



Early childhood care, development and education in Nigeria: foundations for quality and sustainable learning

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) provides the essential foundation for lifelong learning, human capital formation, and sustainable national development. This paper examines the state of ECCDE in Nigeria within the context of rethinking quality education to ensure innovation, inclusion, and sustainability. Drawing on recent empirical studies and policy documents from 2019 to 2025, the paper analyses the gap between Nigeria's progressive policy framework for ECCDE and the reality of implementation on the ground. Key challenges identified include inadequate funding, insufficient teacher preparation, poor infrastructure, limited access in rural and underserved communities, and weak monitoring mechanisms. The paper also highlights emerging opportunities, including the EdoBEST early childhood education initiative, community-based interventions, and new policy directions under the 2020 National Minimum Standards for ECCE. The paper concludes that meaningful progress requires a multi-sectoral approach involving increased budgetary allocation, enhanced teacher education, community engagement, and stronger accountability mechanisms. Recommendations are offered for policymakers, educators, and development partners committed to building a resilient and inclusive early childhood education system in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

We still remember our first visit to a community-based early childhood centre in a rural village in Oyo State in 2023. The children sat on bare floors, their only learning materials being discarded bottle tops and sticks collected from the compound. The teacher, a young woman with no formal training in early childhood education, did her best with songs and storytelling. Watching her, we could see the genuine love and care she had for those children, yet we also could not escape the painful realization that the system had failed these young ones even before their education had properly begun.

This experience is not unique. Across Nigeria, millions of children begin their educational journey in environments ill-equipped to support their development. The earliest years of a child's life are widely acknowledged as the most critical for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Ogunleye (2022), Adekunle and Okafor (2023) have convincingly demonstrated that the foundations for lifelong learning, health, and productivity are laid during early childhood. During this period, the brain develops more rapidly than at any other stage of life (Eze & Nwachukwu, 2021). Okonkwo (2023, p. 92) puts it succinctly: "Investment in early childhood education is not merely a social service; it is an economic imperative with returns that exceed most other forms of public investment."

In Nigeria, the importance of early childhood education is formally recognized in the National Policy on Education, which describes ECCDE as the education given to children aged 0 to 5 years (Federal Ministry of Education, 2014). The Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 further integrated one year of pre-primary education into the basic education framework. On paper, Nigeria has what appears to be a progressive policy environment.

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Yet the gap between policy and practice is vast. The 2024 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey reveals that only 38% of children aged 3 to 4 years are enrolled in any form of organized early childhood education programme (NPC & ICF, 2024). While the South-South records participation rates as high as 96%, some northern states report rates below 5%. UNICEF (2024) has highlighted that Nigeria accounts for a significant proportion of the global out-of-school children population. As Adebayo and Ibrahim (2022, p. 84) observe, "Children who do not receive appropriate early stimulation and education are significantly more likely to struggle with school readiness, perform poorly in primary school, and eventually drop out."

Some might argue that Nigeria faces more pressing educational challenges than early childhood education. While we do not dismiss these concerns, we contend that addressing early childhood education is precisely the most effective way to prevent children from dropping out later. A child who enters primary school with a solid foundation is far more likely to succeed and persist in education than one who does not. We argue in this paper that rethinking quality education in Nigeria must begin with a renewed commitment to early childhood care, development and education. The paper examines the current state of ECCDE in Nigeria, analyzes key challenges and opportunities, and proposes evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the system.

The Policy Landscape for ECCDE in Nigeria

The picture that emerges is one of progressive aspirations undermined by weak implementation. The National Policy on Education (NPE) is the primary policy document governing education in Nigeria. The most recent edition (2014) includes a dedicated section on early childhood education, with objectives including facilitating a smooth transition from home to school and preparing children for primary education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2014). While the NPE provides a progressive vision, Adebayo and Ibrahim (2022) have criticized it for lacking specificity on implementation mechanisms, funding provisions, and accountability frameworks. We share this concern.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 integrated one year of pre-primary education into the basic education framework, stipulating that every public primary school shall establish a pre-primary section (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). In practice, however, many states have not complied, particularly in rural areas (Okafor, 2022). Furthermore, the UBE funding formula has historically favored primary and junior secondary education over pre-primary provision (Adekunle & Okafor, 2023).

In 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education developed the National Minimum Standards for Early Childhood Education, providing detailed guidance on infrastructure, teacher qualifications, curriculum, and health standards (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). As Nwachukwu (2020) observes, having clear standards is a prerequisite for quality assurance. However, as of 2025, compliance remains voluntary and poorly monitored. The Education Sector Policy Review (2022) reaffirmed the government's commitment to expanding access to quality ECCDE, but progress on implementation has been limited (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).

Challenges Confronting ECCDE in Nigeria

The following constitute some of the challenges confronting ECCDE in Nigeria.

The Funding Question

One of the most significant challenges is inadequate funding. Nigeria allocates approximately 7% of its national budget to education, below the 15–20% recommended by UNESCO (Okonkwo, 2023). State governments spend less than 1% of their education budgets on pre-primary education (Adekunle & Okafor, 2023). An estimated 60% of ECCDE centres are privately operated, many unregulated and of poor quality (Okafor, 2022). Children from poorer households are less likely to have access to any form of organized early childhood programme (World Bank, 2023).

The Teacher Challenge

Less than 30% of teachers in ECCDE centres hold any formal qualification in early childhood education (Nwachukwu, 2020). Many teacher education programmes provide limited coverage of early childhood pedagogy and inclusive practices (Eze & Nwachukwu, 2021). Fewer than 10% of ECCDE teachers participate in any form of continuing education (Ogunleye, 2022). Low salaries and poor working conditions discourage talented individuals from entering the profession (Okonkwo, 2023).

Infrastructure Gaps

Many ECCDE centres operate in dilapidated buildings with insufficient space and inadequate sanitation facilities (Adekunle & Okafor, 2023). Okafor (2022) reported that many centres lack basic materials such as toys, blocks, art supplies, and books. Children are often engaged in passive activities rather than active, exploratory learning. The absence of adequate WHO, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities is a particular concern (UNICEF, 2024).

Access and Equity

The 2024 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey reveals stark disparities (NPC & ICF, 2024): national enrollment is 38%, with the South-South at 96% and some northern states below 5%. Children from the wealthiest quintile are more than three times as likely to attend pre-primary education as those from the poorest quintile (World Bank, 2023). Gender disparities are also evident in northern Nigeria, and children with disabilities remain largely excluded (UNICEF, 2024; Okafor, 2022).

Implementation Gaps

Many states have not developed the regulations needed to translate national policies into action. Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak, with no comprehensive system for collecting data on enrollment, teacher qualifications, or learning outcomes (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). Coordination across ministries is limited, and weak enforcement contributes to the proliferation of substandard centres (Eze & Nwachukwu, 2021; Okonkwo, 2023).

Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers

In some communities, particularly in the north, there is skepticism about formal education, and parents may prefer Qur'anic schools (Ogunleye, 2022). Poverty is a major barrier, as hidden costs may be beyond the reach of poor families (Adekunle & Okafor, 2023). Insecurity from armed conflict has disrupted education in parts of Nigeria also (UNICEF, 2024).

Opportunities and Emerging Innovations

There are of course opportunities to make the most out of well-structured early child education in Nigeria, made possible by some emerging innovations.

The EdoBEST Experience

The Edo Basic Education Sector Transformation (EdoBEST) programme is one of the most innovative early childhood education initiatives in Nigeria. Key features include a standardized, play-based curriculum; structured lesson plans; intensive teacher training and coaching; use of technology for support and monitoring; and community engagement (Edo State Government, 2023). By 2024, enrollment in early childhood education in Edo State increased by over 40%, with significant gains in literacy and numeracy skills (Edo State Government, 2024). The EdoBEST model is being adapted in other states.

Community-Based Programmes

Community-based programmes are important for reaching children in underserved areas. The UNICEF-supported community-based ECCDE programme in selected northern states has established hundreds of community centres and trained local facilitators (UNICEF, 2024). Success factors include active community participation, integration of health and nutrition services, and collaboration with traditional and religious leaders (Okonkwo, 2023).

Technology-Enhanced ECCDE

Mobile learning platforms provide teachers with access to lesson plans and professional development content (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). Radio and TV programmes delivered early learning content during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adekunle & Okafor, 2023). Digital systems support real-time monitoring of teaching and learning. However, technology should complement, not replace, face-to-face teaching and play-based learning (Okafor, 2022).

Policy Developments and Partnerships

The 2020 National Minimum Standards provide a comprehensive quality framework (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). The ongoing development of a National ECCDE Policy aims to provide a more coherent framework (UNICEF, 2024). Development partners, including UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education, provide technical assistance and funding (Global Partnership for Education, 2023).

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper leaves little room for doubt: Nigeria's early childhood education system is in crisis. Yet we are not without hope. The EdoBEST programme demonstrates that significant improvements are achievable. The UNICEF-supported community-based programmes show that local communities can become powerful partners in delivering early childhood education. What is needed now is not another policy document, but sustained political commitment, increased public investment, and a collective recognition that our children's earliest years are too precious to waste. Every child who sits on a bare floor without learning materials is a reminder of our collective failure. Every child who enters primary school without school readiness represents a lost opportunity. In my years of observing Nigerian education, we have seen too many bright children lose their spark because their early years were neglected. We have also seen communities transform when given the resources and support to educate their young children. The choice before us is clear. We can continue to neglect the earliest years and pay the price in lost human potential, or we can invest wisely and build a foundation for prosperity, equity, and sustainable development. We urge all stakeholders to prioritize early childhood education as a fundamental right and a strategic investment. Nigeria's future prosperity depends on the foundations we build today in our young children. The time for rhetoric is over; the time for decisive action is now.

Recommendations

1. Federal and state governments should allocate at least 5% of education budgets to ECCDE.
2. Teacher education programmes should include more practical content and supervised practicum. Minimum qualification requirements should be established and enforced.
3. Public ECCDE provision should be expanded in rural and underserved communities.
4. National Minimum Standards should be operationalized through state-level regulations and inspections.
5. A national ECCDE coordinating body should be established to promote nutrition and social welfare.

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