KONTAGORA INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH (KIJER)
AND
THE SOCIETY FOR EDUCATORS, UNITED KINGDOM

A Joint Publication of the Kontagora International Journal of Educational Research (KIJER) and The Society for Educators

Vol. [3] No. [3] ([2026]) | ISSN: [3027-0618] | DOI: [https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23894667]

SPECIAL CONFERENCE PUBLICATION | SOCIETY FOR EDUCATORS

PERCEIVED ROLES OF TEACHERS AND CAREGIVERS ON TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTION AND THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN URBAN OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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Received: [29 April 2026] | Accepted: [25 May 2026] | Published: [15 September 2026]

Abstract

Teacher-child interaction is widely recognised as a determinant of children's social and emotional competencies in early childhood settings. This qualitative case study explored how preschool teachers and caregivers in urban areas of Ogun State, Nigeria, perceive and describe the relationship between teacher-child interaction and children's social and emotional development, and how those interactions were observed to unfold in classrooms.

The study distinguishes two related but distinct constructs: teacher-child relationship quality (the enduring affective bond between a teacher and an individual child) and teacher-child interactional quality (observable moment-to-moment classroom exchanges). Observations addressed the second; interviews and focus groups addressed adults' perceptions of both. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten preschool teachers, six focus group discussions with 38 caregivers, and structured classroom observations across twelve purposively selected public and private preschool settings in Abeokuta South and Sagamu Local Government Areas. Observation was guided by an adaptation of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) domains, used as an organising observational frame rather than as a scored measure. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Participants consistently described warm, responsive and emotionally attuned interactions as supporting children's emotional regulation, social skills, empathy and sense of belonging, and described authoritarian and dismissive styles as accompanying anxiety, withdrawal and aggressive behaviour. Classroom observations were broadly consistent with these accounts. These findings represent adult perceptions and researcher observational interpretations. No child interviews, validated child assessments or longitudinal measurements were conducted, and the study therefore does not establish that interaction styles cause the developmental patterns described. Contextual factors reported as shaping interaction quality included teacher qualification, class size, institutional type and teacher well-being. The study concludes that relational quality is treated by practitioners and caregivers as central to social-emotional learning in this context, and recommends training in relational pedagogy, teacher well-being support, curriculum integration of social-emotional learning, and longitudinal research with child-level measures.

Keywords: teacher-child interaction; social development; emotional development; preschool education; Ogun State, Nigeria; qualitative multiple-case study

1. Introduction

The early years constitute a critical period for the formation of social and emotional competencies underpinning academic achievement, interpersonal relationships and long-term well-being. Research in developmental psychology has consistently affirmed that the environments in which young children are embedded, particularly in preschool settings, play a substantial role in shaping these competencies (Pianta, 1999; Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Central to the quality of these environments is teacher-child interaction. The term is used in two distinct senses in the literature, and this study distinguishes them explicitly. Teacher-child relationship quality refers to the enduring, dyad-specific affective bond between a teacher and an individual child, characterised in the literature by dimensions of closeness, conflict and dependency, and typically measured through teacher-report instruments such as the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale. It is a property of a dyad accumulated over time.

Teacher-child interactional quality refers to observable moment-to-moment exchanges (verbal, non-verbal, emotional and instructional) occurring between a teacher and children at the classroom level. It is a property of a setting at a point in time, and is the object of observational systems such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, 2008).

The two are empirically related but neither reducible to nor substitutable for one another: a teacher may sustain high-quality classroom-level interaction while holding a conflictual relationship with a particular child, and dyadic closeness may exist alongside instructionally poor classroom interaction. This study addressed interactional quality directly through observation, and relationship quality indirectly through teacher and caregiver accounts. Where the terms are used without qualification below, interactional quality is intended.

In Nigeria, early childhood education has expanded considerably over the past two decades, driven by federal and state policy commitments including the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) and the Universal Basic Education Act. Urban centres have seen a proliferation of both public and private preschool institutions. Yet questions remain regarding the qualitative dimensions of teacher-child interaction and their implications for children's social and emotional development (Ejikeme & Onwuka, 2018). These concerns are germane in Ogun State, where urban population growth has intensified demand for early childhood education services.

Social and emotional development in early childhood encompasses a child's capacity to understand and manage emotions, develop positive relationships, show empathy, make responsible decisions and navigate social situations (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). These capacities are shaped by the relational contexts in which children spend their formative years. Teachers, as significant attachment figures in preschool settings, are positioned to influence children's social and emotional trajectories through the quality of their interactions (Pianta, 2012).

1.1. Cultural Positioning of the SEL Framework

The CASEL five-competency framework is used in this study as an organising vocabulary, not as an exhaustive or culturally neutral account of social-emotional competence, and this qualification is material rather than formulaic. CASEL was developed principally in the United States, within an educational culture that foregrounds individual self-management and autonomous decision-making. Applied uncritically in a Nigerian preschool context, it carries three specific risks.

First, its responsible decision-making competency presupposes a degree of individual autonomy in the child that Yoruba and broader Nigerian socialisation practices may locate instead in the family or age-grade collective. Nsamenang (2008) argues that African developmental socialisation is organised around graduated social responsibility and contribution to the collective, which produces competencies such as deference appropriately expressed, sibling caretaking, situational reading of adult authority that CASEL does not name.

Second, its *self-awareness* and *self-management* competencies are typically operationalised through verbal emotional labelling, a culturally specific practice. In settings where emotional restraint before elders is itself the valued competency, a child who does not verbalise emotion to a teacher may be demonstrating competence rather than deficit, and a framework that reads verbal expression as the marker will misclassify them. Third, CASEL's *relationship skills* competency is framed largely around peer relationships, whereas the socially significant relational competencies in this context include appropriate conduct toward adults, elders and younger children in multi-age settings.

Accordingly, CASEL is used here to structure discussion of recognisable competencies, while the analysis remained open to competencies not captured by it. Two such competencies emerged in the data and are reported in the Findings: *respectful conduct toward elders as a socially valued self-regulatory achievement*, and *sibling and peer caretaking behaviour*. Neither maps cleanly onto a CASEL competency. Their emergence supports the position that CASEL is a useful but partial vocabulary in this setting,

and it is one reason a Nigerian-developed or Nigerian-adapted SEL framework is recommended in the conclusion rather than the direct adoption of CASEL.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding global recognition of the importance of social-emotional learning in early childhood, Nigerian preschool education continues to face challenges relating to the quality of teacher-child interaction. The empirical basis for this concern is substantial. Elendu et al. (2025), reviewing 57 studies published over two decades, found high rates of corporal punishment across Nigeria, with approximately 85 per cent prevalence in Northern Nigeria and 70 per cent in Southern Nigeria with younger pupils, particularly at primary level, most frequently subjected to physical discipline; caning, slapping and flogging were the most common forms, and the review documents associated increases in anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Fakunmoju (2020), surveying teachers in a South-West Nigerian district specifically, found continuing perception of corporal punishment as legitimate disciplinary practice despite the legal framework of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 and the Child Rights Act.

Furthermore, many early childhood teachers in Nigeria lack formal training in relational pedagogy and emotionally responsive teaching strategies (Obi, 2015). These gaps indicate a need for empirical investigation into how teacher-child interaction unfolds in urban Nigerian preschool settings and how practitioners and caregivers understand its developmental significance.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

1. Explore the nature and patterns of teacher-child interaction in urban preschool settings in Ogun State.
2. Examine how teachers and caregivers perceive the relationship between teacher-child interaction styles and children's social development.
3. Investigate how teachers and caregivers perceive the relationship between teacher-child interaction patterns and children's emotional development.
4. Identify contextual factors that participants and observation identify as facilitating or hindering positive teacher-child interaction.
5. Propose contextually appropriate recommendations for enhancing teacher-child interaction quality in Nigerian preschool settings.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What are the dominant patterns of teacher-child interaction observed in urban preschool classrooms in Ogun State?
2. How do teachers and caregivers describe the relationship between teacher-child interaction styles and children's social development?
3. How do teachers and caregivers describe the relationship between teacher-child interaction patterns and children's emotional development?
4. What contextual factors do participants and observation identify as shaping the quality of teacher-child interaction in this setting?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualising Teacher-Child Interaction

Teacher-child interaction refers to dynamic, reciprocal exchanges between a teacher and individual children or groups within educational settings (Pianta, 2012). At the classroom level, these encompass emotional support (warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness), classroom organisation (behaviour management, productivity) and instructional support (concept development, quality of feedback), the three domains operationalised by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, 2008).

The construct distinction stated in the Introduction is operationalised as follows in this study. CLASS measures observed classroom interactional quality; it does not measure dyadic relationship quality, which is conventionally assessed through separate teacher-report instruments. This study therefore used the CLASS domains as an *observational organising frame* for

classroom sessions, and treated all relationship-level material teachers' accounts of individual children, caregivers' accounts of their child's bond with a teacher as perceptual data about relationship quality, analysed separately and reported as such. The CLASS instrument was not used as a scored measure: no CLASS dimension scores were assigned, no CLASS-certified observer coding was undertaken, and no CLASS-based quantitative claims are made. Field notes were structured by the three domains and analysed qualitatively.

In Nigerian early childhood settings, teacher-child interactions have been characterised as combining traditional authority-oriented approaches with increasingly child-centred models, particularly in private institutions (Obi, 2015). The extent to which teachers in urban Nigerian preschools engage in emotionally attuned, developmentally responsive interaction remains an open empirical question.

2.2. Social and Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Social and emotional development encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020), subject to the cultural qualifications set out in the Introduction. These competencies emerge through children's daily interactions with adults and peers. Zins and Elias (2006) argue that social and emotional learning is foundational to rather than supplementary to academic education, with children possessing strong SEL competencies demonstrating better academic outcomes, peer relationships and psychological well-being.

Research from sub-Saharan Africa highlights the culturally embedded nature of social and emotional development, noting that values of communal responsibility, respect for elders and cooperative conduct shape the competencies Nigerian children are expected to develop (Nsamenang, 2008). Teachers function as cultural brokers, mediating both broadly shared and culturally specific social-emotional competencies.

2.3. Appraisal of Reviewed Literature

Claims of a research gap require demonstration rather than assertion. The table below summarises the Nigerian and directly comparable West African empirical literature on teacher-child interaction and child social-emotional outcomes located in the preparation of this study, and identifies what each covers and what it leaves unresolved.

Table 1: Existing Nigerian and Comparable Studies; Coverage and Residual Gaps

Study	Population and location	Method	Outcomes examined	What remains unresolved
Ejikeme & Onwuka (2018)	Preschool pupils, Anambra State (South-East)	Quantitative, correlational	Prosocial behaviour scores	No observational data on how interaction unfolds; no caregiver perspective; South-East rather than South-West; no emotional-development outcomes
Obi (2015)	ECE administration, Nigeria (national)	Conceptual/administrative analysis	Systemic and administrative challenges	Does not examine classroom interaction or child outcomes at all
Fakunmoju (2020)	High school teachers, South-West Nigeria	Quantitative survey	Perception and use of corporal punishment	Secondary rather than preschool level; disciplinary practice rather than interaction quality; no child outcomes
Elendu et al. (2025)	Nigeria (national)	Literature review, 57 studies	Prevalence and effects of corporal punishment	Prevalence-focused; no preschool-specific analysis; no examination of positive interaction
Aina & Cameron (2011)	Young children, gender socialisation	Conceptual	Gender stereotyping in early childhood	Addresses gender stereotypes, not disciplinary practice or interaction quality; previously mis-cited in this manuscript for claims it does not support

Study	Population and location	Method	Outcomes examined	What remains unresolved
Nsamenang (2008)	Cameroon	Theoretical with empirical illustration	Agency in early learning and development	Cameroonian rather than Nigerian; theoretical rather than classroom-observational

Three gaps follow from this mapping. First, no located Nigerian study combines classroom observation of interaction with teacher and caregiver accounts; existing work is either survey-quantitative or conceptual. Second, no located study addresses *emotional* development outcomes in the Nigerian preschool context, as distinct from social or behavioural outcomes. Third, no located study examines urban South-West Nigeria at preschool level, and none compares public and private provision within the same design. This study addresses these three gaps.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary perspectives.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) holds that development is facilitated through interaction with more knowledgeable others. Within the Zone of Proximal Development, teacher-child interaction functions as scaffolding that extends children's capabilities beyond independent performance. The specific contribution of ZPD to this study is delimited: it informs the analysis of how teachers *structure* children's social participation through turn-taking routines, guided conflict resolution, and modelling of social scripts, that is, the deliberate instructional dimension of social-emotional learning. It does not account for the affective and regulatory dimensions of emotional attunement, for which a distinct framework is required.

Emotion socialisation theory (Denham et al., 2012) supplies that account. It holds that adults shape children's emotional competence through three mechanisms: *modelling* of emotional expression and regulation; *reactions* to children's emotional displays, which communicate whether emotions are acceptable and manageable; and *explicit teaching* about emotions, including emotional labelling and causal explanation. Denham et al. (2012) report that teacher emotional socialisation practices are among the more significant predictors of children's emotional competence in early childhood settings. This framework directly generated three of the analytical codes used in this study teacher emotional modelling, teacher reaction to child emotional display, and explicit emotion talk and it is the framework against which the emotional-development findings are interpreted.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) situates development within nested systems. The preschool classroom constitutes a microsystem in which teacher-child interactions occur; these are themselves shaped by mesosystem factors (home-school relationships), exosystem factors (school policy, teacher training provision, class size decisions) and macrosystem factors (cultural values, national education policy, normative acceptance of physical discipline). This lens organises the study's treatment of contextual factors in Research Question 4.

2.5. Empirical Evidence on Teacher-Child Interaction and Child Development

Substantial research establishes positive associations between teacher-child interaction quality and children's social and emotional outcomes. Hamre and Pianta (2001) found that the quality of kindergarten teacher-child relationships predicted children's social behaviour, academic achievement and disciplinary outcomes through eighth grade. Mashburn et al. (2008) found that children in classrooms with higher-quality teacher-child interactions exhibited stronger language, literacy and social-emotional skills. Both studies are United States-based, longitudinal or large-sample, and provide mechanism-level rather than directly transferable evidence for the Nigerian context.

In African contexts, empirical work is comparatively limited. Ejikeme and Onwuka (2018) found that Nigerian preschool teachers employing warm, consistent and responsive interaction strategies were associated with higher prosocial behaviour scores among children. Elendu et al. (2025) and Fakunmoju (2020) document the prevalence and normalisation of punitive disciplinary practice in Nigerian schools, including in the South-West, and its association with anxiety, low self-esteem and school avoidance. These studies are largely quantitative or review-based and do not explore the experiential and perceptual dimensions of interaction quality from the standpoint of teachers and caregivers the gap this study addresses.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018), with each of the twelve preschool institutions treated as a case, and with cross-case analysis conducted across the public and private sectors.

This study examined practice across twelve institutions, compared public and private settings, and used structured observation alongside interviews and focus groups. Multiple-case study was the coherent design for that combination as it accommodated multiple data sources per case, supported within-case and cross-case analysis, and made the institution rather than the individual the unit of analysis for contextual questions. Each case comprises one preschool institution, bounded by: the observed preschool classrooms within it; the teacher(s) from it participating in interview; the caregivers of children enrolled in it participating in focus groups; and the institutional context (sector, size, staffing) documented at recruitment.

3.2. Area of study

The study was conducted in urban Ogun State, Nigeria, specifically in Abeokuta South and Sagamu Local Government Areas. Ogun State, in south-western Nigeria, hosts a dense concentration of both public and private early childhood education institutions. The urban areas were selected for their higher concentration of preschool institutions, greater socio-economic diversity, and availability of participants with varied professional backgrounds.

3.3. Population and Sampling

The study population comprised preschool teachers and caregivers in public and private early childhood centres in urban Ogun State. Purposive sampling with maximum-variation intent was employed.

Twelve institutions were selected, six from each metropolis. The sector composition comprised five public and seven private institutions (Abeokuta South: 3 public, 3 private; Sagamu: 2 public, 4 private). The private-weighted distribution was treated as a characteristic of the sample and carried into the interpretation of findings.

Diversity was assessed at recruitment against four documented criteria, recorded for each institution before selection was finalised: (i) *enrolment size:* categorised as small (< 60 preschool children), medium (60-150) or large (> 150); (ii) *sector:* public or private; (iii) *fee level* for private institutions, categorised as low-fee or mid/high-fee relative to the local market; and (iv) *proportion of teaching staff holding a specialist ECE qualification* (NCE-ECE, B.Ed ECE or equivalent): categorised as low (< 25 per cent), moderate (25-60 per cent) or high (> 60 per cent). The final sample included institutions in every category on each criterion.

Table 2: Composition of the Institutional Sample

Case	LGA	Sector	Enrolment size	Fee level	Staff with ECE qualification	Observed class size (mean)
C1	Abeokuta South	Public	Large	n/a	Low	45
C2	Abeokuta South	Public	Medium	n/a	Low	38
C3	Abeokuta South	Public	Large	n/a	Moderate	42
C4	Abeokuta South	Private	Medium	Low-fee	Moderate	22
C5	Abeokuta South	Private	Small	Mid/high	High	14
C6	Abeokuta South	Private	Medium	Mid/high	High	17
C7	Sagamu	Public	Large	n/a	Low	47

Case	LGA	Sector	Enrolment size	Fee level	Staff with ECE qualification	Observed class size (mean)
C8	Sagamu	Public	Medium	n/a	Moderate	36
C9	Sagamu	Private	Small	Low-fee	Low	25
C10	Sagamu	Private	Medium	Low-fee	Moderate	24
C11	Sagamu	Private	Medium	Mid/high	High	16
C12	Sagamu	Private	Small	Mid/high	High	13

Teacher sample. Ten teachers were recruited for in-depth interview: **four from public institutions and six from private institutions**. Characteristics are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Characteristics of Interviewed Teachers

ID	Sector	LGA	Highest qualification	ECE-specialist qualification	Years of preschool teaching experience
T1	Public	Abeokuta South	NCE (non-ECE)	No	11
T2	Public	Abeokuta South	NCE (non-ECE)	No	7
T3	Private	Abeokuta South	B.Ed ECE	Yes	6
T4	Private	Abeokuta South	NCE-ECE	Yes	4
T5	Private	Abeokuta South	B.Sc + PGDE	No	3
T6	Public	Sagamu	B.Ed (Primary Education)	No	14
T7	Private	Sagamu	B.Ed ECE	Yes	9
T8	Public	Sagamu	NCE-ECE	Yes	8
T9	Private	Sagamu	NCE (non-ECE)	No	5
T10	Private	Sagamu	B.Ed ECE	Yes	2

Caregiver sample: Six focus group discussions were conducted, each comprising five to seven caregivers (parents and guardians), yielding 38 caregiver participants in total. Groups were constituted by institution, with three groups drawn from public-institution caregivers and three from private-institution caregivers.

Justification of sample size: Sample adequacy is justified here on the principle of information power (Malterud, et al., 2016) rather than on data saturation, which is a contested criterion for case-study designs. Information power holds that the sample size required decreases as (i) the study aim narrows, (ii) sample specificity increases, (iii) established theory supports the analysis, (iv) dialogue quality is high, and (v) the analysis strategy is cross-case rather than exhaustively within-case. This study scores favourably on each: the aim is narrowly bounded to one construct in one setting; participants are highly specific (preschool teachers and caregivers in two named LGAs); three established theoretical frameworks structure the analysis; interviews were conducted by researchers with prior classroom experience and ran 45–60 minutes; and the analytic strategy is cross-case thematic rather than exhaustive individual-case narrative. On these grounds, ten teacher interviews and six focus groups constitute adequate information power for the stated aim.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Semi-structured interviews: Interviews were conducted with the ten teachers, exploring their understanding of effective interaction, their strategies, perceived challenges, and their observations of children's social-emotional responses. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with written consent. *Language and transcription.* Interviews were conducted in English and Yoruba, with participants choosing the language and code-switching freely; seven interviews were predominantly English with Yoruba code-switching, and three were predominantly Yoruba. All recordings were transcribed verbatim in the language spoken. Yoruba-language segments were then translated into English by a bilingual member of the research team. Translation accuracy was checked by independent back-translation: a second bilingual researcher, working without sight of the original, back-translated the English version into Yoruba; the two Yoruba versions were compared and eleven discrepancies were identified, of which nine were minor lexical variants and two involved idiomatic expressions of emotional restraint that required a translator's note rather than a single-word equivalent. These two are flagged where the relevant quotations appear. Yoruba-language quotations are reported in the original with English translation following.

Focus group discussions: Six FGDs were held with caregivers to elicit perceptions of teacher-child interaction and observed changes in their children's social and emotional behaviour. All FGDs were audio-recorded with the written consent of every participant and transcribed verbatim, following the same language and back-translation procedures as the interviews. Sessions were facilitated using a structured guide and lasted 60-90 minutes. Each session was facilitated by one researcher with a second present as note-taker recording interaction dynamics and non-verbal responses.

Structured classroom observations: Observations were conducted across the twelve institutions. Each classroom was observed on three separate occasions over a three-week period, each session lasting 90 minutes, yielding 36 observation sessions and 54 observation hours. Sessions were scheduled across different times of day (morning arrival, mid-morning instruction, post-meal afternoon) to capture variation in teacher and child state. Field notes were structured by the three CLASS domains: emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support, used as an organising frame only, as set out above. Reflective memos were written immediately after each session. *Observer effects:* Observers were present in classrooms for a familiarisation visit before the first recorded session. Observer reactivity is nonetheless a limitation, addressed in the Limitations section.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), proceeding through familiarisation, initial code generation, theme construction, theme review, theme definition and reporting. Transcripts, field notes and memos were managed and coded in NVivo 14. Memos and the audit trail were maintained within the same project file. Coding was conducted by three members of the research team. The first three teacher transcripts and the first two FGD transcripts were coded independently by all three coders, after which the team met to compare codes, resolve divergence and construct an agreed initial coding frame of 47 codes. The remaining transcripts were divided between the three coders, with 20 per cent double-coded as an ongoing consistency check. Because reflexive thematic analysis treats coder subjectivity as a resource rather than a source of error, no inter-rater reliability coefficient was calculated; instead, all divergences in the double-coded subset were discussed and recorded in the audit trail, and where divergence indicated genuine interpretive ambiguity the code definition was revised.

Data sources were integrated at theme rather than code level, through a case-by-case matrix. For each of the twelve cases, a matrix row recorded: (i) interaction patterns observed; (ii) teacher account of interaction approach; (iii) caregiver account of perceived child response; and (iv) contextual conditions documented. Themes were constructed by reading down the matrix columns for patterns and across the rows for convergence and divergence between sources within a case. Convergence across sources within a case was treated as strengthening a theme; divergence was retained and reported rather than resolved, on the view that a discrepancy between what a teacher reports and what is observed is itself analytically informative. One such divergence is reported in the Findings.

Coding example. The following illustrates the progression from data to theme:

Data extract (T2, public, Abeokuta South): "With 45 children in my class and no assistant, I cannot give each child the attention they need. By afternoon, I am exhausted and I know my patience is shorter."

Initial codes: structural constraint: class size; teacher fatigue; self-awareness of interaction decline; time-of-day variation

Candidate theme: "Structural conditions as limits on relational capacity"

Final theme: "Contextual conditions shaping interaction quality" (sub-theme: "Class size and teacher depletion")

Corroborating observational note (C1, session 3, afternoon): Field notes for the same classroom recorded a higher frequency of directive utterances and lower frequency of individual acknowledgement in the afternoon session relative to the same classroom's morning session consistent with the teacher's self-report of within-day variation.

Trustworthiness: Credibility was supported by triangulation across interviews, focus groups and observation; by member checking, in which emerging themes were shared with four of the ten interviewed teachers, of whom three confirmed the interpretation and one queried the characterisation of directive interaction as necessarily dismissive, prompting a revision to the theme definition to distinguish *authoritative-structured* from *dismissive-authoritarian* patterns; and by maintenance of reflexivity journals in which researchers documented positionality, including the fact that several team members are themselves teacher educators whose professional commitments favour child-centred pedagogy a standpoint that may have sensitised the team to warm-responsive practice and required deliberate attention to countervailing evidence.

Dependability was supported by a full audit trail comprising the coding frame with dated revisions, coder meeting minutes, the case matrix and analytic memos, available from the corresponding author.

Confirmability was supported by anchoring every reported theme to identifiable data extracts across more than one case.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Tai Solarin University of Education.

Institutional permission. Written permission was obtained from the Ogun State Universal Basic Education Board for access to public institutions, and from the proprietor or head teacher of each private institution, prior to any contact with teachers or caregivers.

Adult consent. Written informed consent was secured from all teacher and caregiver participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence; two caregivers exercised this right before their focus group and their data were not collected.

Children in observed classrooms. Children were present in observed classrooms and are therefore participants in the research even though no child was interviewed, assessed or individually studied. The following provisions applied:

Parental consent. Information letters describing the observation, its purpose and its limits were distributed to the parents or guardians of all children in every classroom scheduled for observation, via the institution, at least two weeks in advance. **Written opt-out consent** was used; four parents across the sample requested that their child not be included in observation, and those children were seated outside the observer's recorded field of view for the duration of the sessions, with no field notes recorded about them.

Child assent. At the start of each observation session, the observer was introduced to the class by the teacher in age-appropriate terms as a visitor who had come to watch how the class works and would not be joining in; children were told they could ask the visitor to move away. Assent was treated as ongoing and behavioural: any child who showed distress or reluctance at the observer's presence was to be given distance, and observation of that child discontinued. This occurred on two occasions.

Privacy protection. No child was named in field notes, no photographs or video were taken, and no audio was recorded during classroom observation. Children are referred to in notes and in this report only by non-identifying descriptors. Institutions, teachers and caregivers are identified by pseudonymous codes throughout; institutions are not named.

Safeguarding. A written safeguarding protocol was agreed with the Ethics Committee before fieldwork. Observers were briefed that any observation of physical punishment, humiliation or conduct raising a child protection concern would be recorded factually, reported to the principal investigator within 24 hours, and escalated to the institution's head teacher and, where the threshold was met, to the Ogun State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, with the participant informed that confidentiality could not be maintained where child safety was at issue. This limit to confidentiality was stated explicitly in the participant information sheet and consent form. Two incidents were recorded during fieldwork and were escalated to the respective head teachers in accordance with the protocol; both institutions are retained in the dataset, and the incidents are reported in aggregate in the Findings without identifying detail.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Patterns of Teacher-Child Interaction

Analysis of observations and teacher interviews identified three dominant interaction patterns: warm-responsive, authoritative-structured and dismissive-authoritarian.

Warm-responsive interaction: emotional attunement, active listening, positive reinforcement, individualised attention were observed predominantly in private settings and among teachers holding specialist ECE qualifications. A teacher in a private institution in Abeokuta described her approach:

> *"When a child is crying or withdrawn, I first try to understand what the child is feeling before doing anything else. I get down to their level, make eye contact, and let them know I am here for them. This makes them feel safe and they open up more." (T3, private, Abeokuta South)*

Authoritative-structured interaction: clear expectations, consistent routines and firm direction combined with warmth and explanation was observed across both sectors and was distinguished from the dismissive-authoritarian pattern following the member-checking exchange described in the Methodology. This distinction matters: a teacher may be highly directive without being emotionally dismissive, and conflating the two would misclassify a pattern that participants regarded as legitimate and effective.

Dismissive-authoritarian interaction: harsh verbal reprimand, proximity control, non-response to emotional display, rigid rule enforcement were observed more frequently in public settings and among teachers without specialist ECE training. Two incidents meeting the safeguarding threshold were recorded and escalated under the protocol described above.

Caregiver focus groups corroborated the broad pattern, with several parents reporting observable changes in their children's mood and behaviour following school hours. In two cases (C8, public; C9, private, low-fee), teachers described their own practice in warm-responsive terms while observation recorded predominantly directive interaction with limited emotional acknowledgement. This divergence is not treated here as teacher inaccuracy. It is more plausibly read as evidence that aspirational professional norms have diffused ahead of the structural conditions that would permit their enactment; both cases had observed class sizes above 25 and neither teacher had specialist ECE training. This reading is consistent with the contextual findings below.

4.2. Perceived Relationship Between Interaction and Social Development

Teachers and caregivers consistently described warm-responsive interaction as accompanying prosocial behaviour, cooperative play and positive peer relationships. Participants reported that children experiencing consistent emotional support demonstrated greater sharing, conflict resolution and willingness to engage in group activity. One caregiver said:

> *"Since my daughter moved to this school where the teacher is very patient and kind, she has become more friendly. She now plays well with other children and she even helps her younger sibling at home. Before, she was very aggressive." (Caregiver, FGD2, Sagamu, private)*

This account is characteristic of the caregiver data and also illustrates its limits: the child changed schools, and any number of concurrent changes, including peer group, routine, home circumstances, and maturation, could contribute to the reported change.

Observation was broadly consistent with these accounts: field notes recorded more frequent cooperative play episodes, fewer observed peer conflicts and more peer-helping behaviour in classrooms characterised by warm-responsive interaction than in those characterised by dismissive-authoritarian interaction. Classrooms differed simultaneously in class size, sector, teacher qualification and material resources, and the observed contrast cannot be attributed to interaction pattern independently of those confounds.

Two socially valued competencies emerged that CASEL does not name, as anticipated in the Introduction. Caregivers in four of the six focus groups described "respectful conduct toward elders" as a primary marker of a child's social development, framed as an achievement of self-regulation rather than mere compliance. Caregivers in three groups described "taking care of younger siblings" as evidence of the social learning acquired at school. Both were volunteered by participants without prompting from the interview guide.

These findings are consistent in direction with Mashburn et al. (2008) and align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) proposition that microsystem interaction quality shapes developmental outcomes, while remaining, in this study, perceptual and observational rather than measured.

4.3. Perceived Relationship Between Interaction and Emotional Development

Participants described interaction quality as bearing substantially on children's emotional regulation and expression. In classrooms where teachers modelled emotional vocabulary, validated children's feelings and responded sensitively to emotional cues, teachers and caregivers reported greater capacity in children to name and regulate emotions, and observers recorded fewer sustained episodes of distress and more instances of children approaching the teacher when upset.

Conversely, in classrooms where teachers responded to emotional display dismissively or punitively, participants described emotional suppression, heightened anxiety and social withdrawal, and observers recorded reduced frequency of children initiating emotional communication with the teacher over the three-session sequence. In one public preschool, a teacher was observed to respond to children's crying with commands such as "stop that noise" and "crying is for babies"; observation notes across that classroom's three sessions recorded declining child-initiated emotional approach. This is a within-classroom observational pattern across three sessions in three weeks; it is not evidence of developmental change, which would require measurement over a substantially longer period.

Teacher T7 reflected on emotional responsiveness:

> *"Children learn how to feel by watching how we respond to their feelings. If I brush a child's emotions aside, I am telling them their feelings do not matter. That can stay with them for a long time." (T7, private, Sagamu)*

These findings are interpreted through emotion socialisation theory (Denham et al., 2012) rather than through the ZPD alone. All three of Denham's mechanisms were observable in the data: teacher *modelling* of regulated emotional expression; teacher reactions to children's emotional displays, which the data suggest were the most frequently observed of the three in this setting; and explicit emotion talk, which was the least frequently observed mechanism across all twelve cases, including in warm-responsive classrooms, a finding with direct implications for training content. The Vygotskian contribution is narrower and specific: teachers were observed scaffolding social participation through structured turn-taking and guided conflict resolution, which ~~i~~represents guided participation in the ZPD sense~~,~~ and is analytically distinct from emotional attunement.

4.4. Contextual Factors Shaping Interaction Quality

Four contextual factors were identified across cases.

1. **Teacher qualification:** Teachers holding specialist ECE qualifications were observed to demonstrate more child-sensitive interaction patterns more consistently. This association is confounded with sector: specialist-qualified teachers in this sample were concentrated in private institutions, which also had smaller classes and better material provision. The design cannot separate the contribution of qualification from that of the conditions in which qualified teachers were working, and no such separation is claimed.

2. **Class size:** Large classes were identified as a structural constraint on individualised, responsive interaction. Observed mean class sizes ranged from 13 (C12, private) to 47 (C7, public). As T2 explained:

> "With 45 children in my class and no assistant, I cannot give each child the attention they need. By afternoon, I am exhausted and I know my patience is shorter." (T2, public, Abeokuta South)

Observed class sizes in all five public institutions exceeded the national standard discussed in the Recommendations below; none of the private institutions exceeded it, although one private institution (C9) met the standard exactly.

3. **Institutional type:** Sector differences were pronounced but are, as noted, confounded with class size, qualification profile and material resourcing. Sector is best read in this study as a proxy for a bundle of conditions rather than as an explanatory variable in itself.

4. **Teacher well-being:** Teachers reporting high occupational stress, low job satisfaction and inadequate institutional support were more likely to describe, and were observed to display, dismissive or authoritarian interaction. Within-day variation reported by teachers and corroborated in afternoon observation sessions suggests that interaction quality is a depletable resource rather than a fixed teacher attribute, a reading with direct implications for the well-being recommendation below.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how preschool teachers and caregivers in urban Ogun State understand the relationship between teacher-child interaction and children's social and emotional development, and how such interaction was observed to unfold across twelve institutional cases. Participants consistently treated relational quality as central: warm, responsive and emotionally attuned interaction was described as accompanying prosocial behaviour, cooperative skills, emotional regulation and resilience, while dismissive and authoritarian patterns were described as accompanying social withdrawal, emotional suppression and behavioural difficulty. Classroom observation was broadly consistent with these accounts.

These are perceptions and observations, not demonstrated developmental effects. The study establishes what practitioners and caregivers in this setting believe and describe, and what researchers recorded in 54 hours of classroom observation. It does not establish that interaction styles produce the developmental outcomes participants attribute to them.

The study also finds that interaction quality is shaped by a constellation of contextual conditions such as; teacher qualification, class size, institutional type and teacher well-being, which are mutually confounded in this sample and which operate at the exosystem level in Bronfenbrenner's terms. This suggests that improving relational quality is substantially a structural undertaking rather than solely a matter of individual teacher disposition.

6. Limitations

The following limitations bound all interpretation of the findings above, and the recommendations that follow should be read as conditioned by them.

1. **Small purposive sample size:** Twelve institutions, ten teachers and 38 caregivers in two LGAs of one state support analytic, not statistical, generalisation. Findings should not be extrapolated to rural Ogun State, to other Nigerian states, or to Nigerian preschool provision generally.

2. **Reliance on adult perceptions:** No child was interviewed, assessed or measured. All developmental claims in the data are adult attributions. Children's own accounts of their classroom experience methodologically feasible with age-appropriate techniques and a distinct ethical protocol are absent, and their absence is the study's most significant substantive limitation.

3. **Absence of child-level measures:** No validated instrument was used to assess children's social or emotional competence. Reported associations between interaction pattern and child outcome rest on adult report and observer field notes, neither of which is a measure.

4. **Cross-sectional design:** Data were collected over a three-week observation window. Developmental change occurs over months and years. The study cannot speak to trajectory, and the within-classroom patterns reported across three observation sessions are patterns of classroom dynamics, not of child development.

5. **Observer reactivity:** Teachers knew they were being observed and knew the study's topic. Social desirability effects on observed interaction are likely, and would plausibly bias observation toward the warm-responsive end. That dismissive-authoritarian interaction was nonetheless observed, and that two safeguarding incidents occurred during observation, suggests the effect did not eliminate the behaviour of interest, but its magnitude is unknown.

6. **Sector confounding:** Sector, class size, teacher qualification and material resourcing co-vary throughout the sample. No claim about the independent contribution of any one of these is supportable from this design, and the paper makes none.

7. **Researcher positionality:** The research team comprises teacher educators professionally committed to child-centred pedagogy. Reflexivity journals were maintained, and the member-checking exchange that produced the authoritative-structured category demonstrates one instance in which an initial interpretation was revised. Residual sensitising effects on what was noticed and how it was framed cannot be excluded.

8. **Language and translation:** Although back-translation was used, two idiomatic Yoruba expressions concerning emotional restraint had no single-word English equivalent and are rendered with translator's notes. Meaning may be attenuated in translation at those points.

7. Recommendations

1. Pre-service and in-service training in relational pedagogy: Teacher education curricula in Nigeria, including at Tai Solarin University of Education and Colleges of Education, should incorporate modules on relational pedagogy, emotional literacy and responsive interaction. This study's finding that explicit emotion talk was the least frequently observed emotion-socialisation mechanism across all twelve cases, including in otherwise warm-responsive classrooms, indicates a specific and addressable training target rather than a general one: teachers modelled and reacted to emotion far more readily than they named and explained it. In-service provision should be institutionalised within continuing professional development frameworks.

2. Class size and the applicable national standard: The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) stipulates a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:25 for pre-primary education, and the National Minimum Standards for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], 2007) specifies 1:10 for crèche provision (0-2 years) and 1:25 for nursery/kindergarten provision. Observed class sizes in all five public institutions exceeded the 1:25 standard; none of the private institutions exceeded it, although one private institution (C9) met the standard exactly. In one public institution, the observed class size was nearly twice the 1:25 standard. State governments and the Ogun State Ministry of Education should enforce the existing national standard rather than adopt a new one; the immediate policy gap is one of compliance and monitoring, not of standard-setting. Where enrolment pressure makes compliance infeasible in the short term, deployment of trained teaching assistants offers a partial and lower-cost mitigation, though this study did not evaluate that option.

3. Integration of a contextually adapted SEL framework: The Nigerian early childhood curriculum should formally integrate social-emotional learning competencies. This study's finding that caregivers volunteered two socially valued competencies respectful conduct toward elders and caretaking of younger children that CASEL does not name indicates that direct adoption of CASEL would be inadequate. What is required is a Nigerian-adapted SEL framework, developed with caregivers, teachers and community stakeholders, that retains CASEL's competency structure where it fits and adds culturally salient competencies where it does not. Developing and validating such a framework is a research task in its own right.

4. Teacher well-being support: School administrators and policymakers should invest in teacher support systems, including mentorship, access to psychological support services and improved remuneration. This study's finding that teachers described and observers recorded within-day deterioration in interaction quality supports treating teacher well-being as a direct input to relational quality rather than as a welfare matter separable from pedagogy.

5. Further research: Three studies follow directly from this one. First, a longitudinal mixed-methods study with validated, culturally adapted child-level measures of social-emotional competence, tracking children across at least one full academic year, to test whether the associations participants describe are borne out in measurement. Second, a study incorporating children's own perspectives through age-appropriate participatory methods, which this study's design excluded and which is required for any account of classroom experience that does not rest entirely on adult report. Third, a design capable of separating the confounded contributions of sector, class size and teacher qualification for example, by sampling public institutions with small classes and private institutions with large classes, which exist but were not deliberately sought in this sample.

DECLARATIONS

Funding

The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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CITE THIS ARTICLE

APA

Fatimah, Z., Ajao, T. A., Owoeyele, M. O., Otulana, M. M., & Sam-Ogunmusi, T. G. (2026). Perceived roles of teachers and caregivers on teacher-child interaction and the social and emotional development of preschool children in urban Ogun State, Nigeria. *Kontagora International Journal of Educational Research (KIJER), 3*(3), 161–174.

Chicago

Fatimah, Zakariyyah, Tawakalitu A. Ajao, Muslimah Opeyemi Owoeyele, Otulana M. M., and T. G. Sam-Ogunmusi. "Perceived Roles of Teachers and Caregivers on Teacher-Child Interaction and the Social and Emotional Development of Preschool Children in Urban Ogun

State, Nigeria." *Kontagora International Journal of Educational Research (KIJER)* 3, no. 3 (2026): 161–174.