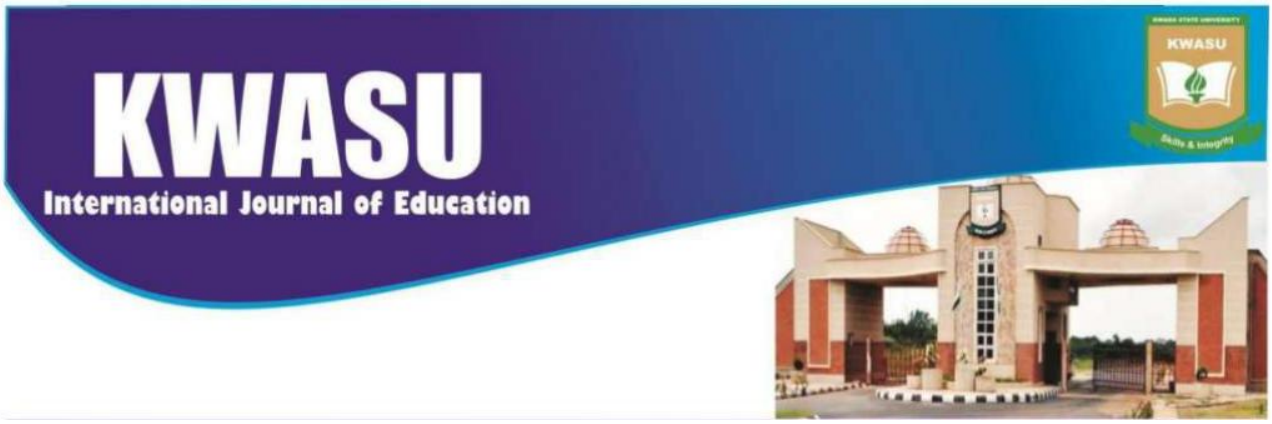


INFLUENCE OF BALANCED DIET INTAKE ON THE SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

One of goals of education is to ensure holistic development of children but this is not the case in many schools in Nigeria as many teachers in Nigerian schools only teach children to pass tests and examinations. As a result, direct teaching and assessment of skills like social skills receive less focus in many early childhood settings. This study was therefore carried out to influence of balanced diet intake on the social skills development of preschoolers in South-Western Nigeria. Correlational descriptive research design was adopted in this study and the target population consist of 1,988,629 preschoolers in Lagos, Oyo and Ogun states. A sample of 384 preschool children were selected using multistage sampling procedure. Preschool Children's Social skills development Rating Scale and Preschool Children's Balance Diet Intake Rating Scale were the two instruments used for data collection. The reliability coefficients of each instruments were 0.823 and 0.855 respectively. Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research questions while simple linear regression was used to test the null hypothesis at the 0.05. Findings indicated high levels of balanced diet intake (mean = 2.94) and social skills development (mean = 2.92) among preschoolers in South-Western Nigeria ($F_{(1,382)}$ = .605 p = 0.437). However, it was found that balanced diet intake does not significantly influence social skills development of preschoolers in South Western Nigeria. As a recommendation, parents should continue to provide a varied and balanced diet at home to maintain the high level of nutritional intake observed among preschool children.

Keywords: *Balanced Diet Intake, Social Skills Development, Preschoolers*

Introduction

Preschoolers represent a unique and crucial age group in early childhood development. Typically between three and five years old, preschoolers experience a significant period of growth (Rostan ef al., 20220). Any child at this stage are expected to be very curious and shows high energy level. They are always eager to explore the world around them and learn new skills. These foundational years is a blueprint for future learning and skills development (Manas, 2020). During this time, nutrition is key because development is fast and dynamic at this stage. Ensuring that preschoolers receive appropriate nutrition, specifically balanced diet intake, is essential as this makes them meet the demands of key developmental outcomes (Precious et al., 2023).

Balanced diet intake is crucial for the optimal growth and development of preschoolers. A balanced diet typically includes macronutrients such as carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, as well as micronutrients like vitamins and minerals. These nutrients support healthy immune system development and overall physical growth (Munteanu & Schwartz, 2022). For preschoolers, whose bodies and brains are rapidly developing, a variety of foods from different food groups is essential to meet their nutritional needs. Deficiencies in key nutrients, such as iron and zinc, can impair cognitive function and motor skills (Roberts et al., 2022). It is important that preschoolers receive a combination of protein sources, fruits, vegetables, grains, and dairy, which work together to support their growth and overall well-being (Braun et al., 2016).

The rate at which malnutrition spreads among preschoolers in Nigeria is alarming and presents a significant public health challenge, particularly concerning balanced diet intake. United Nations Children's Fund, on June 2024, declared that nearly 11 million are not eating balanced diet (Akombi-Inyang, 2024). This situation cuts across Nigeria and South-Western geopolitical zone is not left out. The study of Ogunniyi et al. (2023) confirms that 30.6% of children in the region were underweight and this is an indication of a high prevalence of malnutrition. Bakare et al. (2023) gave a situation report in Oyo State and revealed that 34.5% of children under five years were stunted. Researchers like Okike et al. (2021) also conducted a study in Ogun state and found that 28.6% of children experienced chronic malnutrition, while 11.1% were overweight. These indicate that the diets of children in this region lacks essential nutrients for optimal growth and development which therefore warrant immediate action.

The development of preschool children is a complex process and entails many aspects one of which is social skills. This is an aspect of development that involves gradual acquisition and refinement of observable behaviours that allow children to begin and sustain peer interactions in group settings (Frogner et al., 2022). Core behaviours include initiating and responding to social overtures, taking turns and sharing, cooperating in simple joint tasks, communicating needs and intentions, and resolving minor disagreements (Paz et al., 2023). These behaviours are practical and visible in children's everyday routines at home and in school. Social skills development is marked by increased and flexible use of social strategies across different contexts as the child grows (Frogner et al., 2022). Descriptions of social skills are commonly organized into domains such as communication and cooperation among others (Channell et al., 2023).

In Nigeria, more attention are laid on promoting academic performance. The primary aim of many teachers in Nigerian schools has always been to teach children to pass tests and examinations. School subjects like mathematics and English language are made compulsory and receive more instructional time on the time table. As a result, direct teaching and assessment of areas like social skills receive less focus in many early childhood settings. Social skills are important for a child's holistic development and needs to be taken into consideration. These skills are critical in the early years as they lay the foundation for future interactions at home, in school and society. Preschoolers who develop strong social skills tend to have better relationships with their peers and a more positive sense of self. These skills help children take part in classroom routines and make learning activities easier to follow.

The need to carry out this study is essential considering how important social skills development is in early childhood and the challenges posed by malnutrition among preschoolers. Black, Trude and Lutter (2020) and Osorio et al. (2024) averred that there is need for effective dietary interventions as part of an integrated life cycle approach to early childhood development. It is against this aforementioned that the researcher seeks to investigate the influence of balanced diet intake on the social skills development of preschoolers in South-Western Nigeria. This study aims to contribute valuable insights for policy and practice.

Statement of the Problem

One of goals of education is to ensure holistic development of children but this is not the case in many schools in Nigeria. The primary aim of many teachers in Nigerian schools has always been to teach children to pass tests and examinations. School subjects like mathematics and English language are made compulsory and receive more instructional time on the time table. As a result, direct teaching and assessment of skills like

social skills receive less focus in many early childhood schools in Nigeria. The implication is that children may not receive the comprehensive support necessary to reach their full potential across all developmental domains. This situation demands urgent attention, especially considering how critical early childhood period is and the risks associated with inadequate nutrition. Therefore, in order to address this specific gap in literature and contribute valuable insights for policy and practice, this study investigated the influence of balanced diet intake on the social skills development of preschoolers in South-Western Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of social skills development among preschoolers in South-Western, Nigeria?
2. What is the level of balance diet intake among preschoolers in South-Western, Nigeria?

Research Hypothesis

H_{01}: Balance diet intake does not have a significant influence on the social skills development of preschoolers in South-Western, Nigeria.

Methodology

The research design that this study adopted was descriptive correlational type. A total of 1,988,629 preschool children constitute the population of this study. A sample of 384 preschool children were selected using multistage sampling procedure. Firstly, Lagos, Oyo and Ogun states were where this study was conducted and purposive sampling technique was used to do this. This was followed by selecting local governments in each of the chosen states using a proportionate sampling and 8 LGAs were used in total. Next was to select eight preschools in each local government using simple random sampling technique. The final stage involved using simple random sampling technique to select six children from each of the chosen preschools. Preschool Children's Social skills development Rating Scale and Preschool Children's Balance Diet Intake Rating Scale were the two instruments used for data collection. Both instruments were subjected to face and content validity. Test-retest method of reliability was adopted with reliability coefficients of 0.823 and 0.855 respectively. The data collected for this study was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research questions while simple linear regression was used to test the null hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question One: What is the level of balanced diet intake among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria?

Table 1: Table showing the level of balanced diet intake among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria

S/N	Balanced Diet Intake	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	The child brings food prepared from home which contain balanced diet rather than buy from outside sources	2.75	.962	High
2.	The child eats fruits in school everyday	2.98	.627	High
3.	The child brings food rich in vitamins to school	3.14	.623	High
4.	The child brings clean water to school to drink	3.18	.580	High
5.	The child brings food rich in protein to school	2.93	.678	High
6.	The child eats a balanced diet during meal times in school	2.75	.557	High
7.	The child's food box is free from sugary snacks and drinks in school	2.89	.793	High
8.	The child is given fruit that supports immune system, such as citrus fruits, garlic in school	3.06	.678	High
9.	The child's diet that he/she brings to school includes milk that promotes healthy bone growth	2.55	.734	High
10.	The child brings food rich in fiber to school such as apples, beans, oranges etc to school	3.17	.594	High

S/N	Balanced Diet Intake	Mean	SD	Remarks
11.	The child brings food rich in fats such as avocados or nuts etc to school	2.80	.854	High
12.	The child brings meal rich in green leafy vegetables to school	3.09	.775	High
13.	The child is provided with meals that are free from unhealthy addictive	2.76	.658	High
14.	The child brings fresh fruit juices to school such as pineapple ,watermelon juices etc	3.26	.566	Very high
15.	The child consumes foods that support good eye health, like carrots or spinach in school	2.82	.880	High
	Weighted average	**2.94**	**.703**	**High**

Decision: Very Low: 1.00-1.74, Low:1.75-2.49 High: 2.50-3.24, Very High: 3.25-4.00

Table 1 shows the level of balanced diet intake among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria**.** The weighted average is 2.94 which is greater than 2.49 the base line for positive opinion. This therefore shows a numeric indicator that level of balanced diet intake among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria was high. This simply means that most children in the region are getting enough of the right kinds of food to support healthy growth.

Research Question 2: What is the level of social skills development among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria?

Table 2: Table showing the level of social skills development among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria

S/N	SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	The child plays well with other children in group activities	3.22	.530	High
2.	The child shares toys and materials willingly, with others	3.14	.667	High
3.	The child takes turns with others during play and learning activities	2.73	.565	High
4.	The child initiates conversations with peers and adults	3.07	.543	High
5.	The child listens attentively to others when they speak, showing respect and interest	2.69	.709	High
6.	The child forms close friendships with peers and enjoys spending time with them	3.20	.677	High
7.	The child manages conflict with peers in a calm and respectful manner	2.73	.616	High
8.	The child is able to apologize and make amends when he/she has upset another child	3.06	.686	High
9.	The child makes new friends easily and feels comfortable in social settings	2.58	.552	High
10.	The child engages in reciprocal conversations, taking turns while speaking and listening	2.65	.555	High
11.	The child independently greets others and, use polite expressions like "please" and "thank you"	3.01	.492	High

S/N	SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT	Mean	SD	Remarks
12.	The child adapts well to changes in group activities or new social settings	3.35	.596	Very High
13.	The child is able to follow the teacher's instructions in social interactions, like greetings or playing games with others	2.91	.811	High
14.	The child frequently invites other children to join in play activities	2.77	.777	High
15.	The child helps other children when they are in need, without being asked	2.74	.787	High
	Weighted average	**2.92**	**.637**	**High**

Decision: Very Low: 1.00-1.74, Low:1.75-2.49 High: 2.50-3.24, Very High: 3.25-4.00

Data in Table 2 displays the level of social skills development among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria**.** The weighted average is 2.92 is greater than 2.49 which is the base line for positive opinion. This means that the numeric indicator that shows the level of social skills development among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria was high.

H_{01}: Balance diet intake does not have a significant influence on the social skills development of preschoolers in South-Western, Nigeria.

Table 3: Summary of regression analysis that shows that balance diet intake does not have significant influence on social skills development of preschoolers in Southwest, Nigeria

Model	N	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F-cal.	P-value
1	384	0.040	0.002	0.001	.605	0.437

Dependent Variable: Social skill development

Source: Field Survey 2025

Data in Table 3 is a summary of the regression results of the hypothesis. Result obtained indicated that there was a negative influence of balance diet intake on social skills development (R = 0.04) while R-squared is 0.002 which means that the independent variable (balance diet) explained 00.2% variations of the dependent variable (social skills development). Thus, the result obtained is a reflection that balance diet intake does not have significant influence on social skills development of preschoolers in Southwest, Nigeria (F_{382} = .605 p = 0.437).

Table 4: Test of Significance

Model		Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	T	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Low/Bound	Up/Bound
1	(Constant)	43.006	1.224		35.149	.000	40.601	45.412
	Nutritional Intake	.022	.028	.040	.778	.437	-.034	.077

Dependent Variable: Social Skills Development

Source: Field Survey 2025

The test of significance results as presented in table 4 showed that balance diet intake does not have significant influence on social skills development of preschoolers in Southwest, Nigeria (B = .022; $t_{(382)}$ = .778, P = 0.437). It indicated that at 5% level of significance there was enough evidence that the regression equation revealed that, balance diet intake does not have significant influence on social skills development of preschoolers. This therefore was the predicate to which the null hypothesis was not rejected and a conclusion can be made that balance diet intake does not significantly influence social skills development of preschoolers in Southwest, Nigeria.

Discussion

It was revealed in the first finding of this study that the level of balanced diet intake among preschoolers in South Western, Nigeria was high. This finding is in support of that of Omachi et al. (2022), who found that nearly 59.8% of children in Niger State ate from at least five food groups each day. The finding also agrees with the study conducted by Sanusi et al. (2021), where it was reported that over 60% of pre-schoolers n Ibadan met the minimum dietary diversity in their urban and rural sample. However, this finding negates what was observed in Obasohan et al. (2024) who analysed a national health survey of under- five children across all six geopolitical zones and gave a report that only 32% met the World Health Organization's dietary diversity standard.

This study revealed that the level of preschoolers' social skills development in South- West Nigeria was high. This finding is in tandem with what was observed in Obijiofor and Ugwele (2025) where it was found that stronger teacher- child interactions, measured via the Teacher- Child Interaction Scale, were linked to higher social skills scores. This finding, on the other hand, contradicts the study of Ujah et al. (2025) wherein it was reported that only 37% of children across all zones in Nigeria met the WHO benchmarks for social development. This finding also differs from the study of Odebowale (2022) where it was revealed that children's social- skills scores remained in the "low" range even after six weeks of intervention.

It was also revealed that balanced diet intake does not have significant influence on social skills development of preschoolers in South- West Nigeria. A reason for this outcome could be that social skills depend more on daily interactions and the quality of peer and adult relationships than on preschool children's nutrient intake alone. This finding is in line with what was observed in Premand and Barry (2022) where it was found that there was no significant change in children's social scores despite measurable improvements in diet. On the other hand, this finding contradicts Hammersley et al. (2022), who studied an Australian cohort and reported that higher dietary quality at age three predicted better socio- emotional school- readiness scores at age five.

Conclusion

In light of the evidence gathered in this study, a conclusion can be made that preschoolers in South Western Nigeria exhibited high level of balanced diet intake. A conclusion that can also be made was that preschoolers in South Western Nigeria generally demonstrate high social skills development. However, it was found that balanced diet intake does not significantly influence social skills development of preschoolers in South Western Nigeria. The implications of these findings are important for the field of Early Childhood Education in South Western Nigeria. The lack of a significant relationship between balanced diet intake and social skills development suggests that other factors may be influencing this area. It highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to early childhood development that includes nutritional support and also targeted interventions aimed at enhancing social skills.

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Parents should continue to provide a varied and balanced diet at home to maintain the high level of nutritional intake observed among preschool children.
2. Parents should, however, not focus on using balanced diet as a means to improve the social skills of their children because it was revealed in this study that there was no link between them rather other factors should be considered.
3. Educators should facilitate regular cooperative play and group exercises to build on the strong social skills already evident among preschool children in Southwest Nigeria.

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