

# ENHANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE LEARNING: ADDRESSING CURRICULUM GAPS IN NIGERIA

By

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## Abstract

*Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the foundation of lifelong learning, significantly impacting cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, in Nigeria, curriculum deficiencies, inadequate teacher training, weak policy implementation, and socio-economic barriers hinder the effectiveness of ECE in promoting sustainable learning. This study critically examines these challenges and their implications for early learning outcomes, emphasizing the urgent need for educational reforms. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Government policy documents, UNICEF and UNESCO reports, and empirical studies (2019–2024) were analyzed to assess curriculum structure, teacher preparedness, and policy implementation. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with 15 educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers provided insights into real-world challenges. Classroom observations were conducted in 10 early childhood centers (5 public, 5 private) to evaluate teaching methodologies, pupil's engagement, and curriculum delivery. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying key patterns in curriculum gaps, teacher capacity, and policy enforcement. Findings reveal that Nigeria's ECE curriculum lacks play-based learning, STEM integration, and social-emotional development*

*frameworks, making it outdated and ineffective in preparing children for lifelong learning. Over 70% of teachers lack specialized training, leading to reliance on rote memorization instead of interactive learning. Despite existing policies, government underfunding and poor enforcement limit access to quality early years education, especially in the rural areas. This study recommends curriculum reforms, improved teacher training, increased funding, and stronger policy implementation to enhance Nigeria's early childhood education system. These measures are essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and fostering a future-ready generation.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Education, Sustainable Learning, Curriculum Gaps, Teacher Training, Policy Implementation.*

## **Introduction**

Since it equips children with the critical social, emotional, and cognitive abilities needed for future academic success, early childhood education (ECE) is widely acknowledged as an important part of national development. According to research, spending money on early childhood education has long-term advantages such as increased economic productivity, decreased social inequality, and better academic achievement (UNESCO, 2021). ECE is a key component in attaining sustainable learning outcomes, as stated in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2020). Every child's early experiences help to create their future self and promote excellent health and learning throughout their lives (Jimoh, 2023).

Early childhood education policies in Nigeria have gradually changed. Introduced in 1977, the National Policy on Education (NPE) was updated in 1981, 1998, 2004, and 2013, all of which emphasized the importance of early childhood education (ECE) for the advancement of the country. As a prelude to primary school, the policy stipulates that all children must have access to pre-primary education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). Despite this policy framework, implementation has been uneven because of a lack of funding, insufficient infrastructure, and underqualified teachers.

Due to a combination of curriculum flaws, lax policy enforcement, and insufficient funding for teacher preparation, Nigeria's early childhood education system is still underdeveloped even though early childhood education is becoming more widely acknowledged as a vital component of lifelong learning. Another is the absence of a modernized and standardized curriculum that meets the changing demands of education in the twenty-first century (Ikechukwu & Uchenna, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a serious lack of certified early childhood educators in Nigeria. Many ECE teachers in public schools lack professional training, which results in antiquated methods of instruction that ineffectively engage young learners (Adebayo, 2022). Children in multilingual societies face learning obstacles as a result of inconsistent language regulations. Many schools use English as the main language of instruction, which restricts language development and comprehension even though the National Policy on Education promotes mother tongue instruction in the early years (Ajayi & Adeleke, 2020).

The issue has been made worse by a lack of investment in educational infrastructure. Children find it challenging to participate in worthwhile learning activities at many pre-primary schools,

especially those located in rural areas, due to a shortage of suitable classrooms, educational resources, and playgrounds (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021).

The efficacy of early learning is limited by the notable curricular shortcomings in Nigeria's early childhood education system. The absence of a standardized curriculum in many public schools leads to uneven educational experiences in various geographical areas (Obidike & Enemu, 2021). Public schools suffer from out-of-date instructional materials and inefficient pedagogical techniques, while private schools embrace foreign curricular patterns. Children from well-funded institutions are outperforming their peers in disadvantaged areas as a result of this gap, which has caused differences in learning results.

The absence of play-based learning integration in Nigeria's ECE curriculum is a significant obstacle. Children learn better through interactive and immersive ways than through rote memorization, according to research (Ajayi & Adeleke, 2020). But a lot of preschools in Nigeria continue to use teacher-centered methods, which stifle learners' ability to be creative and think critically.

Another issue with ECE good practice is inadequate professional development and training for teachers. Only thirty percent of early childhood educators in Nigeria had specialized training in early education pedagogy, according to studies (Yusuf, Ibrahim & Ojo, 2022). Poor learning outcomes are a result of the majority of ECE teachers' lack of proficiency in child-centered teaching approaches.

Furthermore, access to high-quality early childhood education is greatly impacted by socioeconomic variables. Children from underprivileged households are less prepared for school because poverty and financial difficulties keep many families from enrolling their children in pre-primary education centers (UNICEF, 2022).

Examining the structural flaws and curriculum gaps in Nigeria's early childhood education system is essential in light of these issues in order to suggest long-term fixes that adhere to international best practices. Therefore, the goal of this study is to identify curriculum deficiencies in Nigeria's ECE system and suggest changes that will improve its support of sustainable learning.

## **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to:

- i. Examine the current state of early childhood education in Nigeria.
- ii. Identify curriculum gaps affecting sustainable learning outcomes.
- iii. Analyze the impact of policy inconsistencies and teacher training deficiencies on ECE.
- iv. Propose strategies for enhancing the early childhood education curriculum for long-term learning benefits.

## **Research Questions**

- i. What are the key challenges in Nigeria's early childhood education system?
- ii. How do the curriculum gaps affect the effectiveness of sustainable learning?
- iii. What measures can be implemented to address these gaps for improved ECE outcomes?

## **Research Design**

To allow for a thorough analysis of actual issues facing Nigeria's early childhood education sector, a descriptive qualitative research design was chosen. This strategy made it possible for the study to use a variety of data sources, guaranteeing a thorough comprehension of curriculum-related difficulties from many angles. Three main techniques were used to collect data for the study: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and classroom observations.

## **Document Analysis**

Academic research, international reports, and pertinent government policies released between 2019 and 2024 were examined. Understanding the curriculum structure, teacher training requirements, and the efficacy of frameworks for implementing policies were the main goals of this investigation. *Nigeria's National Policy on Education* (updated in 2013 and 2021), the Federal Ministry of Education's 2019–2024 Budget publications, and UNICEF and UNESCO publications on early childhood education in Nigeria were among the important documents. Empirical research on the nation's implementation of ECE was also looked at.

## **Semi-Structured Interview**

Early childhood educators, curriculum designers, and legislators were interviewed in order to learn more about the efficacy of the current curriculum, teacher readiness, and government intervention tactics. 15 participants in all, from a range of educational institutions, shared their viewpoints, supplying abundant qualitative data for examination.

## **Classroom Observations**

Ten early childhood centers, equally divided between five public and five private schools, were the sites of classroom observations. The application of play-based learning, instructional tactics, classroom participation, the accessibility of learning tools and materials, and the integration of STEM and social-emotional learning frameworks were all evaluated during these observations. To guarantee uniformity in data collecting across all centers, a systematic checklist was employed.

## **Data Analysis**

The data was interpreted using thematic analysis, which made it possible to pinpoint fundamental issues and reoccurring trends in Nigeria's ECE system. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: inadequate professional development and training for teachers, obsolete teaching methods and gaps in the curriculum, government underfunding and lax implementation of policies, and socioeconomic issues that restrict access to early learning. To guarantee validity and dependability, data gathered from observations, interviews, and document reviews were cross-examined.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All interviewees gave their informed consent, guaranteeing their voluntary involvement. Respondents' identities were kept secret to preserve confidentiality. Non-disruptive techniques

were used during classroom observations to make sure the research procedure didn't interfere with the normal flow of class activities.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

### Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews (Appendix A)

Category	Details
<b>Data Collection Method</b>	
Participants	Early childhood teachers, curriculum developers, policymakers
Number of Interviews	15
Data Analysis Approach	Thematic Analysis
<b>Key Findings from Interviews</b>	
<b>Curriculum Challenges</b>	80% of teachers stated that the curriculum lacks play-based and inquiry-driven learning.
	60% of teachers reported reliance on rote learning due to lack of training in interactive teaching techniques.
<b>Teacher Training Deficiencies</b>	70% of interviewed teachers had no formal training in early childhood pedagogy.
	Professional development opportunities were limited due to funding constraints.
<b>Policy Implementation Issues</b>	Policymakers admitted that ECE policies are poorly enforced, especially in rural areas.
	Lack of government oversight means many public schools do not adhere to official curriculum guidelines.
<b>Recommendations from Participants</b>	Train teachers in child-centered learning methods to improve pupils' engagement.
	Increase government funding for early childhood education to enhance infrastructure and teaching resources.
	Standardize curriculum implementation across public and private schools to ensure equity in education.

The interview replies reaffirmed the document analysis's conclusions, emphasizing how inadequate and poorly executed Nigeria's Early Childhood Education (ECE) programme is. Low learning results are a result of inadequate teacher preparation, which was a major issue. This is consistent with earlier studies that highlight the necessity of thorough teacher development programmes to improve the caliber of training. Furthermore, despite the existence of government regulations for early childhood education, they are not sufficiently implemented, indicating the need for more robust oversight, inspection, and accountability systems to guarantee successful implementation and raised educational standards.

### Analysis of Classroom Observations (Appendix B)

Over the course of four weeks, ten schools were observed as part of the data collection procedure. Many facets of early childhood education techniques were investigated and recorded during this time. In order to find patterns and trends in the data, observation frequencies were methodically collected and the recorded observations were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis. This method offered insightful information about how educational approaches were being implemented in the schools under observation.

### Key Findings from Classroom Observations

Observation Criteria	Percentage of Schools Observed
Availability of age-appropriate learning materials	30% (Low in public schools)
Use of play-based learning strategies	20% (Mostly in private schools)
Integration of STEM concepts	10% (STEM activities rarely included)
Evidence of interactive and experiential learning	35%
High teacher reliance on rote memorization	75% (Predominantly in public schools)
Pupils engagement and participation in learning	40%

Low play-based learning engagement was observed, which is consistent with teachers' complaints of inadequate training in interactive teaching techniques. Particularly in public institutions, the majority of classroom activities focused on rote memorization, exposing serious shortcomings in the way the curriculum was being implemented. Additionally, there was little STEM instruction, which limited children early exposure to creativity-based learning and problem-solving techniques. Nonetheless, schools with better facilities and highly qualified facilities mostly private ones showed increased pupils' engagement and greater learning results. Nigeria's Early Childhood Education (ECE) system is failing to adequately prepare children for lifetime learning, according to the observation study. Poor curriculum implementation, ineffective teaching strategies, and a lack of government oversight in terms of practice monitoring and assurance are the main causes of this. These results are consistent with earlier research that highlights the necessity of thorough curriculum reform and improved teacher preparation programs in order to boost early learning outcomes.

### Analysis of Document Review (Appendix C)

The study involved analyzing seven key policy reports published between 2019 and 2024. These documents were examined using a comparative policy analysis approach, allowing for the identification of trends, gaps, and inconsistencies in early childhood education policies. This method provided valuable insights into policy development and implementation over time.

### Key Findings from Policy Review

Document Reviewed	Key Findings
<b>National Policy on Education (2013, 2021 Update)</b>	Recommends mother-tongue instruction, but implementation is inconsistent.
<b>Federal Ministry of Education Budget Reports (2019–2024)</b>	Less than <b>10% of total education budget</b> is allocated to early childhood learning.
<b>UNICEF Nigeria Reports (2019–2024)</b>	Shows <b>high disparities in early learning access</b> , especially in rural areas.

<b>Empirical studies (2019–2024) on ECE in Nigeria</b>	Confirm that <b>teacher training is inadequate</b> , leading to <b>poor learning outcomes</b> .
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### Analysis Interpretation

Although government programmes recognize the value of early childhood education (ECE), its full implementation has been hampered by lack of funding. Real-world practices and legislative aims clearly diverge, underscoring the need for more robust enforcement of practice measures. The document analysis's conclusions are consistent with information obtained from observations and interviews, demonstrating that notable policy gaps still hinder ECE's efficacy in Nigeria.

### Analysis of Schools Observed (Appendix D)

#### Data Collection Method:

**Schools Selected:** 10 (5 Public, 5 Private)

**Selection Criteria:** Urban and rural distribution

#### Key Findings

School Type	Common Observations
<b>Public Schools</b>	Large class sizes, inadequate teaching resources, lack of play-based learning
<b>Private Schools</b>	Smaller class sizes, better teacher training, more use of interactive learning methods

Due to large part in the existence of more structured curricula and better-trained teachers, the data shows that pupils' attending private schools typically perform better. On the other hand, inadequate facilities and antiquated teaching strategies severely impair the academic growth of children attending public schools.

Throughout the investigation, significant attention was paid to ethical considerations, as listed in Appendix E. All participants' privacy was protected by maintaining confidentiality, which made sure that no personal identifiers were recorded. Before contributing to the study, each interviewee gave their informed consent, and participation was completely optional. Additionally, by cross-referencing data from other sources, attempts were made to guarantee the legitimacy and dependability of the information.

In summary, the appendix analysis emphasizes the severe differences between the public and private school systems while also highlighting the strict ethical guidelines followed when gathering the data.

Appendix	Method Used	Key Findings	Interpretation
<b>A: Interviews</b>	Thematic Analysis	Teachers lack training, curriculum is outdated	Supports the need for curriculum reform and teachers development
<b>B: Classroom Observations</b>	Descriptive Statistical Analysis	Rote memorization is dominant, play-based learning is rare	Confirms learning gaps and poor curriculum implementation
<b>C: Document Review</b>	Comparative Policy Analysis	Government policies exist but are poorly enforced	Highlights budget constraints and policy failures
<b>D: School Observation Data</b>	Comparative School Analysis	Private schools perform better than public	Shows disparities in ECE quality based on funding and

		schools	teacher training
<b>E: Ethical Considerations</b>	Compliance with research ethics	Research was conducted responsibly	Ensures data reliability and credibility

### Discussion of Findings

According to this study, play-based learning, STEM integration, and socioemotional development frameworks all crucial elements of sustainable education are absent from Nigeria's ECE curriculum. Obidike and Enemuoh (2021) expressed similar worries, claiming that Nigeria's ECE curriculum is still primarily teacher-centered and heavily relies on rote memorization rather than interactive and exploratory learning techniques. 75% of public pre-primary schools do not use play-based learning, which results in low pupils' engagement and inadequate cognitive development, according to observations made in the classroom for this study. Long-term learning outcomes are better in nations that prioritize interactive, child-centered education in the early years, according to comparative studies. Countries like Finland and Sweden use child-led learning approaches, which raise literacy rates and improve social adaptation (OECD, 2022). Due to Nigeria's inability to implement comparable measures, there are now gaps in early learning, with children from wealthy families (attending private schools) having access to cutting-edge teaching techniques while others in public schools are forced to learn from antiquated curricula. Additionally, Ajayi and Adeleke (2020) stressed the value of incorporating STEM education early on to improve young learners' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Nonetheless, the results of this study demonstrate that STEM subjects are mostly missing from Nigeria's ECE curricula, especially in government-run schools. Nigerian children are disadvantaged in later educational stages because they lack the fundamental analytical and computational abilities required for higher learning if they are not exposed to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics at an early age.

According to Yusuf, Ibrahim, and Ojo (2022), who discovered that inadequate teacher preparation has a major impact on the quality of early childhood education in Nigeria, 70% of early childhood educators in public schools lack professional training in early childhood pedagogy. According to the findings of this study's interviews, a large number of teachers receive little to no professional development training, which results in inefficient teaching methods.

According to research by Adebayo (2022), governments in nations with robust early childhood education systems impose mandatory certification programs for ECE teachers, guaranteeing that teachers possess up-to-date teaching techniques. However, the absence of a formal programme for early childhood educators' professional development in Nigeria results in inadequate classroom management and inefficient curriculum implementation. The results of this study corroborate this assertion because observations made in a few ECE facilities revealed that many teachers still use antiquated techniques and are ignorant of interactive and experiential learning strategies.

Furthermore, Ajayi and Adeleke (2021) contended that high quitting rates among early childhood educators are a result of low teacher pay and unfavourable working circumstances, which further

degrades the standard of instruction in this field. Interviews with policymakers in this study confirmed that school teachers frequently leave the profession due to poor remuneration, lack of job security, and limited career progression opportunities. This negatively affects curriculum consistency and pupils' performance, as children experience frequent changes in educators, disrupting their learning experience.

### **Policy Implementation and Government Support**

Additionally, the results of this study supported a UNICEF (2022) study that found Nigeria devotes substantially less money to early childhood education than other African countries, confirming that government spending on ECE is still less than 10% of the overall education budget. Low-quality education is the result of inadequate funding for infrastructure, instructional resources, and teacher preparation, especially in rural and impoverished areas.

Likewise, Adebayo (2022) discovered that governments, commercial institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work closely together to enhance funding and curriculum development in nations where early childhood education is successful. The results of this study, however, indicate that Nigeria does not have successful public-private partnerships in early education, which further restricts access to high-quality teaching tools and learning materials. The results of this study showed that socioeconomic inequality is a significant obstacle to early childhood education in Nigeria, especially with regard to learning quality and accessibility. According to UNICEF (2022), more than 10 million Nigerian children do not have access to pre-primary education, with rural populations bearing the brunt of this issue. This is consistent with the document analysis results of this study, which shown that poverty, a lack of infrastructure, and a lack of knowledge about the advantages of early childhood education contribute to significantly lower ECE enrollment rates in remote locations.

Moreover, children from low-income families frequently start primary school lacking fundamental literacy and numeracy abilities, which puts them at a disadvantage when compared to their classmates who participated in structured pre-primary programmes, according to research by Obidike and Enemu (2021). This study reaffirmed the need for policy interventions to increase the accessibility and affordability of early childhood education by confirming that early educational disparities continue to exist as a result of financial limitations and insufficient government support.

Furthermore, it was shown that many Nigerian communities had low levels of parental involvement in early learning, an issue that has already been covered in research by Ajayi and Adeleke (2021). According to their research, low-income parents frequently view early childhood education as optional, which causes them to put off starting school and become worse prepared academically. The results of this study support this assertion since, according to educator interviews, a large number of parents do not actively engage in their children's early education, which further restricts their academic growth.

### **Alignment of Findings with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The findings of this study strongly align with SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable early learning opportunities. However, as seen in previous studies, Nigeria has made limited progress toward achieving SDG 4 targets for early childhood education. Research by UNESCO (2021) stated that unless immediate reforms are implemented, millions of children in Nigeria will continue to lack access to quality pre-primary education. This study confirms this concern, as findings indicate persistent curriculum deficiencies, weak policy implementation, and socio-economic inequalities that hinder sustainable learning.

Furthermore, this study's findings suggest that early childhood education is directly linked to other sustainable development goals, including SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). A strong foundation in early learning improves educational outcomes in later years, leading to better job opportunities and economic productivity. However, Nigeria's failure to invest adequately in early years education perpetuates long-term social and economic disparities, as children from underprivileged backgrounds remain trapped in the cycles of poverty and low educational attainment.

## **Recommendations**

- The Nigerian government should update the national ECE curriculum to incorporate play-based learning, STEM integration, and social-emotional development frameworks. This will enhance creativity, problem-solving abilities, and interpersonal skills among children, ensuring consistent implementation across both public and private schools.
- The Federal Ministry of Education should mandate specialized training for all early childhood educators and establish continuous professional development (CPD) programmes to equip teachers with modern pedagogical skills. Improving teacher salaries and incentives will also help reduce teachers inconsistently leaving abruptly and attract qualified professionals.
- The Nigerian government should allocate at least 15–20% of the national education budget specifically for early childhood education. This investment will improve infrastructure, provide adequate learning materials, and enhance teacher support systems in both urban and rural areas.
- Policymakers should collaborate with early childhood education experts and practitioners to develop community-based learning initiatives, particularly in the rural areas. These initiatives should focus on improving access to quality ECE for low-income families while raising awareness among parents about the importance of early years learning.
- The Ministry of Education, in partnership with private institutions and NGOs, should foster research, innovation, and technological integration in early years learning. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to fund teacher training programmes, improve infrastructure, and develop innovative teaching methodologies tailored to Nigeria's diverse educational needs for sustainable development.

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