

# Philosophical tools for Scaling Up Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: The Role of Stakeholders

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the philosophical underpinnings crucial for scaling up Early Childhood Education in Nigeria, emphasizing the interconnected roles of various stakeholders. Recognizing the limitations of a purely economic or infrastructural approach, the paper argues for a robust philosophical framework grounded in constructivist and progressivist principles. This approach positions children as active agents in their learning, emphasizing play-based pedagogy, individualized learning experiences, and the social construction of knowledge.*

*The paper analyzes the critical roles of key stakeholders such as policy makers, Educators, parents and communities in this endeavour:*

*By embracing a constructivist and progressivist philosophy and fostering active collaboration among stakeholders, Nigeria can create a thriving ECE ecosystem that nurtures the cognitive, social, and emotional development of its youngest citizens, laying a strong foundation for a brighter future.*

## **Introduction**

Early childhood education (ECE) represents a critical foundation in human development, encompassing the formal and informal learning experiences the child receives in the formative years from birth to age eight. This critical period lays the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health. It is characterized by rapid brain development and the acquisition of fundamental cognitive, social, and emotional skills that shape the child's lifelong trajectory. The field of ECE has evolved significantly over the past century, transitioning from basic childcare approaches and custodial care to sophisticated educational paradigms informed by developmental psychology, neuroscience, and pedagogical research. It is in line with this that Nigeria, in accordance with the Jomtien Declaration of Education for all (EFA), is committed to making available qualitative and comprehensive early childhood education and care for all children.

Evidences have confirmed that good ECE is one of the greatest investments that a nation can make for their children, that is, an education that can promote a strong learning foundation for children in later years (Engle et al., 2011, Nores & Barnett, 2010). United Nations (2019) affirms that ECE is one of the strongest determinants of the child's school readiness in both high-income and low-income countries. Consequently, efforts are being geared towards providing and promoting quality education for children at all levels through several policies that are put in place.

Implementation of these policies are ensured by those who have stake in the organisation. Educational stakeholders are all direct and indirect participants in an educational system, including policy makers and members of the public, who have vested interest in its functioning and outcomes (Adebayo, 2013). Recently, it was established that educational provision is the responsibility of all stakeholders (Kufi, 2013; Takyi et al., 2013), and that stakeholders could play substantial roles in influencing the attainment of education quality by promoting the need for educational effectiveness. The National Policy on Education guaranteed stakeholders participation with a view to eliminating overlaps, and to sustain and achieve synergy among diverse stakeholder groups (FGN 2013).

In the same vein, the philosophical underpinnings of ECE have similarly progressed, moving from views of children being seen as miniature adults and as such no special need was accorded to them to being seen as passive recipients of knowledge and to further recognise them as active participants in their own learning (Keelay, 2007). This shift has profound implications for educational practice, policy, and the roles of various stakeholders in the ECE ecosystem. Contemporary philosophical perspectives in ECE emphasize the importance of play-based learning, child-centred approaches, and the integration of diverse cultural contexts in early learning environments. The Nigerian government in response to this call inaugurated the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in order to allow every child to have access to basic education.

The importance of scaling up efforts in ECE cannot be overstated. Report has it that globally, access to early childhood education (ECE) has been expanding rapidly with the most dramatic increases occurring in low- and middle-income countries however, the Nigerian statistics says otherwise. In view of the report from the International Centre for investigative report (ICIR 2023) which states that one out of three children in Nigeria is out of school with about 10.2 million children at the primary school level and only one in three children aged 36-39 months having access to Early Child Care Development Centre (ECCDE).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of ECE's benefits, access to quality programmes remains uneven across socioeconomic groups and geographic regions of Nigeria. Scaling up may involve not only expanding access but also enhancing the quality of ECE programs. This includes improving teacher training, developing evidence-based curricula, and creating supportive learning environments. It is to this end that this paper aims at examining the interplay between philosophical perspectives, stakeholders roles, and practical implementation strategies that will foster the scaling up of early childhood Education in Nigeria.

### **Early Childhood Education in Nigeria**

Historically, Nigeria gained her independence in 1960, and efforts to restructure and empower the educational system has been quite challenging. However, the educational reforms in Nigeria dated back to pre-independence in 1955 when the then Western Regional Government of Nigeria put in place the structure of compulsory Universal Primary Education scheme (UPE) that made primary education free for all children in the region (Edho, 2009). At this stage, many formal and organized preschools and child care centres were established in order to enable working mothers keep their children in safe places while they went to work (Odigie, 2016). The government was not involved with the management and running of this level of Education hence, the administration of pre-primary education continued in the hands of private proprietors until 1969 when a curriculum conference was held. At the end of the conference, the committee advocated a head-start programme for toddlers and children and nursery and kindergarten schools were to cater for the needs of children between the ages of three and five years.

The preschool programme was to allow for the smooth transition of the child from home to school as well as prepare the child for primary level of education. The preschool programme was also meant to provide custodial care for children of working-class parents. The conference recommended that private proprietors should manage the affairs of such schools. In the 1970s, there was the urgent need for government to make more definite policies on the preparatory roles of pre-school institutions. In response to this, the federal government, in its first major National Policy on Education, in 1981, had a full section on pre primary education. In that section, pre-primary education was referred to as, "the education given in an educational institution to children aged three to five years plus, prior to their entering the primary school. Also stipulated in the National Policy on Education (2013), the purpose of pre-school education as follows:

- Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school
- Preparing the child for the primary level of education
- Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work, (on the farms, in the markets, offices etc)
- Inculcating social norms Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities etc
- Teaching co-operation and team spirit
- Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play, and
- Teaching good habits, especially good health habits.

To fully achieve the above goals, the Nigerian government has specified in the National Policy on Education (2013) and through the UBE scheme that it would:

- Set and monitor minimum standard for ECCDE centres
- Develop and disseminate curriculum materials such as the Integrated Early Child Care Development (IECD) Policy, National Minimum Standard for the establishment of Early Child Care Education Centres, IECD Curriculum, IECD implementation Guidelines and all other materials that will enhance the implementation of ECCDE
- Encourage both community and private efforts in the establishment of ECCDE centres based on set standards.

- Make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childcare and education and for retraining of teachers.
- Ensure that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented towards play-way method
- Ensure that ECCDE Centres adopt the following caregiver infant ratio: (i) Crèche shall be 1:10; (ii) Nursery 1:25
- Develop suitable ECCDE curriculum for nationwide implementation
- Supervise and control quality of ECCDE centres
- Make provision for the production and effective utilization of learning and instructional materials in adequate numbers, and
- Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and to this end will:  
Develop the orthography of more Nigerian languages and Produce textbooks, supplementary readers and other instructional materials in Nigerian languages.

### **To what extent has the government ensured the implementation of the above?**

Studies have shown that there is a huge gap between policy and implementation (Abdulrahman, 2018, Salami, 2016). Although, access to ECCDE provisions has improved in recent years through collaborative efforts of the Government and NGOs, ensuring enough access and quality education has been a major obstacle. Children from disadvantaged and marginalised areas are mostly affected by inadequate services and provisions.

In a bid to attend to these issues, the federal government, in collaboration with UNICEF, produced a national curriculum for the education of children in 2004 to cover children of ages 0-5 years plus. Subsequently, in 2013, in a bid to ensure minimum standard for ECCDE centres, a one-year Pre-Primary School curriculum was also produced. This curriculum was to serve as a guide for implementing the compulsory one-year pre-primary education. This was a milestone achieved by the government in a bid to provide free preschool education for Nigerian children. Prior to then, the provision of preschool education rested in the hands of private individuals and organisations (FGN, 1998).

In line with the above, several policy documents were provided to guide the implementation of ECE in Nigeria and they included the National Policy on Education (NERDC, 1977, 1981, 1998, 2004, 2013), the National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria (NERDC, 2007), the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (NERDC, 2017) and the guidelines for Implementing National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (FME, 2013).

In the same vein, by 2007, the National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria (NMSECCC) was produced by Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in collaboration with United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF). The document justifies the need to set minimum standards. It further outlines the objectives, the strategies to be adopted, and the prescribed minimum standards to be upheld. It was an all encompassing document which highlighted the roles of supervision, healthcare services to be provided, stakeholders involvement and roles, human resources etc.

In 2004 the Nigerian government made provision for a one-year pre-primary education programme in the public primary schools. The Idea Early Childhood Development (IECD) commenced with the review of the curriculum for preschool education for ages 0 to 5 years to incorporate other key factors that will promote the holistic development of the child. Other factors incorporated into the curriculum included issues of provision of water, environmental sanitation, health, food, safety, protection as well as nutrition.

In the same year, the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (NPIECD) was also developed and produced by NERDC. This document confirms the deprivation, denial of child rights that the Nigerian child suffers and therefore included in the document, the justification for the policy, the policy's goal and objectives, the policy target and outcomes, the planning and development of interventions, national and state IECD co-ordinating committees, stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, the desirable practices for family, neighbourhood and media, implementation strategies and finally, the financial responsibilities and financial projections. All these aimed at improving care and support that should be given to the growing child in order to give a good head start in life.

In view of all the efforts made by the government in ensuring that the Nigerian child receives access to quality education, how has the government fared in bringing theory to practice? This is a major focus of this section.

According to Ekpo et al., (2016) in a survey carried out on the implementation of ECE Curriculum in Owerri, Imo State, it was discovered that the use of the curriculum was minimal, that is it was not adequately implemented. In the same vein, Adejobi, Omoare and Oyediran (2017), in their comparative assessment of the implementation of ECE Curriculum in public and private schools in Ogun State observed the availability of the Old Curriculum and low implementation in all the schools covered. Salami (2016) in his study on the extent of implementation of government policies about ECE in public schools in Nigeria, observed the following:

- The centres had no curriculum that guided their activities. Most of the time, the teachers either borrowed from the nearest private school (the curriculum used by the private schools is foreign based) or relied on the experience of the teachers to decide what to teach
- About 75% of the public schools in southwest part of Nigeria did not have any of the policy documents. Therefore, the teachers were not aware of the policies guiding the implementation of ECE in the country
- The only resources in the learning centres were chairs and tables for the children and caregivers, and chalkboard. Learning resources were either not supplied at all or grossly inadequate. Those that were supplied were kept out of reach of children in the name of protection from being getting spoilt.
- About 70% of the centres visited had a single teacher working with the children. There were situations in which a teacher was meant to teach the children and one other primary class at the same time.
- The learning environment was generally unattractive and lacks both indoor and outdoor playing materials. There were playing grounds for the children but none of the centres had play materials; the playgrounds were not well-kept and safe for the children.

The above submissions have revealed that as much as the government and relevant organs desire progress of the educational system, there is a great gap in the area of theory and implementation. The success of policies and goals can only be realised through its implementation. The process of adequate monitoring to ensure and enforce implementation is a major gap.

In the light of this, the next section will engage in interrogating the fundamental assumptions raised and attempting to actualise the goals using the ideologies of great Educational philosophers.

### **Philosophical Basis of Early Childhood Education**

The numerous schools of thought in philosophy cannot be exhausted in this paper, however philosophy has been a foundation upon which other disciplines emanated from. It is an indispensable tool for understanding other disciplines. Several concepts and its relation to other disciplines has been teased out of philosophy and it has brought about systematic study of ideas and issues and by implication allows individuals to perceive relationships among diverse fields of study.

philosophy has been established to relate to all subjects such as mathematics, history, religion and even early childhood education. Man's quest advanced philosophy. In classical study, philosophy was traditionally divided into three principal parts which are natural philosophy, moral philosophy (Ethics) and metaphysics philosophy (logic).

The Natural philosophy birthed the various natural sciences like physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy etc while Metaphysics birthed logic and Moral philosophy birthed social science of which is Early childhood Education.

All disciplines in social sciences have their root in philosophy. Studies in Philosophy focuses on the meaning of ideas as well as coherence and relations to other ideas. It employs critical attitude to develop human knowledge and establishes principles of rational beliefs in human beings. Philosophy opens the mind of education practitioners to allow neutrality and subject their beliefs and knowledge for further critical examination.

Early childhood education has its basis in philosophy. Educational thinkers from time immemorial have underscored the importance of basic education not only as an indispensable prerequisite for subsequent and further education but also as a necessary requirement for engendering social justice and cohesion. Plato, who lived between 427 and 347 BC was about the first to see the need and importance of the early stage of the child's development as being fundamental to his all-round growth. He advocated first stage of education, nursery schools for children between the ages of three to six years. His focus was on physical education, music, and basic intellectual training to develop a well-rounded character and in order to achieve this end, he thinks basic education should be universal (for all and sundry), it should be free and compulsory and controlled by the



government. He recommended the use of play method in teaching the child at this stage. Plato was the first to divide education of the child into stages. Plato's quest to build an holistic child, stressed the need to instil courage and self-discipline in the child. This, to him, can be achieved by exposing the child to pleasure and pain through stories of great men in the society who impacted their world positively, as early as three years of life. In trying to emphasise the importance of early years, he affirmed that the beginning of any task is an important part, especially for any creature that is young and tender. It is at this pre-school stage that the child as a learner is best moulded. This prepares him for latter education (Mkpa, 1999).

Froebel (1782-1852), devoted most of his life to early childhood education. He begins from the premise that the child is an individual entity, hence educators should not apply a universal method of education to all children. He submitted that through activities of learning, the interest and abilities of the child would naturally unfold. Froebel's philosophic thought is derived from the flower metaphor and it is from this that he coined the word, 'kindergarten' which means "the children's garden", another name for pre-school. In this analogy, the growing child is compared to a growing, (flowering) plant. According to him, the child's innate tendencies, natural talents begin to unfold. Similarly, the child's teacher represents the gardener, while nature fertilizes and facilitates growth and development. These stages through which children pass could be successful or hindered, depending on the expertise of the teacher in tending the child. The duty of helping the child to bud lies with every significant adult around. The child maximises his potentials through the role of play.

Idealists philosophers believe that children are the purest expression of divinely inspired nature (Johnson, 2014). They are innocent and in that organic unity with themselves and the universe which most adults have lost as a result of their interaction with their world. To this end, the child's talent and knowledge should be applied more meaningfully to boost his moral imagination. Moral discipline is very fundamental to the idealist theory of early childhood learning because it is assumed that the child operates a universal mind. Such is supported by Odigie (2016) who concurs that discipline is aimed at developing positive behaviours and attitudes in the child through early learning. This would help the child act in accordance with societal norms and values as he grows. In view of this, the idealist's curriculum for early childhood education is based on the premise that the whole concept and practice of education should first be seen as a symbolic activity. Within the context of epistemology, symbols are not mere tools of learning, but rather, instrument of the mind. Consequently, the idealists would argue that symbols as a medium of learning and expression is quite crucial to helping the young learner acquire knowledge. For one thing, the use of symbols in pre-school teaching creates a suitable pedagogical environment. It is also suggested that the classroom, as the environment where symbols are expressed, explained and visualized, should be made more meaningful to the child. Consequently, all that takes place in a typical nursery class should constitute an environment rich in symbols. This, they urge, can be achieved through the use of colourful pictures, diagrams, toys and other learning materials. These would help to stimulate the thoughts and feelings of the pre-schooler.

Rousseau, an Existentialist philosopher who lived between 1712 and 1778, imparted significantly the world of pedagogy. He came up with notion that education should consist less in precept than practice. Education should be child centred, focusing on the needs of the child. He broke the stages of education into 4 with infancy between 0-5 years and boyhood between 6-12. Every child has inherent unique characteristic features. His ideology stands on the pedestal that every child has his intrinsic worth and by implication, the child is not a miniature adult, rather, he is a being with characteristic traits that are unique to children, a being of inherent worth and dignity for the present rather than for the future.

An ideal Rousseau's classroom teacher should be one who harmonizes his secret educational strategy with the natural conditions of a child's growth. He provides relevant and favourable experiences to the right conditioning of the pupil's behaviour and his preparation for life. An analysis of Rousseau's works on early childhood education and its implication for contemporary day pre-school learning reveals that the nature of education is natural. He believes that the child is a naturally good person who needs care and compassion. However, this belief was quite in opposition to the prevailing Christian belief of his time. The child at this time was perceived as one born with the "sin of Adam".

According to Mkpa (1999), Rousseau recognized that:

- Education is more than what takes place in the formal school or classroom. The whole environment of the child is a resource for learning, and there are agencies of learning other than what the teacher's life itself teaches.

- The readiness of the child for new items of learning has to be watched, and no new learning task should be presented to him, until he demonstrates that he is ready. The deciding factor is his eagerness for new learning.
- The child is not a miniature adult and so should not be treated as such nor should his education consist mainly of preparation for adult life which could only destroy all the joy and the excitement of learning in the child.
- Each child is a unique individual and should be studied and understood as such.
- The teacher should cultivate affection for his pupils; he should deeply respect their individual nature, and, in general should be a sympathetic guide and adviser.

### **The role of Stakeholders in the application of Philosophical tools in Scaling up ECE**

Scaling up early childhood education requires a robust philosophical foundation that guides its implementation and ensures its effectiveness. Constructivism, with its emphasis on active learning, individualized experiences, and the social construction of knowledge, offers a powerful framework for this endeavor. Crucially, a constructivist approach recognizes the interconnected roles of various stakeholders in creating a thriving ECE ecosystem.

#### **Stakeholders and Their Roles in a Constructivist ECE Approach:**

- **Children:** At the heart of constructivism are the children themselves, recognized as active agents in their learning. Scaling up ECE through this lens means prioritizing children's interests, curiosity, and individual learning styles. (Designing learning experiences together with children, 2012) emphasizes the importance of designing learning experiences *with* children, giving them a voice in shaping their education.
- **Educators:** In a constructivist approach, educators transition from dispensers of information to facilitators of learning. Their role involves creating stimulating environments, posing thought-provoking questions, and guiding children to construct their own understanding through exploration and interaction. (MyEssayDoc: Design an Exemplary Early Childhood Environment, 2022) suggests incorporating elements into the learning environment that reflect the natural beauty of the surroundings, encouraging children to connect with and learn from their environment.
- **Parents and Families:** Constructivism recognizes the crucial role of families as children's first teachers. Scaling up ECE requires strong partnerships with families, involving them in their child's learning journey, valuing their cultural perspectives, and providing opportunities for shared learning experiences. (MyEssayDoc: Design an Exemplary Early Childhood Environment, 2022) also highlights the importance of involving families in the design of the learning space, recognizing their unique insights and needs.
- **Communities:** Constructivism emphasizes the social nature of learning. Scaling up ECE necessitates collaboration with communities to create enriching learning opportunities beyond the classroom walls. This includes partnerships with museums, libraries, community centers, and local experts who can contribute to children's holistic development.
- **Policy-makers:** Creating a supportive ecosystem for constructivist ECE requires policy-makers to prioritize funding for teacher training, developmentally appropriate assessments, and resources that support active, inquiry-based learning environments. (Meeting the Needs of Early Childhood Professionals, 2023) points to the need for professional development opportunities for educators, equipping them with the skills to implement constructivist principles effectively.

#### **Challenges and Opportunities:**

- **Shifting Mindsets:** Embracing a constructivist approach requires a shift from traditional, teacher-centred models of education. This necessitates ongoing professional development for educators and open communication with families and policy-makers.
- **Assessment and Evaluation:** Measuring the success of constructivist ECE requires moving beyond standardized tests to embrace authentic assessments that capture children's skills, knowledge, and dispositions as learners.

- **Equity and Access:** Scaling up constructivist ECE must prioritize equitable access for all children, ensuring that resources and opportunities are available regardless of socioeconomic background or geographic location.

### **Progressivism as a Philosophical Tool in Scaling Up Early Childhood Education: The Crucial Role of Stakeholders**

Scaling up early childhood education effectively and equitably requires a collaborative approach, bringing together various stakeholders who play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of early learning. Progressivism, with its emphasis on democratic principles, community involvement, and the holistic development of the child, provides a valuable framework for understanding and leveraging the contributions of these stakeholders.

#### **Key Stakeholders and Their Roles:**

- **Educators:** As frontline implementers of ECE, educators are central to translating progressive ideals into practice. Their understanding of child development, commitment to play-based learning, and ability to create inclusive environments are paramount. (Luff & Webster, 2014) emphasizes the importance of participatory approaches in ECE, advocating for educators' voices to be heard and their expertise valued in decision-making processes.
- **Parents and Families:** Recognizing the vital role of families in a child's development, progressivism encourages active parent engagement in ECE. This includes open communication, shared decision-making, and opportunities for families to contribute their unique perspectives and cultural capital. (Kinkead-Clark, 2017) highlights the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, including parents, on the influence of external factors on ECE, emphasizing the need for inclusive dialogue.
- **Communities:** Progressivism views education as a shared responsibility between schools and communities. Scaling up ECE requires partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and community leaders to provide resources, create enriching learning experiences, and ensure that programs are responsive to local needs. (Saguil, 2021) discusses the concept of "child leadership" within a progressive framework, suggesting that preparing children for active participation in a democratic society necessitates collaboration between schools and communities.
- **Policy-makers:** Creating a supportive ecosystem for scaled-up ECE requires policy-makers to prioritize early learning through adequate funding, developmentally appropriate standards, and policies that promote equitable access for all children. (Policy 1 - Quality Pre-K | 3 Practices and 3 Policies, 2018) provides an example of policy recommendations advocating for high-quality pre-K, highlighting the role of policy-makers in shaping the ECE landscape.
- **Researchers:** Evidence-based decision-making is crucial for effective scaling up. Researchers contribute by studying the impact of different ECE approaches, identifying best practices, and informing policy and practice with data-driven insights.

#### **Fostering Collaboration and Shared Vision:**

- **Open Dialogue and Communication:** Creating platforms for regular communication and collaboration among stakeholders is essential for building consensus, addressing concerns, and ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.
- **Professional Development and Training:** Equipping educators, administrators, and policy-makers with the knowledge and skills to implement progressive principles in ECE is crucial for successful scaling up.
- **Community Engagement and Outreach:** Actively involving families and communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of ECE programs fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

Scaling up Early Childhood Education in Nigeria is not merely a logistical challenge of making policies and training more teachers; it demands a fundamental shift in our understanding of early learning and the roles various stakeholders must play. This paper has argued for the adoption of a robust philosophical framework grounded in constructivist and progressivist principles, recognizing children as active agents in their learning journey.

By embracing these theories, there is a paradigm shift, that is moving away from rote memorization and standardized testing towards a system that values exploration, creativity, and the social construction of knowledge. This requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders: policymakers enacting supportive legislation and ensuring equitable resource allocation; educators embracing their roles as facilitators of learning; parents and families actively engaging in their children's education; and communities providing enriching experiences beyond the classroom.

The task is undeniably complex, requiring a sustained commitment to collaboration, innovation, and ongoing dialogue. However, the potential rewards are immeasurable. By investing in children and providing them with a strong foundation in early childhood education, there is a hope of brighter future for Nigeria, one characterized by critical thinking, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning.

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