of facial expressions and body language to express their emotions, laying the foundation for healthy social interactions and emotional regulation during this critical developmental stage.

Recognizing and responding to emotions, preschoolers enhance their emotional intelligence, which is largely shaped by social interactions with parents, caregivers, and peers. By age 3, many children begin to exhibit empathetic behaviors, such as comforting an upset peer (Hoffman, 2000), and this empathy is crucial for fostering positive relationships; preschoolers capable of empathizing are more likely to engage in presocial behaviors like sharing and helping others. Studies indicate that preschoolers can identify basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger by observing facial expressions (Denham et al., 2003), and their ability to recognize emotions is often enhanced through stories and role-play activities that expose them to various emotional scenarios.

Social play refers to interactive play in which children engage directly with others, sharing toys, taking turns, following rules, and communicating, thereby developing important social skills like cooperation, empathy, and understanding of others' perspectives (Rubin et al., 2006; Parten, 1932). As preschoolers grow, their social play evolves through distinct developmental stages, transitioning from parallel play where children play alongside others with minimal interaction to associative play, characterized by sharing materials and some level of interaction, and ultimately to cooperative play, which involves working together towards a shared goal.

This progression in social play enables preschoolers to develop essential communication skills, solve social problems, build friendships, and enhance their emotional development, making it a significant vehicle for social growth. Various types of play, such as physical play, constructive play, and pretend play, contribute to this development. For example, constructive play involves experimenting with drawing, music, and building, while parallel play lays the foundation for cooperative interactions. Typically developing around age 4, cooperative play entails sharing, taking turns, and participating in group games, helping children learn negotiation, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Rubin et al., 2006). Additionally, pretend play allows preschoolers to explore social roles and scenarios, enhancing their understanding of social norms and expectations; for instance, playing ‘house’ encourages children to adopt different roles, such as parent or child, fostering empathy and perspective-taking. Overall, social play in preschool serves as a critical context for young children to practice and refine their social skills and interactions.

As preschoolers grow, their verbal communication skills develop rapidly and are closely linked to their ability to engage effectively in social interactions (Berk, 2018; Owens, 2020). Verbal communication in preschoolers refers to the use of spoken words to express thoughts, feelings, and needs, often characterized by simple sentences, basic vocabulary, and a focus on concrete language; at this stage, children are still developing their language skills and may make grammatical errors while communicating with others (Owens, 2020). This includes using words to name objects, ask for things, and share basic information about their experiences (Berk, 2018). As their curiosity about their environment increases, preschoolers begin to ask questions that seek information, thereby driving social interactions as they engage peers and adults in conversation (Vygotsky, 1978). This inquisitiveness often manifests in questions such as "Why is that happening?" or "Can I play with you?", highlighting their desire to connect socially with others (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009).

Conflict resolution refers to teaching young children how to identify, discuss, and peacefully solve disagreements by expressing their feelings, listening to different perspectives, and finding mutually acceptable solutions, thereby laying the foundation for healthy relationship building through communication and empathy skills (Denham et al., 2012). Conflict is an inevitable part of social interactions, and preschoolers begin to manage disagreements in various ways, such as recognizing when a conflict arises, for example, when two children want the same toy, which represents an early form of social awareness (Rubin et al., 2015). Initially, preschoolers often seek help from adults for mediation; however, as they mature, they increasingly engage in peer mediation by suggesting compromises or alternative solutions, such as sharing or taking turns (Guralnick, 2011). These skills are crucial for social development and form the basis for future collaborative problem-solving (Denham et al., 2012). Preschoolers' social interactions therefore manifest through a combination of verbal and nonverbal communication, emotional understanding, social play, and conflict resolution skills, with adults and caregivers playing a vital role in guiding and modeling these behaviors (Berk, 2018).

A caregiver is an individual responsible for the care, supervision and well-being of a child, while caregiver variables refer to the personal and professional characteristics of caregivers that influence children's development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). Caregiver variables such as gender, educational qualifications, and professional training have been shown to generate positive outcomes in children's social interactions (Phillips et al., 2016). Many preschoolers experience difficulties in developing effective social skills, and research has identified caregiver variables as a key contributing factor to this challenge (Mashburn et al., 2008). Caregivers play a central role in ensuring that children acquire social skills by intentionally preparing learning materials, organizing interactive activities, and modeling appropriate communication behaviors (Berk, 2018). They also ensure children's safety, organize educational activities, supervise playtime, document children's progress, and communicate with parents regarding developmental concerns (Essa, 2020).

Caregiver educational qualifications and training are particularly crucial for supporting positive social-emotional development in young children. Research consistently shows that caregivers with higher levels of education and specialized training in early childhood education and care (ECEC) demonstrate higher-quality, more sensitive, responsive, and engaging interactions with children compared to those without such qualifications (Mashburn et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2016). In addition, ongoing professional development activities, such as in-service workshops and continuous training, enhance caregiver competencies and improve caregiver–

child interaction quality (OECD, 2018). Thus, the educational qualifications of caregivers play a significant role in shaping preschoolers' social interactions and overall social development.

Vygotsky (1978) posited that caregivers help children engage with peers effectively by scaffolding their social learning experiences. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates that skilled Caregivers with strong educational backgrounds can understand developmental milestones and utilize strategies that encourage socialization, providing opportunities for children to practice communication skills and cooperative play.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children NAEYC (2020), caregivers who are well-educated in early childhood education possess a robust understanding of child development and effective pedagogical strategies. This knowledge enables them to create environments that foster secure attachment, encouraging children to explore social bonds. A caregiver trained in early childhood education is more likely to employ practices that promote positive peer interactions, such as collaborative games and structured group activities that require teamwork.

Chan et al. (2016) emphasized that culturally responsive caregivers can model inclusive practices that encourage children to interact positively with peers from various backgrounds, thereby enriching their social experience and teaching them about tolerance and acceptance. Cultural Sensitivity Educated caregivers are often better equipped to understand and appreciate the diverse cultural backgrounds of the children in their care. This awareness helps them implement culturally relevant practices that acknowledge and celebrate diversity.

In contrast, caregivers with lower levels of education and less specialized training may struggle to provide the optimal emotional support, cognitive stimulation, and positive behavioral guidance that young children need for healthy social-emotional development. The quality of caregiver-child interactions is a key mediator between caregiver qualifications and children's social competence and attachment behaviors.

Caregivers should provide age-appropriate learning opportunities and materials that challenge children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional development. Caregivers with higher levels of education and specialized training in early childhood education tend to exhibit stronger skills in these areas, which in turn supports children's learning and development.

The gender of a caregiver plays a significant role in shaping a child's social interactions, contributing to the development of social skills, emotional regulation, and relational dynamics. Research indicates that male and female caregivers often bring different styles and perspectives to their interactions with children, which can influence the way children learn to navigate social situations.

Additionally, the expectations surrounding gender roles can manifest in the caregiving style. Male caregivers, often socialized into being more hands-off and competitive, might instinctively approach interactions with a focus on activity-based engagement rather than emotional connection. This has implications for some children who may thrive more fully in environments rich in emotional validation rather than physical challenges (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019).

Globally, only about 3% of early childhood education and care providers are men, making child care a predominantly female-dominated profession (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). This gender imbalance in child care settings may influence how children interact with caregivers and how relationships are formed. Some researchers have raised concerns that the lack of male role models in these environments may limit boys' opportunities to develop close bonds, as most professional caregivers are women.

In early childhood education, policies such as Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasize the critical role of social interactions in young children's learning and development by promoting environments that foster collaboration, communication, and emotional intelligence. The DAP encourages educators to create rich social environments where preschoolers can engage in play-based learning, which is essential for developing social skills. Through structured and unstructured play, children learn to negotiate, resolve conflicts, share, and cooperate all vital components of healthy social interaction. In these settings, educators are encouraged to scaffold children's social experiences, guiding them in forming relationships, navigating challenges, and fostering empathy, thereby enhancing their overall development.

Despite the implementation of this early childhood policy at improving the quality of early childhood education in Nigeria, observations have shown some preschoolers lack social interaction, such as limited verbal skills, which make them struggle to articulate their thoughts and feelings, often leading to misunderstandings and frustration during interactions with peers. Another hurdle is emotional regulation. Young children are still learning to manage their emotions and reactions which can result in impulsive behaviours or outburst in social situations. Some preschoolers are faced with the challenge of interpreting social cues as a result of them still developing their social understanding. Hence, this paper seeks to explore caregivers' variables which can influence the quality of social interaction in preschoolers, such as the educational qualifications and gender. This paper aims to investigate Caregivers' Variables and Social Interaction among preschoolers in Rivers South East Senatorial District of Rivers State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the influence of Caregivers' Variables on Preschoolers' Social Interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District of Rivers State. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Examine the influence of caregivers' educational qualification on preschoolers social interaction in Rivers South-East Senatorial District of Rivers State.
- Determine the influence of caregivers' gender on social interaction of preschoolers in Rivers South-East Senatorial District, Rivers state.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated for the study and were tested at .05 level of significance:

- There is no significant influence of caregivers' educational qualification on preschoolers social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District of Rivers State.
- There is no significant influence of caregivers' gender on preschoolers' social interaction among preschoolers in Rivers South East Senatorial District, Rivers state.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design was used for the investigation. The study's population consisted of 23,192 subjects comprising 311 caregivers and 22,881 preschoolers from 210 Early Childhood centres. Using stratified random sampling technique and simple random techniques, 30 caregivers were selected and 2288 preschoolers under the care of the 30 caregivers, constituted the sample for the study.

Caregivers Variables and Social Interaction of Preschoolers' Observation Inventory (CVSIPOI). The instrument consisted of two sections A and B. Section A elicited information concerning the caregivers' variables such as their educational qualification and gender while Section B consisted of 20 items which gathered information on preschoolers' social interaction in the classroom, serving as the data collection tool.

The researcher's experts in the Department of Early Childhood/Primary Education and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation in the Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education assessed the instrument's face and content validity. Prior to the instrument final copy being created their input was utilized to make corrections. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.75. After obtaining consent from the head teachers of the schools included in the sample, the researcher enlisted the help of research assistants to distribute the instrument's copies.

The research assistants were adequately trained on how the research instruments were to be filled. After five days, copies of the instrument were retrieved by the researcher and research assistants and were coded properly and made ready for analysis. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the researcher and two (2) research assistants carefully explained to the respondents on how to fill out the instrument for themselves and their preschoolers. Confidentiality of the sources were also ensured by the researcher. A total of 2319 copies of the instrument were administered, but 2310 copies of the instrument were properly filled, collected and used for analysis. The exercise lasted for six working days. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question One: To what extent does caregivers' educational qualification influence social interaction of preschoolers in Rivers South-East Senatorial District of Rivers State?

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: There is no significant influence of caregivers' qualification on preschoolers' social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Table 1: Analysis of variance of difference in caregivers' qualification and preschoolers' social interaction

Source of variance	SS	Df	Ms	F_{cal}	F_{crit}
Between group	2.089	3	.696	8.826	3.85
Within group	22.750	27	.843		
Total	24.839	30			

From the analysis of data in Table 1 in respect of hypothesis 1, given that at 3 and 27 degree of freedom (df) and at .05 level of significance, with the f-calculated of 8.826 greater than f-critical of 3.85, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This means that there is a significant influence of caregivers' qualification on preschoolers' social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant influence of caregivers' gender on preschoolers' social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District, Rivers state.

Table 2: Analysis of variance of difference in caregivers' gender on preschoolers' social interaction

Source of variance	SS	Df	Ms	F_{cal}	F_{crit}
Between group	.051	1	.051	8.059	3.85
Within group	24.788	29	.855		
Total	24.839	30			

From the analysis of data in Table 2 in respect of hypothesis 4, given that at 1 and 29 degree of freedom (df) and at .05 level of significance, with the f-calculated of 8.059 greater than f-critical of 3.85, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a significant influence of caregivers' gender on preschoolers' social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District, Rivers state.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Caregivers' Qualification and Preschoolers' Social Interaction

The result in hypothesis one shows that the f-calculated value is 8.826, while the f-table is 3.85 at .05 level of significance. The degree of freedom is 3 and 27. This implies that, there is significant influence of caregivers' qualification on preschoolers' social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

The finding of this is in agreement with the views of National Association for the Education of Young Children NAEYC (2020) who opined that caregivers who are well-educated in early childhood education possess a robust understanding of child development and effective pedagogical strategies. This knowledge enables them to create environments that foster secure attachment, encouraging children to explore social bonds. A caregiver trained in early childhood education is more likely to employ practices that promote positive peer interactions, such as collaborative games and structured group activities that require teamwork. Also, the finding of the study supports the findings of Jones et al. (2013) who found that caregivers who are knowledgeable about Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) are more adept at integrating these principles into daily activities.

Caregivers' Gender and Preschoolers' Social Interaction

The finding in hypothesis two shows that the f-calculated value is 8.059, while the f-table is 3.85 at .05 level of significance. The degree of freedom is 1 and 29. This means that the null

hypothesis is rejected. This implies that, there is a significant influence of caregivers' gender on preschoolers' social interaction in Rivers South East Senatorial District, Rivers state.

The finding of the study agrees with the views of Hawkins et al. (2021) who observed that female caregivers, traditionally the primary figures in early childhood education, often utilize a nurturing and communicative approach, which can foster emotional connection and a secure environment for children. Also, the finding of the study is in tandem with the findings of Krentz et al. (2020) who found that female caregivers tend to engage more in verbal communication, using richer language and emotional acknowledgment during interactions. This enriched linguistic environment enables children, particularly young girls, to develop strong verbal and emotional skills, which are crucial for establishing peer relationships.

CONCLUSION

The preschool child learns social interaction as long as he/she is an active participant in the classroom activities. This underscores the importance of making the preschooler an active participant of the classroom activities. The caregivers' demography plays an important role in the social interaction of the preschool child. This implies that the caregivers' qualification and gender play significant roles in the social interaction of the preschool child in early childhood education centres.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

- Qualified caregivers should be employed to teach in public early child centres as this will deepen the learning of the preschoolers.
- There should be a proper mix in the employment of caregivers in early childhood education classrooms to ensure that the preschoolers have a balanced taste of both male and female caregiver role modeling to help them in learning and development.

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