

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE EDUCATIONAL ADVANCEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a crucial foundation for sustainable educational development, particularly in Nigeria, where access to quality early learning remains unequal. ECE encompasses both formal and informal programs that foster children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth from birth to age eight. It plays a vital role in addressing educational disparities and building human capital. This study highlights the strategic importance of ECE, linking access to improved long-term outcomes, such as literacy, school readiness, and reduced grade repetition. Urban areas tend to have better ECE implementation compared to rural regions. The paper emphasises the significance of early learning windows; critical periods of brain development when educational input has the greatest impact. Utilising these windows effectively helps children succeed in school and decreases dropout rates. The study advocates for increased investment and community-based approaches to expand and improve ECE across Nigeria, ensuring equitable and sustainable progress in the education sector.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, educational development, literacy proficiency, school readiness, educational disparities

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is widely recognised as the cornerstone of lifelong learning and national development. Globally, robust ECE systems have been linked to improved cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes, higher literacy levels, reduced school dropout rates, and long-term economic benefits (Heckman, 2011; OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2021). However, many developing countries, including Nigeria, continue to struggle with providing equitable and high-quality early learning opportunities due to systemic challenges such as limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven policy implementation (World Bank, 2020).

In Nigeria, ECE is acknowledged in national policies as a crucial phase in the educational continuum, yet its implementation remains inconsistent across regions (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2021). Delivery is fragmented because it is offered through a mix of formal pre-primary schools, community centres, and home-based programs, with significant variations in quality and accessibility (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019). While urban areas tend to benefit from better-resourced ECE services, rural and marginalised communities often face serious barriers, including a lack of trained teachers and poor facilities (NPC & ICF, 2019). These disparities reinforce existing educational inequalities and hinder the country's progress toward inclusive and sustainable development goals (UNESCO, 2021).

The early years of a child's life are marked by rapid brain development, during which educational experiences shape critical skills such as language, self-regulation, and social interaction (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). High-quality ECE contributes to school readiness, boosts literacy and numeracy, reduces grade repetition, and fosters adaptability skills vital in a dynamic global environment (UNICEF, 2019). For Nigeria, with its growing youth population and ambitious development targets, strengthening ECE is key to cultivating a skilled, resilient, and competitive future workforce.

Despite these well-documented benefits, Nigeria ECE sector is beset by multiple challenges. Socioeconomic inequality, geographic disparities, underinvestment, and weak enforcement of education policy continue to

prevent many children, particularly in underserved communities, from accessing quality early learning (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019; World Bank, 2020). This paper explores how ECE can serve as a veritable tool for sustainable educational advancement in Nigeria. It examines the sector's current state, identifies barriers to effective implementation, and proposes strategic interventions, emphasising investment, systemic reform, and community engagement to enhance early learning outcomes and drive national development.

Conceptual Review

Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to a broad range of educational programs and strategies geared toward children from birth to approximately eight years of age, a critical period for cognitive, emotional, and social development (UNESCO, 2021). ECE encompasses both formal and informal settings. Formal ECE programs include structured environments such as nursery schools, kindergartens, and pre-primary classrooms that follow a curriculum aimed at school readiness. Informal ECE, on the other hand, often occurs in homes, community centres, religious institutions, or through parent-led initiatives, providing learning opportunities that may not follow a rigid curriculum but still foster essential developmental skills (UNICEF, 2019).

In Nigeria in 2013, ECE was formally recognised in the National Policy on Education (2013) as the foundation stage, preparing children for primary education and life-long learning (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2021). However, the reality on the ground is varied. In urban areas, formal ECE centres are more prevalent and often better resourced, whereas rural communities frequently rely on informal, community-driven efforts with limited external support (NPC & ICF, 2019). For ECE to serve as a veritable tool for sustainable educational advancement, a harmonised framework that values both formal and informal approaches is essential, recognising the diverse contexts in which Nigerian children grow and learn.

ECE and Human Capital

Human capital, which is the collective skills, knowledge, and abilities of a population, is fundamental to national development and economic progress. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a foundational investment in human capital formation, setting the stage for future learning, workforce productivity, and societal well-being. Research underscores that cognitive and non-cognitive skills acquired in early childhood are critical predictors of later life outcomes, including educational attainment, employment, health, and civic engagement (Heckman, 2011). ECE programmes enhance not only intellectual capabilities but also foster socio-emotional skills such as perseverance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal communication, which are indispensable for 21st-century economies (OECD, 2017).

In the Nigerian context, where youth unemployment and underemployment rates remain high (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020), building a skilled and adaptable workforce from the earliest stages of life is a strategic imperative. By expanding access to quality ECE, Nigeria can cultivate a generation equipped with the competencies necessary to drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusive growth. Investments made during early childhood yield higher returns compared to later educational investments, offering a cost-effective strategy to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and underdevelopment (World Bank, 2020).

Impact of Early Childhood Education on Long-Term Literacy Proficiency

Literacy, the cornerstone of education, begins developing in early childhood through exposure to language-rich environments. Studies have shown that children who attend quality ECE programs demonstrate stronger pre-literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and narrative skills (UNESCO, 2021). These early literacy competencies are predictive of later reading fluency and comprehension abilities, which in turn affect academic performance across subjects. In Nigeria, where national assessments have highlighted significant deficiencies in reading proficiency among primary school students (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC], 2020), strengthening ECE can be a powerful intervention to address foundational literacy gaps before formal schooling even begins.

Impact of Early Childhood Education on School Readiness

School readiness encompasses a child's preparedness across multiple domains (cognitive, physical, social, and emotional) to succeed in a structured school environment. Quality ECE ensures that children enter primary school not only with academic skills but also with the emotional maturity and social competence needed to thrive (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019). Evidence suggests that children who participate in organised ECE are more likely to display behaviours conducive to learning, such as attentiveness, persistence, and cooperative interaction (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For Nigeria, improving school readiness through expanded ECE provision could reduce the high rates of early grade failure and learning poverty that currently undermine the effectiveness of the education system.

Impact of Early Childhood Education on Reduced Grade Repetition

Grade repetition is both a symptom and a cause of inefficiency in education systems. Repeating a grade often leads to increased educational costs, heightened risks of dropout, and diminished student motivation (World Bank, 2020). ECE programs that lay strong cognitive and socio-emotional foundations significantly lower the probability of children repeating grades. According to global meta-analyses, participation in quality preschool programs reduces grade repetition rates by up to 15% (OECD, 2017). In Nigeria, where educational wastage is a serious concern, scaling up ECE could serve as a preventive mechanism, ensuring that children progress through school on time and with competence.

Impact of Early Childhood Education on Decreased Dropout Rates

High dropout rates in Nigeria's education sector, particularly after early primary grades, pose a major barrier to achieving universal basic education (UNESCO, 2021). Dropping out often reflects a cumulative failure of early educational experiences, where children fall behind academically, disengage, and eventually exit the system. By contrast, ECE prepares children to meet the demands of formal schooling, increasing their resilience and engagement over time (United Nations, 2015). Longitudinal studies reveal that children who attend early learning programs are not only more likely to complete primary school but also have higher transition rates to secondary and tertiary education (Heckman, 2011; UNICEF, 2019). For Nigeria, this implies that investments in ECE are investments in longer educational trajectories, culminating in a better-educated populace capable of driving sustainable national development.

In summary, ECE is not merely the first step in the educational continuum; it is the foundational platform upon which sustainable educational advancement is built. Prioritising ECE expansion, quality improvement, and equitable access in Nigeria offers a transformative strategy to uplift individual lives, strengthen human capital, and propel the country toward inclusive and sustainable development goals.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical linkage between early learning and lifelong success is well-documented in educational and economic literature. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) emphasises that child development is influenced by multiple environmental systems (home, school, community) interacting with each other. ECE provides a structured system that can positively mediate these interactions, particularly when children are exposed to enriching, inclusive, and stimulating environments.

Furthermore, James Heckman's Human Capital Theory (Heckman, 2011) asserts that skills acquired early become the foundation upon which later skills are built, creating a dynamic of cumulative advantage. This perspective aligns with findings that children who attend quality ECE programs perform better academically, are more likely to complete secondary and tertiary education, and enjoy better employment prospects in adulthood (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

For Nigeria, embedding early childhood education firmly within the educational policy framework can yield transformative dividends. It can lead to a more literate, adaptable, and innovative workforce capable of advancing national goals such as economic diversification, technological innovation, and global competitiveness (United Nations, 2015).

In conclusion, ECE must be viewed not simply as a preliminary educational stage but as the critical cornerstone of sustainable national development. Strengthening the conceptual understanding and practical execution of

ECE in Nigeria offers a future where all children, regardless of background, can realize their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

Review of Related Studies

Several Nigerian initiatives offer practical illustrations of the strategic importance of early learning windows. The Lagos State Universal Basic Education Board (LSUBEB), for example, has implemented ECE programs focusing on developing early literacy and numeracy skills through interactive and child-centred methodologies. Evaluations revealed that children who attended Lagos State ECE centres were significantly more prepared for primary school compared to those who did not, with higher basic literacy and math competencies (World Bank, 2020).

Similarly, community-driven programs in northern Nigeria, such as the Northern Education Initiative Plus (NEI+) supported by USAID, have integrated ECE into broader educational reform efforts. These programs emphasise mother-tongue instruction, culturally relevant curricula, and parental engagement, key elements that enhance learning during early critical periods. In Bauchi and Sokoto states, NEI+ interventions have led to a 20% improvement in school readiness scores over a three-year period (USAID, 2020).

However, these promising models remain localised. Nationwide scaling, equitable financing, rigorous teacher training, and culturally adaptable curricula are urgently needed to replicate success stories across Nigeria's diverse regions. A forward-thinking policy approach would emphasise early learning not merely as an educational strategy, but as a national economic and social development priority.

Challenges Hindering Effective ECE Implementation

Infrastructural Deficits

One of the major impediments to effective ECE delivery in Nigeria is the widespread lack of suitable infrastructure. Many early childhood centres, especially in rural areas, operate without basic facilities such as safe classrooms, child-friendly furniture, sanitation amenities, or learning materials (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019). Inadequate physical environments undermine children's safety, comfort, and ability to engage in meaningful learning activities (World Bank, 2020). Without purpose-built, stimulating spaces designed for young learners, efforts to provide quality ECE are severely compromised, leading to suboptimal developmental outcomes.

Teacher Training and Professional Development Gaps

A significant gap exists in the availability of trained early childhood educators. Many caregivers lack formal qualifications in early childhood pedagogy, resulting in the reliance on unskilled labour that does not fully understand child development principles (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). Furthermore, ongoing professional development opportunities are rare, and where they exist, they often do not align with global best practices in child-centred learning and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021). Poorly trained teachers struggle to deliver curricula effectively, especially when it comes to fostering critical skills like problem-solving, emotional regulation, and creativity during sensitive early developmental windows.

Funding Limitations

Public investment in ECE in Nigeria remains exceedingly low, both in absolute terms and relative to the primary and secondary education sectors. Budgetary allocations to ECE programs often do not reach the levels necessary to support infrastructure development, resource procurement, teacher training, or comprehensive program monitoring and evaluation (World Bank, 2020). Reliance on private provision has partially filled the gap, but it has also deepened inequalities in access and quality between socio-economic groups (UNICEF, 2019). Without substantial and consistent financial commitments from federal, state, and local governments, the expansion and improvement of ECE will remain sluggish.

Sociocultural Barriers and Parental Involvement Issues

Deep-seated sociocultural norms also pose challenges to ECE development. In some regions, early childhood education is undervalued, with parents prioritising children's contributions to household labour or informal

apprenticeships over formal early learning (UNESCO, 2021). Misconceptions about the purpose of ECE, that it is merely "babysitting" rather than foundational education, persist in many communities. Furthermore, parental engagement, a cornerstone of successful ECE, is often low, particularly among low-income and rural populations, where parents may themselves have limited educational backgrounds. Strengthening community understanding of the lifelong benefits of ECE is essential to overcome these cultural and informational barriers.

Suggestions

Calls for Increased Government and Donor Funding

To realize the transformative potential of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria, a significant increase in financial investment is essential. The federal and state governments must prioritise ECE funding as a distinct and critical component of national education budgets. Current allocations to ECE are insufficient to meet demand, perpetuating disparities in access and quality (World Bank, 2020). Targeted fiscal policies should guarantee dedicated funding streams for infrastructure development, teacher recruitment and training, curriculum enhancement, and program evaluation. Furthermore, partnerships with international development agencies, philanthropic organisations, and private sector stakeholders should be formalised through strategic frameworks that ensure transparency, equity, and accountability (UNESCO, 2021). Innovative financing models such as public-private partnerships and results-based financing can also mobilise additional resources to catalyse ECE expansion and sustainability.

Framework for Equitable ECE Expansion in Rural and Marginalised Areas

A national framework for ECE expansion must prioritise equity by specifically targeting rural, remote, and marginalised communities. These regions, which house a large proportion of Nigeria's children, are currently underserved and at risk of being left further behind (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019). Policymakers should implement localised solutions, such as mobile ECE centres, community-based early learning programs, and mother-tongue instructional models that respect cultural and linguistic diversity. Infrastructure projects must prioritise accessible design standards, including safe sanitation, disability access, and age-appropriate learning spaces. Additionally, incentives such as rural hardship allowances and professional development scholarships should be provided to encourage trained ECE professionals to serve in underprivileged areas.

Strategic Capacity Building for ECE Workforce

The effectiveness of ECE systems is largely contingent on the quality and preparedness of its workforce. Strategic investments in pre-service and in-service training for early childhood educators must be a policy priority. Teacher education curricula should integrate contemporary research on child development, inclusive education, trauma-informed practices, and technology integration (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). Establishing national standards for ECE teacher certification, coupled with ongoing professional development programs, would ensure that educators remain competent, motivated, and adaptable to evolving pedagogical innovations. Furthermore, creating career pathways and recognition systems for ECE professionals can enhance workforce stability and attract high-calibre individuals into the field.

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms for ECE Programmes

Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are indispensable for ensuring the continuous improvement of ECE programs. The Nigerian government must establish standardised indicators for assessing access, quality, learning outcomes, and equity across ECE settings (World Bank, 2020). Real-time data collection mechanisms supported by technology should inform evidence-based decision-making at local, state, and national levels. Independent audits, longitudinal studies tracking child development outcomes, and community feedback loops should be integrated into M&E frameworks to ensure transparency and responsiveness. Building national capacity for research and evaluation in ECE will also empower Nigeria to participate more fully in global knowledge exchanges and benchmark its progress against international standards.

Conclusion

Early Childhood Education is not merely a foundational phase of individual learning; it is a strategic lever for national transformation. In the context of Nigeria's ambition to achieve inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for all, ECE emerges as a critical determinant of long-term educational and socio-economic success. Scientific evidence and global best practices unequivocally demonstrate that investments made during early childhood yield the highest returns in terms of cognitive development, social cohesion, human capital formation, and poverty reduction (Heckman, 2011; UNESCO, 2021).

Looking forward, Nigeria must reimagine its education system as a resilient ecosystem rooted firmly in strong early learning foundations. Achieving this vision requires bold policy reforms, substantial investments, innovative delivery models, and a societal shift that fully values the early years as the bedrock of national development. By systematically expanding access to high-quality ECE, particularly for disadvantaged populations, Nigeria can close educational inequities, nurture a generation of critical thinkers and innovators, and drive sustainable economic growth.

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement, demographic shifts, and global interdependence, Nigeria's competitiveness will hinge on the human capital it cultivates today. A nation that invests wisely in its youngest citizens invests in its most promising future. Thus, the call to action is clear: to build a sustainable, inclusive, and prosperous Nigeria, Early Childhood Education must be elevated from a peripheral concern to a central pillar of national policy and practice.

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