

TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TO HEALTH AND SAFETY PRECAUTIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SCHOOLS' LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN OFFA LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

In order to ensure for a safe and healthy learning environment, there are things preschool teachers need to plan beforehand so that they can be able to deal effectively with illnesses, injuries and emergencies. For this reason, this study examined teachers' attitude to health and safety precautions in early childhood schools' learning environment in Offa Local Government Areas. The study employed descriptive research design. Simple random sampling technique was used to select twenty private and twenty public early childhood schools in Offa Local Government. The total number of teachers that participated in the study was 360. The instrument used for data collection was Teachers' Attitude to Health and Safety Precautions Questionnaire ($r=0.78$). Four hypotheses were formulated and tested. Data gathered were analyzed using t-test statistics at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that teachers in early childhood schools do not show positive attitude towards upholding health and safety precautions in the learning environment. Also, gender does not determine teachers' attitude to safety and health precautions. The type of school determines the level of teachers' attitude to safety and health precautions. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made that teacher training institutions for child educators should include courses on safety and health in their curriculum and regular workshop and training be organized by stakeholders to update teachers on issues about health and safety of children in early childhood schools.

Keywords: Early childhood schools' learning environment, Teachers' attitude to health precautions, Teachers' attitude to safety precautions

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Introduction

Fostering a learning environment in which children feel safe, relaxed and willing to take risks is highly essential in early childhood schools as this provides children with confidence which maximizes their learning potentials. It is important that while children are in school, risks to their health and safety are minimized as far as feasible especially in relation to transmission of infection disease, injury and other medical emergencies. A high quality early childhood learning environment looks and smell good. It is bright, organized and clean. It influences not only the content but the design of the early learning environment including appropriate lightening, furniture, equipment, materials, storage, food preparation and hygiene facilities, ensuring that space is inviting and healthy and safe. There is a possibility for children to be injured even seriously hurt in learning environment. As noted by Wellhousen & Crowther (2006) there has been incidence of children who sustained injuries in day care and some even died in the day care.

Belsky, Brezausek, Schwebel (2006) found that only half of the children felt safe in school. Approximately 160,000 children per day miss school because they fear physical harm. Therefore, health and safety precautions should be among the most important factors to be considered when setting up an early childhood learning environment so also, teachers should be systematically and continuously involved in the exercise of health and safety precautions.

According to Green man (2002) safety precautions mean those acts taken before an activity to prevent danger or risk during the activity or an action taken in advance to protect possible danger or injuries while health precautions have to do with measures that will be taken to avoid infections and illnesses among children in the learning environment. Bullard (2010) submitted that teachers should have concern for how to reduce both short and long term illness in early childhood settings and ways to prevent minor and major risks. It is important that teachers are continually alert for dangers in the environment and the precautions to be taken against such danger. In order to ensure for a safe and healthy learning environment, there are things teachers need to plan beforehand or measures teachers need to employ beforehand which are referred to as the precautions. Colquhoun &

Alexander (2001) prescribed that the proprietors and educators are responsible for ensuring that early childhood settings operate in a way that protect health, safety and wellbeing of all children attending the settings.

Children in early childhood programmes are more susceptible to illness and accidental injuries and these have been found to be connected with an unsafe and unhealthy learning environment. Bukoye (2000) submitted that teachers should be able to deal effectively with illnesses, injuries and emergencies. Bullard (2010) lend credence to this and emphasized that it is highly important that teachers take extra care in preventing illness and injury in children's learning environment. An effective early childhood teacher should be able to create an environment that is welcoming, stimulating, caring and safe for the learners. An early childhood learning environment includes both the indoor and outdoor learning environment. Teachers have roles to play in ensuring a safe and healthy environment in both indoor and outdoor learning environment. The indoor learning environment is where the important activities of the day take place such as playing, eating, sleeping, washing hands and going to bathrooms. The teacher provides enough space for pupils to move around the class, provide appropriate materials that are safe for children to play with. The outdoor learning environment is the environment outside the classroom where a lot of activities of the children are carried out including manipulative centres where water and sand are used (Clark, 2002).

Goffin (2001) highlighted some precautions a teacher is expected to take to prevent children from illness and injury in the learning environment. Teacher can stop the spread of germs by encouraging the pupils in frequent hand washing with the use of sanitizers before and after any activities such as eating, using of the toilet, removing of diapers, playing with sand. The toileting of children should be handled by adults around them; they should not be left to do it on their own. Children should be encouraged to clean their hands before eating, after playing and after toileting. Play materials should be sanitized every time after use. Wearing of shoes on floor, carpet or rug should not be allowed in early childhood classrooms. Children should be monitored and guided against putting anything they find on the floor in their mouth. It is the duty of caregivers to take extra care in preventing illness among children under their care. A sick child should not be allowed

to stay in school until he/she recovers in order to prevent others from been infected. Children should not be encouraged to wipe their noses by themselves. Adequate ventilation should be encouraged in early childhood classrooms. Teachers should care about the foods and drinks children bring to school.

There are some of the things to prepare in the learning environment to prevent dangers. Mack 1997; Phelan, Khoury, Kalkwarf and Lanpher (2001) submitted that teachers also need to teach children about accident prevention tricycle and bicycle safety, and preparedness for emergencies. The researchers identified that majority of injuries that occur in school happen on the playground. Healis, Cody and Mickalide (2003) also observed that non-fatal playground injuries are most often caused by falls. Bullard (2010) further stated the precautions to be taken by caregivers and teachers to ensure healthy and safe environment in early childhood schools learning environment. The teachers should remove all broken glass, nails, big sticks, make a daily check of the equipment, clean materials regularly and keep medication out of the reach of children. Also, electrical wires should not be exposed and children should not have access to electrical appliances that have risks. Children should also be protected from other aggressive children and make sure they do not engage in plays that will involve pushing one another and as well be prevented from injuring themselves with the materials or equipment they are using. Toys should not be left in fall zones and children should not play with sharp objects in and outside the classroom. Walking and crawling children should not be put together without monitoring. Children should be supported and controlled when coming down a set of stairs. Regular clearing and cleaning of the school compound is also essential and above all, the teachers should always monitor the activities of the children. Children can always be prevented from injury and risks with the proper attention and supervision of the teacher (Belsky, et al, 2006).

Current research continues to highlight the need for teachers as well as care givers to reduce the risk of transmission of infection and injuries in child care services. There are many ways early childhood teachers can help meet this need to provide safe, secure and healthy environments for children under their care which they may not show any concern about or be well

disposed to. It is therefore imperative to examine their attitude to health and safety precautions in preschool setting.

Researchers have confirmed that gender dictates what the passion or interest in teaching or any other profession will be which can have serious effect on a teacher's attitude in the way she cares for safety and health of children in learning environment. For example, Bukoye (2002) observes that many teachers believe teaching is all disseminating knowledge to the pupils and not giving adequate attention to health and safety of their pupils. Rothenberg (2001) supports this and advocates for the need to make all male and female teachers in profession to give adequate care and supervision to their pupils in the programme. There is also an assumption that the type of school will determine the attitude of teachers to children under their care. As submitted by Morison (2003) the private schools are owned and controlled by private agencies or individual while the public schools are owned by the government. The public school teacher are paid better amount and enjoyed many entitlements. This can make those who are paid better have great enthusiasm towards children while those who are paid less would show a lackadaisical attitude towards pupils' health and safety. Therefore, these variables were studied in this study.

Statement of the Problem

Comprehensive safe learning environment is vital to the wellbeing of children. Over the years there have been cases of children accidental injuries due to an unsafe and unhealthy learning environment. Reducing injuries and danger when working with young children should be a major concern. The sole responsibility of the proprietors, care givers and teacher in early childhood schools is ensuring that early childhood settings operate in a way that protect health, safety and wellbeing of all children attending the settings. Thus, in order to plan against danger and risk there should be teachers who are ready to observe the necessary health and safety precautions. Studies have been carried out in the area of importance of health and safety in the learning environment but these variables have not been looked into along with teachers' attitude to health and safety precautions in early childhood learning environment. Thus, this study investigated teachers' attitude to health and safety precautions in early childhood schools' learning environment.

Hypotheses

- H0₁ There is no significant difference in the female and male teachers' attitude to health precautions in early childhood schools' learning environment.
- H0₂ There is no significant difference in the female and male teachers' attitude to safety precautions in early childhood schools' learning environment.
- H0₃ There is no significant difference in private and public teachers' attitude to health precautions in early childhood schools' learning environment.
- H0₄ There is no significant difference in private and public teachers' attitude to safety precautions in early childhood schools' learning environment.

Method

The research design for this study was descriptive survey. The population of this study comprised of early childhood education teachers of both public and private schools in Offa Local Government Area of Kwara State. Simple random sampling technique was used to select twenty private and twenty public early childhood schools in Offa Local Government. The teachers that participated were teachers in crèche, kindergarten and lower primary classes. The total number of teachers that participated in the study was 360. Teachers' Attitude to Health and Safety Precautions Questionnaire (TAHSPQ) consisted of three sections. Section A – personal data of the respondents, section B consisted of ten items which elicited information on teachers' attitude to health precautions in early childhood schools learning environment and Section C also comprised of ten items obtaining information on teachers' attitude to safety precautions in early childhood schools learning environment. The items in TAHSPQ are based on four-point Likert scale, Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) with scoring of 4, 3, 2, and 1 for positively worded items and 1, 2, 3 and 4 for negatively worded items.

The instrument was administered to forty respondents in two schools which were not part of the study sample and using split half method Teachers' Attitude to Health and Safety Precautions Questionnaire

(TAHSPQ) yielded reliability coefficient of 0.78. Data gathered were analyzed using t-test statistics to test the hypotheses which was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Result and Discussion

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the male and female teachers' attitude to health precautions.

Table 1: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between female and male teachers' attitude to health precautions

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	t	df	Sig.	Remark
Teachers' attitude to health precautions							
Male	119	20.92	5.222	1.183	355	.238	Not
Female	238	20.00	7.575				Significant

Table 1 shows the difference between female and male teachers' attitude to health precautions. It shows that there is no significant difference in female and male teachers' attitude to health ($t = 1.183$; $df = 355$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore the null hypothesis 1 is accepted. The mean value shows that male have a slightly higher attitude to health precautions ($x = 20.92$) than their female ($x = 20.00$) counterparts.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the female and male teachers' attitude to safety precautions

Table 2: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between female and male teachers' attitude to safety precautions

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	t	df	Sig.	Remark
Teachers' attitude to safety precautions							
Male	119	19.08	9.742	-814	355	.416	Not Significant
Female	238	19.87	8.190				

Table 2 shows the difference between female and male attitude to safety precautions. It shows that there is no significant difference in the male and female attitude to safety precautions ($t = -.814$; $df = 355$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 2 is accepted. The mean values shows that female ($x = 19.87$) have a slightly higher attitude than their male ($x = 19.08$) counterparts.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in public and private teachers' attitude to safety precautions in early childhood education learning environment.

Table 3: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between public and private teachers attitude to health precautions in early childhood learning environment

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	t	df	Sig.	Remark
Public and private teachers attitude to health precautions							
Private	178	19.38	7.377	2.249	358	0.19	Significant
Public	238	21.10	6.471				

Table 3 shows the difference between public and private teachers' attitude to health precautions. It shows that there is significant difference between public and private teachers' attitude to health precautions ($t = -.2.249$; $df = 358$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 3 is rejected. The mean values

shows that public teachers have a higher mean score ($x=21.10$) than the private ($x= 19.38$) counterparts.

Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference in private and public teachers' attitude to safety precautions in early childhood education learning environment

Table 4: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between public and private teachers attitude to safety precautions in early childhood learning environment

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D.	t	df	Sig.	Remark
Public and private teachers attitude to safety precautions	178	18.99	8.510	1.344	358	0.18	Significant
Private	238	20.22	8.855				
Public							

Table 4 shows that there is significant difference between public and private teachers' attitude to safety precautions ($t= 1.344$; $df= 358$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 4 is rejected. The mean values shows that public teachers have a higher mean score ($x= 20.22$) attitude to safety precautions than their private ($x= 18.99$) counterparts.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of this research showed that teachers' attitude to health and safety precautions was not satisfactory. They did not show positive attitude towards health and safety precautions of the pupils in the learning environment. This finding is in agreement with Koech (2003) and Esteo (2004) who observed that most teachers exposed children to risks in the learning environment and they do not follow the health and safety rules. This finding does not conform with the prescription of Colquhoun and Alexander (2001) that the proprietors and educators should take responsibility for ensuring that early childhood settings operate in a way

that protect health, safety and wellbeing of all children attending the settings. It was revealed that teachers were not always vigilant in detecting any pupil that has communicable disease not to talk of taking precautions that will prevent other children in the class from being infected by the same disease. This result is also not in support of recommendation of Wellhousen & Crowther (2006) that teachers need to be vigilant and take immediate action to attend to young children's behaviour such as putting toys in their mouth, wiping noses with hands and a child with contagious diseases having physical contact with others so as not to increase the spread of disease among the children.

Another finding revealed that there is no significant difference in male and female attitude to health and safety precautions. This thus implies that being either male or female teacher does not depict that teachers would have positive attitude towards health and safety of the pupils they are working with. This result is not in conformity with Landy (2002) who observed that the way male teachers care for the pupils in the classroom is very poor and that they do not pay much attention to the pupils when they engage in rough play.

Finally it was revealed through the study that there is significant difference in private and public schools teachers' attitude towards health and safety precautions. The public school teachers' positive attitude to health and safety precautions is higher than their private counterparts. This finding is in agreement with the submission of Morison (2003) that there is tendency that public teacher who is paid better shows better enthusiasm towards children while those who are paid less would show a lackadaisical attitude towards pupils' health and safety.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the above findings, it can be concluded that teachers in early childhood schools do not show positive attitude towards ensuring health and safety precautions in the learning environment. Also, being a female or male teacher does not determine what the teachers' attitude to safety and health precautions will be. Whereas it is expected that female should have better attitude than their male counterpart in catering for the good health and safety of the pupils they are working with.

The type of school either private or public determines the attitude of teachers to safety and health precautions. That means there is tendency that pupils who attend public schools receive adequate care, supervision and monitoring than children who attend private schools. This may be so because the government has the accredited qualification for employing teachers into various level of education whereas most private school proprietors/proprietresses establish their schools with sole aim of making profit thereby employing teachers who are not qualified to be in teaching profession and with little or no passion for children. Such teachers have little knowledge of what to and what not to put in place. Also, since private school teachers are paid less, they show a lackadaisical attitude towards pupils' health and safety.

In the light of the conclusion of this research, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- Government should always organize seminars for both public and private school teachers on how best they can care and attend to pupils' health and safety.
- Teachers who do not have teacher training in early childhood and primary education or related field should not be employed in both public and private early childhood schools.
- Teachers should be encouraged to develop and update themselves on how daily and adequate care and supervision can be given to pupils in early childhood settings by attending seminars and workshop, consulting textbooks and utilizing other resources like internet.
- Government should establish a body that will always go on supervision and screening of early childhood schools and teachers from time to time.
- Teacher training institutions and departments should include courses on safety and health in their curriculum for early childhood and primary education teacher training.

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