

Scaling Up Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: Stakeholders' Role Through Policy and Expedient Curriculum for Expected Outcomes

Emenike, John Afamefuna

*Federal University of Education,
Kontagora, Niger State, Nigeria
Email: emenyke2@yahoo.com*

Abstract

This paper examines the critical importance of early childhood education as the foundation of the educational system in Nigeria and the role that stakeholders play in scaling up quality, standard and accessibility of this level of education via policy and curriculum. Through an examination of existing policies, curriculum frameworks, and the roles of various stakeholders, this paper shed light on potential strategies to scale up early childhood education in Nigeria. Through different range of literature reviews and research findings, the paper explores the challenges and opportunities confronting early childhood education in Nigeria, offering recommendations for policy improvements, provision of expedient curriculum that is in tandem with holistic nature of children learning and collaborative efforts among stakeholders to promote quality education of children at the early years.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Stakeholders role, Policy, curriculum, outcomes.

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*Corresponding author: emenyke2@yahoo.com

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INTRODUCTION

Education is an indispensable instrument for individual and national development. No nation can rise above its education level. This conforms to the Latin adage: “Nemo dat quod non habet” meaning no one gives what he has not. This implies no country can progress beyond its educational standards. Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014) in the National Policy of Education recognizes education as an instrument ‘par excellence’ for affecting individual and national development. At its different levels, formal education consists of different levels starting with early childhood education, primary education, secondary education and tertiary education.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) encompasses essential programmes and activities that are critical to children's holistic development, academic success and future achievements. It's not only a starting point of the Nigerian Educational System, but also the foundation pillar for holistic development and an indispensable bridge of the transition from home to primary school. Succinctly, Centre on the Developing Child (2024) attests that early Childhood education provides the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, strong communities, and successful parenting of the next generation. The rationale for the programme is from the view that children within this age are not mature enough to learn complex task or skills that are required of them in primary school. This level forms the foundation for a child's future learning experiences.

Considering the current status of early childhood education in Nigeria discloses not only opportunities in spreading early childhood education but also provides a comprehensive synopsis of the challenges abating quality education and development at this important stage of human and national growth. This paper examines the status of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria, focusing on the role of different stakeholders in policy formulation, curriculum development, and the practical challenges in scaling up the ECE programme in Nigeria. The gap of this paper is scaling up the status of ECE via policy formulation, provision of the expedient curriculum with a holistic and integral approach and the stakeholders' role towards the realization of the goals for the establishment of the ECE programme.

Concept of Early Childhood Education

The term 'early' refers to the onset of any period, event, initiative, or life phase. The early years of human life typically symbolize the starting phase that serves as a base for subsequent activities and functions. Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016) emphasized that these early life years are recognized as the most critical time when children undergo cognitive, language, perceptual, socio-emotional, and motor growth, all of which are essential for future accomplishments and social integration. This timeframe requires special focus, as Estes (2004) aptly labeled the early years as a significant period of child growth and development. Additionally, Oduolowu and Olowe (2011) argued that these early years are marked by high vulnerability and immense potential, necessitating adequate protection, care, and stimulation to establish a solid foundation for children's overall welfare and development. Given its importance, the early years must be treated with exceptional care to avert any potential risks associated with foundational development. In establishing this groundwork during the early years, Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a crucial role in supporting lifelong learning for children and contributing to national growth.

Early childhood education refers to the instruction provided to children in their formative years. Maduewesi (1999) describes early childhood education as teaching aimed at children who have yet to reach the required age to start primary education. It is a form of education where young children engage in play that promotes mental, social, and physical learning according to their developmental stages until they are ready for primary school. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) describes Early Childhood Education as instruction offered in educational settings to children aged 0-5 before they enter primary school. This stage is crucial for brain development. Shonkoff and Phillips cited in Emenike, Hounvenou and Njoku (2022) averred that by age 6, the human brain is 90% fully developed and prepared for cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. The components of the ECE program include "ota akara," commonly referred to in various regions, along with crèches, nurseries, and kindergartens (FRN 2014).

Generally, ECE aims to foster the comprehensive development of children from birth to five years. According to Olowe, Kutelu, and Majebe (2014), the objective of ECE is to enhance aspects like intellectual growth, socio-emotional progress, language acquisition, physical development, and overall learning during the first five years. Given the inherent nature of children, their learning and development are intertwined elements that form an integrated whole. Oduolowu and Olowe (2011) correctly highlighted that Early Childhood Education (ECE) includes vital programs and activities that are fundamental to the holistic growth, academic achievements, and future successes of children. The learning and development of children are achieved through this holistic approach. ECE's activities and programmes focus on providing positive early experiences for children.

Sooter (2013) highlighted that the goals of Early Childhood Education (ECE) include supporting children's proper growth, recognizing and resolving their issues, tapping into their abilities, shaping their character, improving their learning, and preparing them for life, guiding their actions towards constructive personal, community, and global progress. In Nigeria, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) outlined the goals as follows:

- i. Ensuring a smooth transition from home to school;
- ii. Readyng children for primary education;
- iii. Offering suitable care and supervision for children while parents are at work;
- iv. Instilling a sense of inquiry and creativity in children through engagement with nature and their surroundings, arts, music, and play with toys;
- v. Fostering a spirit of teamwork and cooperation;
- vi. Teaching social standards;
- vii. Cultivating healthy habits, particularly those related to good health; and
- viii. Introducing foundational concepts such as numbers, letters, colors, shapes, and forms through play.

The FRN (2014) outlined specific strategies that the government aims to implement to reach the goals of ECE within Nigeria, including:

- (i) Promoting private initiatives in providing early childhood education;
- (ii) Ensuring teacher training institutions prepare specialist educators in Early Childhood Education;
- (iii) Making sure instruction primarily occurs in the child's native language or the local community's language;
 - a. Developing written forms for numerous Nigerian languages; and
 - b. Creating textbooks in these local languages;
- (iv) Ensuring play is the primary teaching method in early childhood centers, and that the curriculum at teacher training colleges aligns with this approach.

The Current Status of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is essential for establishing a strong basis for both individual lifelong growth and national development. In Nigeria, the status of ECE is influenced by several governmental policies, including the National Policy on Education (NPE), which was first established in 1977 and has undergone several revisions. The NPE states that ECE in Nigeria aims to support the overall development of children. The Nigerian government acknowledges the importance of ECE, particularly in line with the Education for All (EFA) objectives set by UNESCO and other international organizations.

Among the strategies proposed by the federal government in the FRN (2014) to reach ECE goals, only the initiative to encourage private involvement in pre-primary education and the effort to create specialized teacher training in Early Childhood Education have seen substantial success and limited progress, respectively. Sooter (2013) confirmed that the National Policy on Education has provisions encouraging private participation in the country's early childhood education efforts. This policy has been very successful, leading to a significant

increase in ECE centers appearing in various locations. According to Nwakaego (2007), it has become common to find early childhood centers in nearly every home.

At present, early childhood education facilities can be found in a range of locations and structures, including some universities and colleges, buildings owned by industrial and business entities, church facilities, and residential areas, where certain spaces are rented for use as early childhood institutions (Ejeh, 2006).

While the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) outlines rules for running early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria, it fails to provide details regarding the care and support necessary for children aged zero to two years. This creates a significant gap, as private operators manage the program without sufficient guidelines or standards (Obiweluzor 2015), which is crucial for enhancing ECE through the engagement of stakeholders in policy development and effective curriculum implementation. ECE requires a comprehensive strategy that considers children's learning, care, development, and social abilities. Nonetheless, Obiweluzor (2015) indicates that children in Nigeria face challenges due to inadequate social services, including poor nutrition, insufficient healthcare, and lack of access to clean water and sanitation, as well as protection from environmental risks and safety concerns. This situation led to the creation of the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (IECD), which was officially introduced in October 2007. This policy mandated that early childhood education in Nigeria adopt an integrated approach, facilitating collaboration among the Federal Ministry of Education and various ministries, including Health, Environment and Housing, Women's Affairs, Information and Communication, Finance, Agriculture, and Water Resources, alongside the National Planning Commission, to enhance the cognitive, physical, social, moral, and emotional growth of children.

Policy Background of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Considering its intended purpose, significance, and function, a variety of regulatory frameworks are established, consisting of government policies and regulations aimed at maintaining high standards in early childhood education. Ahmed and Dantata (2016) describe policy as a framework for action, generally outlining methods to achieve a desired result or outcome. Public policy fundamentally refers to the actions that governments choose to undertake or refrain from doing. The Nigerian government has instituted numerous policies and regulations to oversee the delivery of early childhood education throughout the nation. Through these policies, the government ensures a suitable curriculum and a nurturing learning atmosphere that meets the necessary quality for the integral development of children.

A fundamental policy in Nigeria is the National Policy on Education, which outlines educational development at all levels, including early childhood education. According to Moloney (2010), policy articulates the aims and objectives of education and highlights the crucial role of early childhood education in establishing a strong foundation for lifelong learning and growth. Additionally, the Nigerian government has introduced the National Early Childhood Education Policy, which targets the development of early childhood programs. This policy specifies the standards for early childhood education, including curriculum, teacher qualifications, and available learning resources (Policy and Early Childhood Education 2016).

In August 2004, the NERDC, with UNICEF's backing, organized a gathering of specialists and key participants in early childhood care to establish a baseline for the operation of education centers for young children in a unified manner across Nigeria. This initiative led to the creation of what is now known as the National Minimum Standards for Early Childhood Education Centers in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2017). The challenge lies in the fact that not all centers are knowledgeable about this document, and those who are may not have seen or handled it.

Moreover, close monitoring has revealed that the care and assistance provided to children regarding health, nutrition, and psychological support are essential for their intellectual growth, character development, and social behavior. The report "Sector Warns Government of Free Childcare Shortages" (2016) indicated that early childhood care in Nigeria has evolved from a single-sector focus to a broader multi-sector approach, integrating efforts in health, nutrition, care, stimulation, protection, and child involvement.

Despite the government's attempts to create policies, there are significant obstacles when it comes to applying and enforcing standards in early childhood education within Nigeria. Researchers Ahmed and Dantata (2016), along with Cletus, Oikhala, & Izokpu (2022), noted that the implementation of public policy is a major challenge Nigeria faces in achieving national development. Many policies end up failing during the implementation phase. The issues impeding the execution of policies in early childhood education and other educational settings are complex and include broad challenges highlighted by Institutions, policies, and implementation (2021). Among the recognized issues are insufficient funding (Akinrotimi & Olowe), a shortage of qualified educators (Amadi, 2013; Okewole, Iluezi-Ogbedu, & Osinowo, 2013; Osho, Aliyu, Okolie, & Onifade, 2014), and inadequate infrastructure (Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri, & Dagunduro, 2011; Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012). Additional challenges comprise inconsistent rules and social or cultural barriers such as poverty, a lack of understanding regarding the significance of early childhood education, and traditional beliefs that may negatively affect educational quality (Disciplines in Nigeria 2024). These factors impede the success and achievement of the program's objectives.

Curriculum Expedients for Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Alongside the development of policies to encourage early childhood education, the curriculum is crucial for enhancing quality and advancing early childhood education. According to Emenike (2021) and Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016), the curriculum is a vital element for executing any educational initiative. It outlines both what is taught (content) and how it is taught (method) within any educational program. The curriculum acts as the means through which educational programs can be effectively delivered. The early childhood education curriculum is a key document that considers the goals and objectives, suitable activities for child development, learning experiences designed to meet these goals, the roles of stakeholders in supporting children's achievement, and the materials necessary for implementing the curriculum (National Centre on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL), 2012). The combination of content and methods results in educational outcomes such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are to be gained from the program (NAEYC 2009). The National Early Childhood Curriculum offers a framework for creating age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and inclusive educational programs that support the overall growth of young children and inspire a passion for learning early on.

A significant initiative to highlight is the creation of a comprehensive early childhood education curriculum, which is divided into two segments tailored for children aged 0-3 and 3-5 years. As per UNESCO (2007), Nigeria's Early Childhood Education curriculum underwent a review and modification in 2003/2004, utilizing a comprehensive bottom-up strategy focused on children aged 0-5 years. This updated curriculum aims to support an integrated approach and encompass all necessary sectors, including health, nutrition, water and environmental sanitation, psycho-social support, early learning, and fostering an optimal environment for children to thrive, learn, and achieve their full capabilities. This holistic curriculum is essential and wide-ranging, designed to address the overall development of children while equipping them with critical knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective functioning.

An effective, relevant early childhood curriculum ensures that educators address key learning areas, implement suitable teaching methods, and maintain a standard of quality across various age groups involved. The characteristics of the early childhood education curriculum demonstrate a comprehensive approach recognizing that children learn as a whole rather than in segments. Such a functional curriculum is crucial for the successful execution of the early childhood education program.

Significant Issues with Policies and Curriculum

Despite the importance of the National Early Childhood Curriculum, numerous obstacles are obstructing its effective implementation at both state and local levels. A primary issue is that this curriculum has been largely absent from most early childhood education centers since its introduction. Research conducted in various Nigerian states confirms the unavailability of the National Early Childhood Curriculum for ages 0-5 years in these education centers (Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012). Academics have also pointed out the shortage of trained professional teachers and the lack of ongoing professional development as major hindrances (Olaleye & Omotayo, 2009; Osho, Aliyu, Okolie, & Onifade, 2014). Professional educators are essential for the effective implementation of the early childhood education program. The National Governors Association Centre for Best Practices (2010) indicated that the expertise and capabilities of early childhood educators are crucial in providing high-quality developmental and educational experiences for children. Insufficient training for teachers exacerbate the challenges facing early childhood education in Nigeria (Olaleye & Omotayo, 2009; Viatonu et al., 2011).

Additional challenges include a lack of essential resources (Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri, & Dagunduro, 2011; Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012); deficiencies in monitoring, supervision, and evaluation processes impede effective curriculum implementation in various contexts across Nigeria (Nakpodia, 2011; Sooter, 2013); the necessity for context-specific approaches to curriculum creation and assessment remains an urgent concern for progressing early childhood education in the nation; and a lower staff-child ratio is a prevalent issue within Nigerian early childhood education (Sooter, 2013). Underfunding of early childhood education programmes in Nigeria has been drawn attention to in several researches and academic gatherings on the issue. (The Good Planet Foundation, 2013; Alabi & Ijaiya, 2014; Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012). According to The Good Planet Foundation (2013) regarding Nigeria, the insufficient budget for critical areas such as textbooks, teaching materials, staff training, and operational costs is failing to uphold the quality and standards of early childhood education.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the existing issues within early childhood care, hindering service delivery, widening disparities, and emphasizing the necessity for creative strategies to assist children and their families during challenging times. The pandemic has highlighted the critical need to invest in robust early childhood systems, foster collaborations among partners, and utilize technology to improve both the quality and accessibility of early childhood education.

In light of these challenges, there are opportunities to enhance early childhood programs in Nigeria through joint efforts among stakeholders, improvements in policy, and investments aimed at boosting program quality. Addressing these difficulties could involve integrating early childhood development into national priorities, ensuring adequate resource allocation, and encouraging collaboration across multiple sectors. Enhancing the status of early childhood education would provide a solid foundation for upcoming generations.

Despite the notable advancements made in early childhood care, development, and education in Nigeria due to the contributions of various stakeholders, several initiatives proposed by the government to meet the goals of early childhood education have yet to yield results, while numerous challenges continue to hinder equal access for all children in the nation. Engaging stakeholders and fostering collaboration could help alleviate these issues.

Stakeholders in Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Stakeholders are essential in influencing the quality, reach, and significance of early childhood education in Nigeria. As defined by Iyer, Seetharaman, and Ranjan (2021), stakeholders can refer to any individuals or groups capable of affecting the achievement of an organization's goals particularly in this case, an educational institution. According to Giving Compass (2022), education stakeholders encompass parents, school leaders, community members, governmental entities, non-governmental organizations, and educators. The contributions of these stakeholders are interconnected rather than distinct.

The government is vital in establishing standards, distributing resources, and overseeing the execution of early childhood education and other educational initiatives (Nyongesa, 2020). Government responsibilities include crafting policies, offering financial support, providing technical assistance, and developing oversight mechanisms designed to enhance the quality and reach of early childhood education in Nigeria. The government is tasked with the creation and execution of educational policies that influence the entire system (Knowledge Nest, 2018).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations are also crucial in promoting early childhood education. As noted by Eze (2023), NGOs are recognized for two related yet distinct areas of involvement: one focuses on delivering essential services to individuals in vulnerable situations, while the other emphasizes policy advocacy and public awareness initiatives. Through advocacy, building capabilities, and involving the community, NGOs help enhance understanding of the significance of early childhood education and encourage fair and accessible quality education for young learners.

Teachers are the primary professionals in early childhood environments. They are vital in executing the curriculum, nurturing children's growth and learning, and fostering strong connections with families and communities (Temple & Emmett 2013). By heavily investing in teacher education, ongoing professional growth, and creating supportive workplaces, these educators can improve the effectiveness and quality of early childhood education in Nigeria.

Families and parents play a crucial role in early childhood education. They support their children's learning and growth through positive caregiving, active participation in educational activities, and helping with their emotional development (Hossain, & Eisberg 2020). Enhancing parenting skills, fostering family involvement in early childhood initiatives, and tackling economic obstacles to parental participation can strengthen the role of families as essential partners in the education and development of their children.

Local individuals, community leaders, religious organizations, and neighborhood groups also significantly support early childhood education (Eravia 2020). The encouragement of community-based methods for early child development through building collaborations with local partners, and utilizing community knowledge and resources, improve the relevance, accessibility, and sustainability of early childhood education across various regions in the country.

Scaling up the status of early childhood education in Nigeria via Policy and realistic Curriculum

Focusing on the involvement of stakeholders in creating policies and designing effective curricula that consider the comprehensive nature of children, their learning traits, and suitable developmental methods can be advanced through what is termed "*accurriculation*." According to Emenike (2021), '*accurriculation*' is essential for establishing a functional curriculum for early childhood education programs. Policies mainly consist of various initiatives and guidelines intended to foster children's well-being and overall growth.

However, despite these policies being established, the main challenge resides in the application and enforcement of early childhood policies in Nigeria. Insufficient funding, poor infrastructure, and lack of cooperation among vital stakeholders pose major challenges to the effective provision of early childhood education for children. Furthermore, disparities in access to quality early childhood services remain between urban and rural areas, worsening inequalities in educational results and opportunities, which significantly hinders the enhancement of ECE status in Nigeria.

In addition to these necessary policies and curricula for achieving program goals, advancing early childhood education in Nigeria is crucial for improved educational outcomes. This includes Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA) that foster personal growth, development, and subsequently contribute to national progress. This advancement is essential for propelling early childhood education programs toward enhanced individual development and overall national growth.

CONCLUSION

Enhancing the quality and standards of early childhood education programs is not only necessary but also urgent and essential for personal growth, development, social interaction, and, by extension, vital for national advancement. Simply creating policies is insufficient and a misallocation of resources and efforts without appropriate strategic follow-up in their execution and cooperation among all involved parties. Policies become useless aspirations if there are no actionable plans to achieve their intended goals.

Alongside the policy, it is crucial to highlight the importance of an effective curriculum that is both relevant and practical. Policy and curriculum must work in harmony to ensure the implementation of a high-quality early childhood education program that leads to improved educational results necessary for development and social engagement. The success of this initiative requires contributions from all parties, including the government, curriculum developers, non-governmental organizations, educators, parents, and the community. While the government has the primary responsibility for enhancing early childhood education, other stakeholders also play vital roles in promoting this program for improved educational outcomes essential for lifelong learning, individual growth, social engagement, and overall national progress.

In light of the above, several suggestions have been made for scaling up early childhood education:

1. Boost financial support for early childhood education programs to guarantee equal access and quality for every child.
2. Reinforce teacher training and ongoing professional development efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education and foster positive learning outcomes for children.

3. Encourage community-based strategies for early childhood education to ensure the relevance and sustainability of these programs across various regions.
4. Build partnerships among stakeholders to enhance collaborative initiatives in early childhood development efforts.
5. Develop a suitable curriculum through collaboration with all relevant individuals and ministries, taking into account the characteristics of children and their comprehensive understanding of learning.

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