AJSSM
African Journal of Social Science and Management

African Journal of Social Science and Management
ISSN: 3141-5369
Journal homepage: www.ajssm.com

Research article

Perceived barriers to participation in physical activity among children in primary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Physical activity is essential for children's physical, psychological, social, and overall development, yet participation among primary school children may be constrained by institutional, teacher-related, and pupil-related factors. This study investigated the perceived barriers affecting children's participation in physical activities in primary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area (LGA) of Imo State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 410 primary school teachers, from which a sample of 202 teachers was determined using the Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 level of precision and selected through a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Barriers to Physical Activity Questionnaire (BPAQ). The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in Physical and Health Education and Measurement and Evaluation, while its reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding a coefficient of 0.83. Data were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation. The findings revealed that inadequate funding, inadequate support from school management, inadequate access to sports facilities and equipment, poor allocation of instructional time, and inadequate teaching spaces were major institutional barriers. The study concluded that participation in physical activities, among children in primary schools in Owerri North LGA, is constrained by interconnected institutional, teacher-related, and pupil-related factors. It recommends improved funding and provision of facilities and equipment, stronger administrative support, adequate instructional time, continuous teacher professional development, and the adoption of engaging and inclusive strategies to motivate pupils' participation in physical activities.

Keywords: Barriers, children, participation, physical activity, primary schools, teachers

Received 28 March 2026; Received in revised form 19 August 2026; Accepted 09 September 2026; Available online 05 October 2026. © 2026 Authors.
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How to cite this article: Okafor, N. P., Oyigbo, M. A., Nwakamma, J. C., and Maduka, M. A. (2026). Perceived barriers to participation in physical activity among children in primary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria. African Journal of Social Sciences and Management, 1(2): 1-9.

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity refers to any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure and contributes to the development and maintenance of physical fitness, health, and overall well-being. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including active play, recreational pursuits, organized games, sports, exercise, and other forms of movement performed in daily life. Participation in physical activity has become increasingly important in contemporary society because of its significant contributions to physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive, and social development across all stages of life, particularly during childhood. Beyond promoting healthy growth and development, physical activity also serves as a medium for social interaction, recreation, and the acquisition of life skills that positively influence individual and community well-being.

Children's participation in physical activity is widely recognized as an essential component of healthy development. During childhood, regular engagement in physical activities contributes to the development of muscular strength, cardiovascular fitness, motor skills, flexibility, coordination, and healthy body composition. It also plays an important role in preventing childhood obesity and reducing the risk of developing chronic diseases such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and certain forms of cancer later in life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Flgagi and Philips (2020) similarly observed that regular participation in physical activity promotes health and delays or prevents the occurrence of several musculoskeletal disorders, including low back pain, neck pain, and shoulder pain, while also lowering the risk of coronary heart disease and metabolic disorders.

Beyond its physical health benefits, participation in physical activity contributes significantly to children's psychological and emotional well-being. Research has shown that physically active children tend to report higher levels of happiness, self-esteem, emotional stability, and overall mental health than their less-active peers (García-Hermoso et al., 2026). Participation also enhances self-confidence, resilience, discipline, and the ability to cope with everyday challenges. Zhang et al. (2024) reported that girls who participate in physical activities develop improved self-worth through increased physical competence and a more positive body image. Likewise, Heinrich (2023) noted that participation in physical activity enables children to develop important life skills such as teamwork, honesty, self-discipline, respect for others, leadership, and effective communication, all of which contribute positively to their personal development.

Physical activity further promotes children's social and educational development. Regular participation provides opportunities for social interaction, friendship formation, cooperation, and peer acceptance while fostering a sense of belonging within the school and community. Chaput et al. (2020) observed that participation in structured physical activity programmes enables children to experience success, develop social competence, and become active contributors to their social environment. Similarly, early exposure to physical activity has been found to encourage lifelong participation in sports and other physically active lifestyles (Kirt et al., 2022). Janssen and LeBlanc (2017) further reported that physically active children often demonstrate improved academic

performance, better concentration, enhanced classroom behaviour, and greater school engagement than children who are physically inactive.

Recognizing these numerous benefits, several international organizations have developed recommendations aimed at encouraging regular physical activity among children. The World Health Organization (2022) recommends that children and adolescents aged 5 – 17 years should accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, including vigorous-intensity and muscle- and bone-strengthening activities on at least three days each week. Similar recommendations have been made by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2025), emphasizing that regular physical activity is fundamental to healthy growth and development.

Despite these recommendations and the well-established benefits of physical activity, participation among children remains below the recommended levels in many countries. Global evidence indicates that a substantial proportion of children and adolescents are insufficiently active. Guthold et al. (2012) estimated that approximately 80% of adolescents worldwide do not achieve the recommended levels of daily physical activity. More recent reports continue to indicate a decline in children's participation in physical activities across many regions of the world, with noticeable differences according to age, gender, and socioeconomic background (Riddoch et al., 2024; WHO, 2022). These trends have become a major public health concern because inadequate physical activity during childhood may adversely affect health, educational attainment, and quality of life throughout adulthood.

The persistence of low participation rates suggests that many children encounter challenges that limit or discourage their involvement in physical activity. Previous studies conducted in different countries have associated children's participation with several environmental, personal, family, school-related, and socio-cultural factors. However, the nature and influence of these factors differ considerably across societies because of variations in educational systems, community infrastructure, cultural practices, parental attitudes, safety conditions, and the availability of recreational facilities. Consequently, findings obtained in one geographical setting cannot automatically be generalized to another.

In Nigeria, concerns have continued to grow regarding the declining participation of children in physical activities as a result of changing lifestyles, increased academic demands, rapid urbanization, inadequate recreational facilities, excessive screen time, and limited opportunities for active play. Although some Nigerian studies have examined factors influencing children's physical activity, empirical evidence remains limited, particularly within many local government areas where environmental and socio-cultural conditions may differ significantly. Specifically, there is limited empirical information regarding the perceived barriers that hinder children's participation in physical activities in Owerri North Local Government Area of Imo State. This lack of localized evidence makes it difficult for educators, school administrators, policymakers, and health professionals to develop interventions that effectively address the unique challenges experienced by children within the area.

Teachers occupy a strategic position in promoting children's participation in physical activity because they interact with pupils regularly, supervise school-based physical activities, and observe children's behaviour within the school environment. Their experiences and professional judgments

provide valuable insights into the factors that may encourage or hinder children's participation in physical activities. Understanding teachers' perceptions is therefore essential for developing evidence-based strategies that can improve children's participation in physical activity within schools and the wider community.

It is against this background that the present study seeks to examine the perceived barriers to participation in physical activities for children in Owerri North Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. The findings of the study are expected to provide empirical evidence that will assist educational authorities, school administrators, parents, community leaders, and policymakers in designing appropriate interventions aimed at promoting regular participation in physical activities among children.

RESEARCH METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised 410 teachers in public primary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area of Imo State. The population figure was obtained from records of the Imo State Universal Basic Education Board (IMSUBEB). The sample size for the study was determined using the Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 level of precision. A multistage sampling technique was used to select the respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Barriers to Physical Activity Questionnaire (BPAQ). The questionnaire was designed to obtain teachers' perceptions of the factors that may hinder children's participation in physical activities in primary schools. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in Physical and Health Education and Measurement and Evaluation. The experts examined the questionnaire items for clarity, relevance, appropriateness, adequacy, and consistency with the purpose and research questions of the study. Their observations and recommendations were incorporated into the final version of the instrument before administration. The reliability of the Barriers to Physical Activity Questionnaire (BPAQ) was established through a pilot test involving teachers who were not comprised in the main study. The responses obtained from the pilot administration were analysed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. The analysis yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.83 indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency and supporting the suitability of the instrument for the main study. The researcher administered the questionnaires to the selected teachers with the assistance of trained research assistants where necessary. The data obtained from the completed questionnaires were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation.

RESULT PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Perceived barriers affecting the provision of facilities for physical activities among children in primary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area

Table 1 shows that several factors were perceived as barriers to the provision of physical activity programmes for primary school pupils. Prominent among these factors are funding and support from the school management.

Table 1. Perceived barriers to the provision of physical activity programmes among primary school pupils

S/N	Barriers	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Access to facilities and equipment	2.99	1.229	High
2	Access to suitable teaching spaces	2.77	1.277	High
3	Timetabling	2.84	1.244	High
4	Support from school management	3.05	1.190	High
5	Funding	3.28	1.127	High
	Cluster Mean	2.99		High

Barriers to children's participation in physical activity in Owerri North Local Government Area

On the other hand, Figure 1 reveals several barriers affecting the participation of primary school children in physical activity programmes in schools. These barriers include difficulties in engaging students in physical activities, curriculum-related challenges, inadequate facilities, students' low level of interest in Physical Education, and the failure of some schools to prioritize physical education programmes.

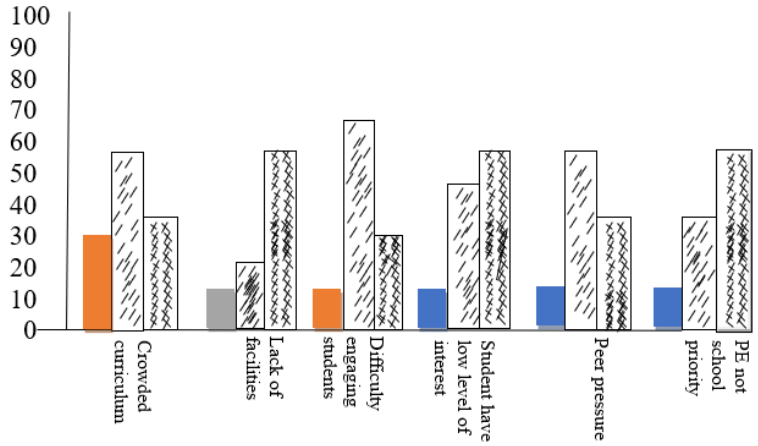


Figure 1. Teachers perceived barriers to pupils accessing physical activities in schools

The analyses show that institutional factors constituted important barriers to the provision of facilities for physical activities among children in primary schools, with a cluster mean of 2.99. Inadequate funding was the most prominent barrier ($\bar{x}$ = 3.28), followed by limited support from school management ($\bar{x}$ = 3.05), inadequate facilities and equipment ($\bar{x}$ = 2.99), poor allocation of instructional time ($\bar{x}$ = 2.84), and inadequate teaching spaces ($\bar{x}$ = 2.77). This finding suggests that the availability of financial, material, and administrative support is central to effective school-based physical activity provision. The finding agrees with Türkmen and Varol (2023), whose systematic review identified inadequate facilities, resources, and institutional support as recurring barriers to the implementation of school physical activity programmes. Similarly, van Sluijs et al. (2021) reported that school-level conditions, including limited opportunities and competing demands, can constrain physical activity among children and adolescents. The consistency of these findings indicates that improving participation requires attention not only to pupils but also to the institutional environment in which physical activity is delivered.

The prominence of inadequate funding in the present study is particularly important because financial limitations can affect the procurement and maintenance of equipment, development of activity spaces, and sustainability of physical activity programmes. The finding that school management support was also highly rated reinforces the importance of administrative commitment. Storey et al. (2016), in an empirical evaluation of comprehensive school health implementation, found that organizational conditions and school-level support were important to achieving changes in school practices and health-related behaviours. Thus, provision of resources without corresponding administrative commitment may not be sufficient to create sustained opportunities for pupils' participation.

In addition, the result shows that teacher-related factors constituted important barriers to the participation of children in physical activity. Difficulty engaging pupils, an overcrowded curriculum, insufficient instructional time, inadequate teacher preparation, and heavy workload were identified as major concerns, with difficulty engaging pupils receiving the highest rating. This finding is consistent with Jenkin and Benson (2020) who reported that teachers' knowledge, school conditions, and policy implementation influence the delivery of physical activity and physical education programmes. Similarly, Dyson et al. (2020) found that teachers' experiences of delivering physical activity were influenced by the practical conditions within schools and the demands placed on teachers. These empirical findings suggest that teacher capacity and working conditions are important components of effective physical activity provision.

The finding relating to an overcrowded curriculum and insufficient instructional time is also noteworthy. When schools prioritize competing academic demands, physical education and physical activity may receive reduced attention. Brock et al. (2020) similarly identified the difficulty of sustaining instructional physical activity programmes within competing institutional demands. This implies that improving children's participation requires schools to recognize physical activity as an integral component of pupils' development rather than an activity that can easily be displaced by other subjects.

The result further revealed that pupil-related factors constituted barriers to participation, particularly low interest in physical activities, peer pressure, unwillingness to participate, negative attitudes towards Physical Education, and difficulty motivating pupils. Low interest recorded the highest rating among these factors. This finding is supported by Guthold et al. (2020) whose large pooled analysis showed high levels of insufficient physical activity among adolescents globally, indicating the persistence of participation challenges during the school years. Similarly, Heinrich (2023) found that psychological factors such as self-efficacy are associated with physical activity participation, suggesting that pupils' motivation and confidence may influence their willingness to engage in physical activity.

The finding on peer pressure further indicates that participation is influenced by pupils' social environment. Children's decisions to participate may be shaped by their relationships with classmates and perceptions of acceptance. This supports the broader evidence presented by van Sluijs et al. (2021) that physical activity behaviour during adolescence is influenced by multiple individual and environmental factors. Consequently, strategies for improving participation should create supportive and inclusive environments in which pupils feel encouraged to participate regardless of differences in ability or interest.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that barriers to children's participation in physical activities are multidimensional, involving institutional conditions, teacher-related challenges, and pupil-related factors. Improving funding, facilities, equipment, teaching time, and administrative support should be accompanied by teachers' development and the use of engaging, inclusive strategies that respond to pupils' interests and motivation. A coordinated approach involving school administrators, teachers, education authorities, and other relevant stakeholders is therefore more likely to produce sustainable improvements in children's participation in physical activities.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that children's participation in physical activities in primary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area is constrained by institutional, teacher-related, and pupil-related barriers. Institutional barriers, particularly inadequate funding, limited management support, inadequate facilities and equipment, and insufficient instructional time, were prominent. Teacher-related barriers included difficulty engaging pupils, curriculum demands, and inadequate instructional support, while pupil-related barriers included low interest, peer influence, and unwillingness to participate. These findings indicate that improving children's participation requires coordinated attention to school resources and administrative support, teachers' capacity and instructional conditions, and pupils' motivation and engagement.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

i. Education authorities and school administrators should improve funding and provide adequate sports facilities, equipment, suitable activity spaces, and sufficient instructional time to create better opportunities for children's participation in physical activities.

ii. School administrators should support teachers through regular professional development and adequate instructional support, particularly in the use of engaging and inclusive strategies for motivating and involving pupils in physical activities.

iii. Teachers and school authorities should adopt child-centred and enjoyable physical activity programmes that address pupils' interests, motivation, and peer-related concerns, thereby encouraging regular and active participation.

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