

The Critical Role of Government in Scaling Up Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

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By
Olumide Olakunle IGE Ph.D
Department of Social Sciences Education
Faculty of Education
University of Lagos

Protocol

Good morning, distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, and fellow educators. It is an honor to be here today at this esteemed 15th National Conference (which coincides with the 30th Anniversary of Early Childhood Association of Nigeria, where we gather to share insights and discuss the future of education globally. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the esteemed executives and members of this great body of intellectuals at the state and the national levels, and to the conference organizers for the opportunity to present this paper on such a vital topic.

Allow me to acknowledge the presence of names of key figures, such as the Honorable Commissioner(s), the Royal Fathers, the Conference chair, dignitaries, and the founding mothers and fathers of the ECAN whose contributions to the field of education have been truly inspiring. To my fellow presenters and participants, thank you for your dedication to advancing education worldwide.

1.1 Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is recognized globally as a critical foundation for lifelong learning and development. It encompasses the educational experiences and environments provided to children from birth to age eight, a period characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. It is during these formative years that children develop the essential cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills that will influence their future academic achievements and overall well-being. The importance of ECE cannot be overstated, as numerous studies have demonstrated its positive impact on children's academic performance, social skills, and long-term economic prospects (Heckman, 2011; UNESCO, 2015; Ige, 2023). In Nigeria, the significance of ECE cannot be overstated, especially given the country's large population of young children and the diverse challenges they face, such as poverty, malnutrition, and lack of access to quality education. Despite these known benefits, access to quality early childhood education remains limited in many parts of Nigeria, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This disparity underscores the need for the Nigerian government to play a more critical and proactive role in scaling up the status of ECE across the country and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Today, I will be discussing the critical role of government in scaling up early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria, a subject of paramount importance for the future of our children and, indeed, our nation. As we delve into this topic, I will explore the historical context of government involvement in ECE, the current challenges, and the strategic pathways that the government must take to ensure that every Nigerian child has access to quality early childhood education.

1.2 Historical Evolution of Government Involvement in ECE in Nigeria

The government's involvement in early childhood education in Nigeria has evolved over several decades, reflecting changing priorities and socio-political contexts. Before the colonial period, Nigerian children were primarily educated through informal, community-based systems that emphasized moral instruction, cultural transmission, and practical skills. These indigenous educational practices were deeply rooted in the cultural and religious values of different ethnic groups. However, the advent of colonialism in the late 19th century brought about significant changes to the educational landscape, as Christian missionaries introduced Western-style education, including early childhood programmes, in their mission schools (Fafunwa, 1974).

During the colonial era, the British colonial administration established a dual education system that prioritized

the education of the elite, with little emphasis on early childhood education. ECE was largely confined to mission schools, which catered to the children of the colonial elite and a small number of Africans who had converted to Christianity. These schools provided basic literacy and numeracy skills, along with religious instruction, but were not widely accessible to the majority of Nigerian children. It was not until the post-independence period that the Nigerian government began to take a more active role in the provision of early childhood education.

In the years following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the government recognized the need to expand access to education at all levels, including early childhood education. The 1969 National Curriculum Conference marked a significant milestone in this regard, as it highlighted the importance of ECE and recommended its inclusion in the national education system (Fafunwa, 1982). This led to the adoption of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977, which formally acknowledged early childhood education as a critical component of the education system. The NPE emphasized the need for government, private sector, and community involvement in the establishment and management of pre-primary schools.

Despite these policy developments, the actual implementation of ECE programmes remained limited, primarily due to inadequate funding, a lack of trained teachers, and insufficient infrastructure. The government continued to rely heavily on private providers, including religious organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to deliver early childhood education services. This reliance on private providers led to significant disparities in access and quality, with urban and affluent areas benefiting more than rural and low-income communities.

In the early 2000s, the Nigerian government renewed its commitment to early childhood education through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, which was launched in 1999. The UBE program aimed to provide free and compulsory basic education to all Nigerian children, including one year of pre-primary education. The inclusion of pre-primary education in the UBE program was a significant step towards expanding access to ECE, as it mandated the establishment of pre-primary sections in all public primary schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004; Ige, 2023). However, the implementation of this mandate has been uneven, with many states struggling to establish and maintain pre-primary sections due to resource constraints and other challenges.

The National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD), introduced in 2007, further underscored the government's commitment to ECE. The adoption of the National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development in 2007 marked a significant milestone in the government's approach to ECE. This policy aimed to provide a holistic framework that combined education with health, nutrition, and psychosocial services for children under the age of five.

However, the policy's ambitious goals were hampered by systemic challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and insufficient coordination among the various government agencies responsible for implementing ECE programmes (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007; Ige, Omotuyole, & Sebili, 2020). As a result, while the government's involvement in ECE has expanded over the years, significant gaps remain in terms of both access and quality.

1.3 Comparative Analysis: Lessons from Other Countries

To better understand the role that government can play in scaling up early childhood education in Nigeria, it is instructive to look at examples from other countries that have successfully implemented large-scale ECE programmes. Countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Brazil offer valuable insights into how government intervention can transform early childhood education.

Finland

In Finland, early childhood education is considered a critical component of the country's educational system. The Finnish government ensures that all children have access to high-quality ECE, regardless of their socio-economic background. This is achieved through substantial public funding, a well-trained workforce, and a curriculum that emphasizes play-based learning and child-centered pedagogies. The Finnish model demonstrates the importance of a strong government commitment to ECE, with policies that prioritize equity, inclusivity, and quality (Bennett, 2008).

Singapore

Similarly, Singapore has made significant strides in early childhood education through proactive government

intervention. The Singaporean government has implemented a comprehensive ECE framework that includes universal access to preschool education, rigorous teacher training programmes, and continuous assessment and improvement of ECE centers. The government's role in regulating and funding ECE in Singapore has been crucial in ensuring that children receive a well-rounded education that prepares them for the demands of formal schooling (Lim, 2017).

Brazil

In Brazil, the government's Bolsa Família program has been instrumental in expanding access to early childhood education, particularly for children from low-income families. The program provides financial incentives to families who enroll their children in preschool, thereby reducing barriers to access. Additionally, the Brazilian government has invested in training and professional development for ECE teachers, recognizing that a well-prepared workforce is essential for delivering quality education (Victora et al., 2011). The success of Brazil's ECE initiatives highlights the importance of targeted government policies that address both access and quality in early childhood education.

These examples from Finland, Singapore, and Brazil illustrate how government policies and investments can significantly impact the quality and accessibility of early childhood education. For Nigeria, adopting similar strategies—such as increasing public funding, enhancing teacher training, and implementing policies that promote equity and inclusivity—could be pivotal in scaling up ECE across the country.

1.4 Challenges in Scaling Up Early Childhood Education

Despite the positive steps taken by the Nigerian government in recent decades, several challenges continue to impede the effective scaling up of early childhood education. The challenges faced by the Nigerian government in scaling up early childhood education are multifaceted and complex. These challenges include inadequate funding, a shortage of trained teachers, inconsistent policy implementation, poor infrastructure, and cultural barriers. Addressing these challenges is essential for achieving the goal of universal access to quality early childhood education.

1.4.1 Inadequate Funding

Inadequate funding remains one of the most significant challenges to scaling up early childhood education in Nigeria. The education sector, in general, is underfunded, with early childhood education receiving a disproportionately small share of the education budget. According to UNICEF (2017), Nigeria allocates less than 10% of its national budget to education, which is below the recommended 15-20% by the United Nations. Within this allocation, early childhood education competes with other education sectors, such as primary, secondary, and tertiary education, for limited resources. This lack of funding affects the ability of the government to build new pre-primary schools, provide adequate learning materials, and recruit and retain qualified teachers.

1.4.2 Shortage of Trained Teachers

The shortage of trained teachers is another critical challenge that hampers the expansion of ECE in Nigeria. Early childhood education requires specialized training and skills, as young children have unique developmental needs that differ from those of older children. However, many ECE teachers in Nigeria lack the necessary training and qualifications to effectively deliver quality education. The shortage of teacher training institutions that offer specialized ECE programmes exacerbates this problem. As a result, many pre-primary schools, especially in rural areas, rely on unqualified or under-qualified teachers, which undermine the quality of education provided to children (World Bank, 2020).

1.4.3 Inconsistent Policy Implementation

The implementation of ECE policies in Nigeria has been inconsistent, leading to disparities in access and quality across different regions and states. While the federal government has developed several policies aimed at promoting early childhood education, the responsibility for implementing these policies often falls on state and local governments. However, many states lack the resources, capacity, and political will to effectively implement ECE policies. This has resulted in significant variations in the availability and quality of ECE services, with some states making more progress than others. Additionally, corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies have further hindered the effective implementation of ECE policies (Olanrewaju, 2019).

1.4.4 Poor Infrastructure

Many ECE centers in Nigeria operate in substandard conditions, with inadequate infrastructure that fails to meet the needs of young children. In many cases, pre-primary schools are housed in overcrowded and dilapidated buildings that lack basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation facilities, and safe playgrounds. The poor state of infrastructure not only affects the quality of education but also poses significant health and safety risks to children. The lack of appropriate learning environments also limits the ability of teachers to effectively engage and support children's development (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018).

1.4.5 Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural and social factors also play a role in limiting access to early childhood education in Nigeria. In some communities, particularly in rural and northern regions, traditional beliefs and practices may discourage parents from enrolling their children in pre-primary education. For example, in some areas, there is a preference for early marriage and domestic work for girls, which can lead to lower enrollment rates for girls in ECE programmes. Additionally, the low level of awareness about the importance of early childhood education among some parents contributes to low enrollment rates. Addressing these cultural and social barriers requires targeted interventions that promote the value of ECE and engage communities in the process (Obanya, 2019).

1.4.6 Developmentally Inappropriate Strategies

Several developmentally inappropriate strategies have been implemented in Nigerian ECE program, exacerbating existing challenges. One notable example is the use of Eko Excel, a digital education platform designed primarily for primary education, at the ECE level. The program's content and pedagogical approach are not tailored to the developmental needs of young children, leading to ineffective learning experiences (Edozien, 2020).

The deployment of consultants to train ECE teachers has also been problematic. In some cases, these consultants lack expertise in early childhood education, providing inadequate or misleading training that does not address the specific needs of ECE settings. This issue is compounded by the imposition of uniform teaching methods, such as Montessori, without considering the diverse developmental needs and cultural contexts of Nigerian children (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016).

Additionally, the creation of separate inclusive units within schools, rather than ensuring that all schools are inclusive, reflects a misunderstanding of the principles of inclusive education. Effective inclusion should be a fundamental aspect of all ECE program, not a separate initiative, to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have equitable access to quality education (Okoli, 2017).

Addressing these challenges is essential for achieving the goal of universal access to quality early childhood education. Government intervention is crucial in addressing these challenges and scaling up the status of ECE in Nigeria. By focusing on policy formulation, funding, capacity building, and quality assurance, the government can play a pivotal role in transforming the ECE landscape in Nigeria.

1.5 Strategic Pathways for Government Intervention

To effectively scale up early childhood education in Nigeria, the government must adopt a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that addresses the various challenges outlined above. The following strategies are recommended to enhance the government's role in promoting and expanding ECE.

- **Increased Investment in Early Childhood Education**

One of the most critical steps the government can take is to increase investment in early childhood education. This includes allocating a higher percentage of the national education budget to ECE and seeking additional funding from international donors, private sector partners, and non-governmental organizations. By increasing investment, the government can address the infrastructure deficit, provide adequate learning materials, and expand access to ECE across the country. Additionally, increased funding can support the establishment of more teacher training programmes, which are essential for improving the quality of early education (UNICEF, 2017).

- **Expansion of Teacher Training Programmes**

To address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators, the Nigerian government should prioritize the expansion of teacher training programmes that specialize in early childhood education. This can be achieved by increasing the number of teacher training colleges offering ECE certification programmes and integrating ECE

modules into the curriculum of existing teacher education programmes. Additionally, the government should consider providing incentives such as scholarships, grants, and improved working conditions to attract more individuals to the field of early childhood education. Continuing professional development (CPD) programmes should also be implemented to ensure that current teachers have access to the latest pedagogical practices and resources, thereby improving the quality of education delivered (Okon, 2015).

- **Strengthening Policy Implementation and Monitoring**

The Nigerian government needs to strengthen the implementation and monitoring of ECE policies at both the federal and state levels. This can be achieved by establishing clear guidelines and standards for ECE service delivery, ensuring that all pre-primary schools, whether public or private, meet minimum quality standards. The government should also improve coordination among different levels of government and relevant agencies to ensure consistent and effective policy implementation. Additionally, there should be regular monitoring and evaluation of ECE programmes to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Transparency and accountability measures should also be strengthened to reduce corruption and inefficiencies that may hinder the implementation of ECE policies (Ajayi, 2021).

- **Enhancing Infrastructure and Learning Environments**

Improving the infrastructure and learning environments of ECE centers is crucial for ensuring that children have access to safe, healthy, and stimulating spaces for learning. The government should prioritize the construction and renovation of pre-primary school facilities, particularly in underserved and rural areas. This includes providing basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation facilities, and playgrounds, as well as ensuring that classrooms are adequately equipped with age-appropriate learning materials and resources. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can also be explored as a means of mobilizing additional resources for infrastructure development (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018).

- **Community Engagement and Awareness Campaigns**

Raising awareness about the importance of early childhood education is essential for increasing enrollment and participation rates, particularly in regions where cultural and social barriers may exist. The government should implement community engagement programmes that involve parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders in the promotion of ECE. These programmes can include public awareness campaigns, workshops, and outreach activities that highlight the benefits of ECE for children's development and future success. Additionally, the government should work with community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to develop culturally sensitive approaches to ECE that respect and incorporate local traditions and values (Obanya, 2019).

1.6 Recommendations

Based on the challenges and strategies discussed, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the government's role in scaling up the status of early childhood education in Nigeria:

- The government should increase the budgetary allocation for education, with a specific focus on early childhood education, to meet the minimum recommended allocation of 15-20% of the national budget.
- Efforts should be intensified to expand and improve teacher training programmes for ECE, ensuring that teachers are well-equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide quality education. Incentives should be provided to attract and retain qualified ECE teachers.
- The government should develop clear and enforceable guidelines for the implementation of ECE policies and improve coordination between federal, state, and local governments. Regular monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of ECE programmes.
- The government should invest in the construction and renovation of ECE centers, particularly in underserved areas, to ensure that children have access to safe and conducive learning environments. Public-private partnerships should be leveraged to mobilize additional resources.
- Efforts should be made to implement community engagement and awareness campaigns to promote the value of ECE, particularly in regions where cultural barriers may exist. Collaborative efforts with CBOs and NGOs should be encouraged to develop culturally relevant ECE programmes.
- The government should actively seek partnerships with the private sector, international organizations, and NGOs to support the development and expansion of ECE services. These partnerships can provide

additional funding, expertise, and resources to complement government efforts.

- There should be a periodic review and update ECE policies to reflect current best practices and emerging trends in early childhood education. This will ensure that policies remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of young children.
- The government should promote inclusive education practices within ECE, ensuring that all children, including those with disabilities and from marginalized communities, have access to quality early childhood education.

1.7 Conclusion

The critical role of the government in scaling up the status of early childhood education in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. As the custodian of national development, the government has the responsibility to ensure that every child, regardless of socio-economic background, has access to quality early childhood education. By increasing investment, expanding teacher training, strengthening policy implementation, improving infrastructure, and engaging communities, the government can make significant strides in enhancing the provision of ECE across the country. The successful scaling up of ECE in Nigeria will not only contribute to the development of well-rounded individuals but also to the overall socio-economic progress of the nation.

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