



**International Journal of Economics,
Environmental Development and Society
(IJEEDS)**

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR LONG TERM BENEFITS OF PUPILS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN RIVERS STATE

Gloria IDIABANA

Department of Educational Management
Faculty of Education
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria
gloriaidiabana.gl@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5944-330X>

Eucharia Sotonye SOMIEARI-PEPPLE

Department of Educational Management
Faculty of Education
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

This study examined strategies for improving Early Childhood Education (ECE) programmes for the long-term benefit of pupils in primary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. Recognizing that the early years of a child's life are critical for cognitive, emotional, and social development, the study underscores the importance of high-quality ECE in laying the foundation for lifelong learning and academic success. It explored the historical context, objectives, significance, and current challenges of ECE in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the realities in Rivers State. The research identified several systemic issues undermining the effectiveness of ECE, including inadequate infrastructure, poor funding, lack of qualified educators, weak supervision, and insufficient stakeholder participation. Drawing on relevant literature and policy frameworks, the study proposed strategic interventions such as improved teacher training, curriculum reform, inclusive practices, enriched learning environments, enhanced monitoring, and stronger community engagement. The findings revealed that children who attend well-structured ECE programmes perform better in primary school, exhibit stronger emotional and social skills, and are more likely to complete their education successfully. In conclusion, the study affirmed that ECE is a critical investment for both individual development and national growth. It recommended that stakeholders including government bodies, educators, parents, communities, and NGOs play active and coordinated roles in enhancing the quality and reach of early childhood education. Specific actions such as increased funding, infrastructure development, policy enforcement, and capacity building were suggested to ensure effective and equitable ECE delivery in Rivers State and beyond.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Educational Development, Teacher Training, Learning Environment, Child Development, Educational Policy, Stakeholders.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Idiabana, G., & Somieari-Pepple, E. S. (2025). Strategies for improving early childhood education programme for long term benefits of pupils in primary schools in Rivers State. *International Journal of Economics, Environmental Development and Society*, 6(3), 542-560.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) establishes the crucial foundation upon which all future learning is based. It is during the early years particularly from birth to age five that the brain grows most quickly, building synaptic connections that impact cognitive, emotional, social, and physical consequences throughout a person's life. Globally, ECE has received recognized as a strategic instrument for fostering inclusive, equitable, and quality education, in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which calls for universal access to excellent early childhood development and pre-primary education. Studies indicate that children who get high-quality early education are more likely to excel in primary school, less prone to grade retention, and exhibit enhanced lifetime learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2019; Britto et al., 2020). These advantages transcend the individual, contributing to a more competent, responsible, and productive society.

The significance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria has been officially recognized in many national policy papers, notably the National Policy on Education (2014), which stipulates one year of pre-primary education as a component of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program. Rivers State, as a component of the Nigerian federation, has initiated the implementation of this strategy by establishing early childhood care development and education (ECCDE) facilities inside public elementary schools. Nonetheless, the actual execution has encountered some problems that diminish the programme's efficacy. A critical concern is insufficient finance. Although a regulatory framework is in place, the financial investment from both federal and state governments has been inadequate to sustain the infrastructure, educational resources, and training necessary for high-quality early childhood education. Adebayo and Ogunlade (2020) asserted that financial expenditures for early childhood education in Nigeria are insufficient relative to other educational levels, hindering schools from achieving the necessary standards.

A notable difficulty is the scarcity of properly qualified educators specializing in early childhood education. Instructing young children requires particular pedagogical expertise, including an understanding of child psychology, play-based learning techniques, and age-appropriate evaluation methodologies. Regrettably, several early childhood education institutions, especially in rural and disadvantaged regions of Rivers State, are manned by unskilled or inadequately qualified workers, adversely affecting the quality of instruction and learning. Research conducted by Okafor and Onwuegbunam (2019) and Umezina and Ajaegbu (2021) indicated that the involvement of professionally educated educators markedly increases the learning experiences of young children and bolsters their preparedness for primary school. The absence of ongoing professional development opportunities exacerbates the problem, leaving many educators ill-prepared to address the distinct requirements of early learners.

Moreover, the learning environment in the majority of ECE centers in Rivers State is substandard and detrimental to successful learning. Numerous classrooms are congested, inadequately ventilated, and deficient in age-appropriate furnishings and teaching materials. The significance of a stimulating and secure learning environment is paramount, particularly for young children who acquire knowledge most effectively via sensory exploration, interaction, and play. Oduolowu and Ige (2020) asserted that the lack of organized play spaces, educational corners, and appropriate instructional resources constrains the comprehensive development of children and obstructs the fulfillment of early childhood education goals. Furthermore, the curriculum used at several centers is either antiquated or inadequately executed. The National

Curriculum for ECCDE offers a thorough framework for enhancing literacy, numeracy, health, and social skills; however, its effective execution is obstructed by inadequate teacher comprehension and insufficient oversight.

These systemic difficulties have enduring consequences for the academic and social development of children in Rivers State. When children lack a robust educational foundation, they often have difficulties with reading and numeracy in primary school, suffer from diminished self-esteem, and are more prone to disengagement from formal education. This initial disadvantage compounds over time, leading to elevated dropout rates, subpar performance on standardized tests, and ultimately, diminished opportunities in adulthood. Research conducted by Eze and Maduewesi (2022) revealed that children in southern Nigeria without access to excellent early childhood education had markedly worse performance in fundamental literacy and numeracy assessments in primary schools relative to their counterparts enrolled in organized ECE programs. The shortcomings in the existing early childhood education program adversely impact individual learners, while also perpetuating wider educational disparities and limiting the state's potential for human capital development.

To address these deficiencies and guarantee the long-term advantages of early childhood education, it is imperative to implement strategic enhancement measures that conform to global best practices in early childhood development. These methods must be evidence-based, context-specific, and inclusive, addressing all facets of the ECE ecosystem, including policy implementation, educator training, infrastructure enhancement, curriculum assessment, and stakeholder involvement. Adedokun et al. (2021) asserted that effective early childhood education reform requires robust political commitment, intersectoral cooperation, and enduring financial strategies. Rivers State, due to its resource endowment and strategic location in the Niger Delta, have the capacity to excel in providing excellent early childhood education, provided that concerted efforts are undertaken to enhance current frameworks and implement novel methodologies.

Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) includes both official and informal learning experiences offered to children from birth to five years old, before they begin primary school. This is a pivotal phase marked by accelerated brain growth and the establishment of cognitive, emotional, and social skills that provide the foundation for lifetime learning and behavior. UNESCO (2019) asserts that high-quality early childhood education establishes a robust basis for academic achievement, health, and production, making it a strategic investment for individual and social advancement. The early years constitute a critical period during which children's brains exhibit significant plasticity and responsiveness to beneficial stimuli. During this period, learning settings, caregiver-child interactions, and exposure to developmentally suitable educational activities profoundly impact brain architecture and neural connections (Britto, Lye & Proulx, 2020). When children get enough attention and stimulation throughout these years, they are more likely to develop enhanced language skills, numerical comprehension, critical thinking, and emotional control, all of which are vital for future academic and life success.

Furthermore, early childhood education offers children their initial encounters with organized learning and social engagement beyond the home environment. These experiences are vital for developing fundamental pre-academic abilities, including letter and number identification, phonemic awareness, counting, and pattern recognition, as well as interpersonal

skills like as collaboration, empathy, and communication. Briggs et al. (2014) and Ololube et al. (2010) asserted that involvement in organized early childhood education programs is positively associated with enhanced cognitive development, improved health outcomes, and increased school completion rates. Children who experience early education are much more likely to transfer seamlessly into primary school and are less prone to grade repetition or dropout. Well-designed ECE programs promote fairness by reducing developmental inequities that often stem from socio-economic differences. Early learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged homes may provide compensating experiences that alleviate the impacts of poverty, inadequate nutrition, and insufficient parental support (UNICEF, 2020).

The importance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is progressively recognized within Nigeria's national educational policies. The National Policy on Education (2014) acknowledges early childhood care and education as a fundamental element of the universal basic education framework, advocating for the creation of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) centers nationwide. Nonetheless, the execution of this strategy is inconsistent across several jurisdictions, including Rivers State, attributable to structural challenges like as inadequate finance, a shortage of qualified instructors, and ineffective oversight. These challenges have resulted in inequalities in access to and quality of early childhood education services, especially between urban and rural regions. Research conducted by Eze and Maduewesi (2022) indicated that children participating in organized early childhood programs in urban areas had much superior performance in literacy and numeracy evaluations relative to their rural peers who did not have access to these services. This discovery underscores the pressing need to enhance access, equality, and quality in early childhood education.

It is essential to emphasize that early childhood education (ECE) not only enhances children's academic performance but also fosters holistic development including moral, physical, and emotional well-being. Structured early childhood education programs often include elements of health education, nutrition, cleanliness, and physical exercise, all of which enhance a child's whole development. Children exposed to organized early learning settings often exhibit improved physical coordination, healthier lives, and enhanced resilience. Okonkwo and Ogbonna (2020) asserted that the incorporation of play-based learning, storytelling, music, and creative arts into early childhood education curriculum augments children's imaginative and problem-solving abilities, hence nurturing enduring creativity and innovation. These formative events influence not just children's knowledge but also their attitude to learning throughout their lives.

There is a growing global agreement that investing in early childhood education provides the greatest returns on educational expenditures, particularly when initiatives are directed towards the most disadvantaged communities. Consequently, several international organizations, like as the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO, have urged national governments to promote early learning in their educational reform initiatives. In Nigeria, enhancing early childhood education interventions especially in underprivileged regions such as some portions of Rivers State necessitates a coordinated strategy that includes policy implementation, community engagement, comprehensive teacher training, and continuous financial support. With such policies in place, the long-term developmental and educational results of children may be considerably enhanced, contributing to the general human capital development of the country.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Pre-Colonial Era (Before the 1800s): Informal and Culturally-Based Learning

Before the advent of Western influence, Nigerian societies operated on deeply ingrained systems of informal education that were tailored to cultural values, communal living, and the immediate environment. Early childhood education during this period was not structured in classrooms but was embedded in everyday life. Children acquired knowledge and skills through observation, participation, and imitation of adults. Storytelling was a primary method through which moral values, history, customs, and social expectations were passed down. These stories, often told by elders, were rich in cultural symbolism and carried moral lessons designed to instill discipline, honesty, and respect for elders.

Different ethnic groups had unique educational goals and methods. Among the Yoruba people, boys learned farming, hunting, and trade skills, while girls were taught household management, childcare, and traditional crafts. The Igbo, on the other hand, emphasized community cooperation and entrepreneurial skills. The Hausas, with their strong Islamic influence, often introduced children to Quranic education early in life, where they learned to recite and memorize verses from the Quran, alongside receiving moral instruction. In all these societies, education was communal, practical, and geared towards preparing children to function effectively within their specific socio-cultural environment.

Colonial Era (1800s–1960): Introduction of Western Education

The colonial era brought profound changes to the educational landscape in Nigeria. With the British colonization of Nigeria in the 19th century came the introduction of Western-style education, which significantly altered traditional methods of learning. Early childhood education, as part of formal education, began to take root during this period, albeit on a limited scale. Christian missionaries were the first to establish schools for young children, primarily to promote literacy and convert indigenous populations to Christianity. These missionary schools focused on the use of English and taught religious values, arithmetic, and basic literacy. The aim was to cultivate a class of literate individuals who could serve the colonial administration.

However, access to these educational opportunities was highly restricted. Most schools were located in urban centers and mission stations, making them inaccessible to rural populations. Furthermore, colonial education policies favored the children of the elite and those living in coastal cities like Lagos, Calabar, and Port Harcourt. Indigenous knowledge systems and local languages were disregarded in favor of Western ideals and the English language. The early childhood education system during this time was neither inclusive nor culturally relevant for the majority of Nigerian children.

Government involvement in early childhood education was minimal during the colonial period. Most of the initiatives were undertaken by religious missions, with very little oversight or support from the colonial authorities. This resulted in a fragmented system with varying standards and inconsistent curricula.

Post-Independence Era (1960–Present): National Efforts and Modern Developments

Nigeria's independence in 1960 marked the beginning of a new phase in the development of early childhood education. The newly formed government recognized education as a tool for nation-building and economic development. As a result, education was prioritized in national development plans. The first National Development Plan (1962–1968) emphasized the expansion of educational facilities and access to schooling. However, early childhood education still did not receive the attention it deserved. The focus was primarily on primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

The introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) program in 1976 was a landmark effort aimed at expanding access to education. Although UPE was targeted at primary school-aged children, it indirectly influenced early childhood education by increasing demand for preparatory learning. Parents began to recognize the value of sending children to school earlier to better prepare them for primary education.

The 1981 National Policy on Education, which has since undergone several revisions, marked a significant turning point by officially recognizing early childhood education as part of the educational structure. The policy advocated for the establishment of pre-primary education facilities and emphasized the training of specialized teachers for young learners. The revised National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) further reinforced the government's commitment by promoting one year of pre-primary education as a requirement before entering primary school.

Key Milestones in the Development of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

- 1955: The Nigerian government establishes the first nursery school in Lagos.
- 1960: Nigeria gains independence, and the government prioritizes education as a key area for development.
- 1970s: The Universal Primary Education (UPE) program was introduced, aiming to provide free primary education to all children.
- 1980s: The Nigerian government establishes the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) to oversee teacher education.
- 1990s: The government introduces the National Policy on Education, which emphasizes the importance of early childhood education.
- 2000s: The government launches the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, which aims to provide free basic education to all children.
- 2013: The National Policy on Education is revised, emphasizing the importance of early childhood education in preparing children for primary school.

OBJECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The objectives of ECDE as rendered by FRN (2014) are to:

Facilitating Smooth Transition from Home to School

One of the core objectives of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is to create a seamless transition from the home environment to the formal school setting. At this stage, children are often leaving the protective and familiar confines of their homes for the first time. ECE programs are designed

to ease this transition by creating a nurturing and responsive environment that bridges the gap between informal home-based learning and the structured routines of formal schooling. As noted by Olaleye and Omotayo (2021), a positive start in early education plays a critical role in reducing anxiety, building confidence, and helping children adapt to the more rigid structure of primary education. The Nigerian policy emphasizes that a gradual and well-supported transition not only reduces stress but also enhances long-term school retention and academic motivation.

Preparation for Primary Education

ECE is tasked with laying a solid foundation for future learning by preparing children for the demands of primary education. This includes cognitive readiness, social adaptability, and physical coordination. According to Eze and Maduewesi (2022), children who go through structured early childhood programs demonstrate better performance in primary school, particularly in literacy and numeracy. These programs expose children to pre-reading and pre-mathematical concepts through storytelling, rhymes, number games, and drawing activities. Furthermore, the development of motor skills through manipulative play, music, and physical education activities equips children with the stamina and coordination necessary for effective participation in classroom activities.

Providing Adequate Supervision and Care

Another essential objective of ECE, especially in the Nigerian context, is to provide care and supervision for children while their parents engage in economic activities such as farming, trading, and office work. This objective is not only a social necessity but also a developmental need. The availability of safe and nurturing childcare facilities ensures that children are not left unattended or exposed to harmful environments. Akpan and Okon (2019) asserted that quality childcare during the early years contributes significantly to children's emotional security and cognitive development. In Rivers State, this function becomes particularly critical in both urban and rural areas where working-class parents struggle with balancing work and childcare responsibilities.

Inculcation of Social Norms and Values

ECE plays a vital role in the early socialization of children by teaching them the acceptable values, attitudes, and behaviours of their society. The policy emphasizes the importance of social norms such as respect for elders, cooperation with peers, cleanliness, honesty, and obedience. Through songs, storytelling, and group play, children internalize cultural norms and begin to understand the consequences of their actions. According to Ajayi and Oyinlola (2020), early exposure to social expectations helps children develop empathy, discipline, and emotional regulation traits that are essential for harmonious living and citizenship. Moreover, teaching social values at this stage ensures cultural continuity and national identity formation.

Encouraging Inquiry and Creativity

The ECE curriculum is designed to stimulate children's curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills through exploration of the environment, arts, music, and play. Play-based learning allows

children to ask questions, make discoveries, and engage in hands-on activities that foster imagination and innovation. As noted by UNESCO (2019), fostering creativity in the early years lays the groundwork for later innovation and critical thinking skills. In Nigeria, especially within the framework of the National Policy on Education, this objective is prioritized through experiential learning and child-centered methods. Teachers are encouraged to create learning scenarios where children can interact with nature, use local materials for craftwork, and participate in music and dance that reflect cultural heritage.

Promoting Team Spirit and Cooperation

Another key objective is to instill in young learners a sense of cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork. Activities such as group games, collaborative storytelling, and role-play exercises are incorporated into the curriculum to help children develop interpersonal skills and the ability to work with others. Okonkwo and Ogbonna (2020) stressed that social interaction during early childhood lays the foundation for effective communication, conflict resolution, and collaborative learning in later years. In Rivers State, promoting team spirit at an early age is vital in fostering community development and reducing the prevalence of anti-social behaviors among youths.

Instilling Healthy Habits

ECE also focuses on teaching children basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle habits. This includes proper handwashing, oral hygiene, nutritious eating, exercise, and personal cleanliness. These habits are often introduced through songs, routines, and storybooks that emphasize their importance. According to WHO (2020), early childhood is a critical period for developing lifelong health practices, and school-based interventions are effective in reinforcing these behaviors. In Nigeria, where public health challenges persist, ECE provides an avenue to instill preventive health measures in the population from a young age.

Teaching Basic Literacy and Numeracy through Play

A unique strength of ECE lies in its ability to introduce basic academic concepts through play. The National Policy emphasizes teaching letters, numbers, shapes, colors, and forms in a manner that is engaging and developmentally appropriate. Learning through play has been shown to improve attention span, memory retention, and enthusiasm for school (UNICEF, 2021). Children in Rivers State who are exposed to playful learning environments enter primary school with a stronger foundation in literacy and numeracy, which translates into better academic performance and reduced repetition rates.

IMPOTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Foundation for Lifelong Learning

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as the cornerstone of lifelong learning and human development. The experiences children have in their early years significantly shape their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns. These formative years are characterized by rapid brain development, making them a critical period for the acquisition of foundational skills such

as language, numeracy, memory, and problem-solving. According to UNESCO (2019), children who participate in quality early learning programs develop stronger cognitive skills and are more likely to thrive in formal education settings. This foundation reduces learning disparities and prepares children for academic success in primary school and beyond. In the Nigerian context, where many children begin primary school without any prior exposure to formal learning, ECE bridges this readiness gap, ensuring children acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed for progression (Adedokun et al., 2021).

Promotion of Holistic Development

ECE goes beyond academic preparation; it nurtures the total development of the child—socially, emotionally, morally, and physically. Structured play, storytelling, music, creative arts, and peer interactions help children develop communication skills, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and moral values. According to Britto et al. (2020), a holistic approach to early childhood education fosters resilience, adaptability, empathy, and collaboration, which are vital skills for navigating life. In Nigeria, especially in Rivers State, where children from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack nurturing environments at home, ECE centres can serve as protective spaces that offer stimulation, nutrition, and psychosocial support. These interventions improve not only school readiness but also children's health and behavioral outcomes in later years.

Reduction of Socio-Economic Inequality

One of the most compelling arguments for the importance of ECE is its role in reducing socio-economic disparities. Children from low-income families are more likely to start school late, repeat grades, or drop out entirely. Quality ECE programmes provide an equalizing platform by equipping all children regardless of background with the tools to succeed in school and life. UNICEF (2020) highlighted that early education is a cost-effective intervention that helps close achievement gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, and boys and girls. In communities within Rivers State, where inequalities in education are often driven by poverty, poor infrastructure, and lack of parental education, investment in early learning can help ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, gets a fair start in life.

Boost to National Human Capital Development

Investing in ECE is not only a moral obligation but a strategic economic decision. A nation's future productivity and economic competitiveness depend largely on the quality of its human capital. Early education builds the critical thinking, innovation, and interpersonal skills that modern economies require. According to the World Bank (2020), countries that invest in ECE experience higher economic returns in the long run through improved school achievement, reduced remedial education costs, and increased workforce participation. For Nigeria, where youth unemployment and skill mismatches are pressing challenges, strengthening early learning systems is a key step toward building a knowledgeable and skilled population. ECE programmes aligned with global best practices can lay the groundwork for future entrepreneurship, innovation, and national development.

Strengthening Gender Equity and Parental Involvement

ECE also contributes to gender equality and supports parental engagement in the learning process. Girls who attend early education programmes are more likely to stay in school longer, delay early marriage, and participate actively in society. At the same time, ECE centres provide opportunities for parental sensitization, where caregivers learn about nutrition, hygiene, child rights, and developmental milestones. Okonkwo and Ogbonna (2020) argued that ECE centres in Nigeria that engage parents and communities in early learning activities foster stronger home-school partnerships and encourage lifelong learning habits within families. This dual impact on both children and parents creates a culture of education that supports positive developmental outcomes and enhances societal cohesion.

CHALLENGES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN RIVERS STATE

Despite its importance, ECE in Nigeria faces several challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, poor funding, and insufficient teacher training (Ibrahim, 2014; Bagudo, 2008). Many parents undervalue pre-primary education due to concerns about quality and cost (Ibrahim, 2014). The government has implemented policies like the National Policy on Education and the UBE program to address these issues, but more needs to be done to ensure universal access and quality (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014; Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2007).

Inadequate Infrastructure and Teaching Materials

One of the most pressing challenges facing Early Childhood Education in Rivers State is the shortage of age-appropriate infrastructure and teaching materials. Many public ECE centres in the state operate in dilapidated buildings without child-friendly facilities such as low-seated furniture, colorful learning aids, functional playgrounds, and sanitary toilets. The absence of such facilities not only endangers the safety and health of children but also impedes their cognitive and physical development. According to Eze and Maduwesi (2022), many pre-primary classrooms in southern Nigeria are poorly ventilated, overcrowded, and lack stimulating environments that are essential for early learning. In several rural areas of Rivers State, children attend ECE in makeshift classrooms without visual learning tools, toys, or structured play areas, which hinders effective teaching and learning. A conducive and stimulating learning environment is vital at this stage, yet its absence continues to be a major limitation in the region.

Poor Funding of ECE Programmes

The underfunding of Early Childhood Education programmes is another critical barrier to their effectiveness in Rivers State. Despite the inclusion of ECE in Nigeria's National Policy on Education, public investment in the sector remains low compared to primary, secondary, and tertiary education. ECE is often left to private providers, religious bodies, or non-governmental organizations, which leads to disparities in access and quality. According to the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) report cited by Adeyemi and Ogunode (2021), less than 10% of the basic education budget is allocated to the pre-primary subsector. In Rivers State, the situation is worsened by inconsistent financial planning and delayed disbursement of education funds, resulting in poor maintenance of facilities, lack of instructional materials, and inadequate teacher

training. This chronic underfunding undermines the sustainability and equity of ECE, especially for children from low-income and rural backgrounds.

Lack of Qualified Early Childhood Educators

Another major challenge is the shortage of trained and specialized ECE teachers in public schools. Many teachers assigned to ECE classes in Rivers State have little or no formal training in early childhood pedagogy. This affects their ability to use child-centered teaching methods, manage young learners effectively, and deliver age-appropriate curriculum content. Studies have shown that the qualifications and competence of ECE teachers significantly influence learning outcomes at this critical stage (UNESCO, 2019). However, due to the neglect of pre-service and in-service training programmes, many teachers lack the professional skills to stimulate cognitive, emotional, and social development in preschool-aged children. Okonkwo and Ogbonna (2020) also note that teacher-pupil ratios in many ECE centres in the South-South region are far above recommended standards, leading to teacher burnout and reduced individual attention to learners. Without urgent investment in teacher recruitment, training, and motivation, the quality of early childhood instruction in Rivers State will remain suboptimal.

Weak Supervision and Policy Implementation

Policy implementation and supervision of ECE programmes in Rivers State are generally weak due to institutional lapses and lack of political will. Although the National Policy on Education mandates the provision of at least one-year pre-primary education, many public schools either do not implement this requirement or do so in name only. There is also limited monitoring by education authorities to ensure adherence to curriculum guidelines, teacher standards, and child protection regulations. According to UNICEF (2020), weak regulatory frameworks at the state level contribute to the proliferation of unapproved ECE centres with poor learning conditions and unqualified personnel. In Rivers State, the lack of a coordinated early childhood development policy and poor inter-agency collaboration further affect service delivery. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a robust monitoring and evaluation frame

GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVING ECE OBJECTIVES IN NIGERIA

To actualize the outlined objectives of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria, the government has designed several strategic initiatives. These interventions, enshrined in national education policies, are aimed at expanding access, improving quality, and fostering sustainability in ECE delivery. However, while these strategies are commendable in theory, their implementation across states, including Rivers State, has been inconsistent. Below is a critical examination of these government initiatives and their implications.

Establishment of Pre-Primary Sections in Public Schools

The Federal Government of Nigeria has mandated the integration of pre-primary sections into all existing public primary schools. This strategy is designed to increase access to early education, especially for children from low-income families who cannot afford private nursery schools. According to Ogunyemi and Aborisade (2019), the establishment of public pre-primary sections

is a step toward universalizing early childhood education and reducing disparities in access between rural and urban areas. In Rivers State, however, the actual number of public schools with functional pre-primary sections remains low, largely due to funding constraints and infrastructure deficits. Thus, the government's encouragement of community and private sector participation in ECE provision remains crucial.

Provision for Teacher Specialization in ECE

A cornerstone of effective early childhood education is the training and deployment of qualified teachers who specialize in early learning pedagogy. The government has made provisions within teacher education programs to ensure the inclusion of ECE specialization tracks in colleges of education and universities. These specialized programs emphasize child psychology, play-based instruction, and classroom management for young learners. As noted by Adeyemi and Ogunode (2021), adequately trained teachers are essential for facilitating age-appropriate learning and achieving desired developmental outcomes. However, many ECE centers in Rivers State are still staffed by unqualified personnel or primary school teachers without ECE training, which compromises the quality of instruction and undermines policy intentions.

Promotion of Indigenous Languages as Medium of Instruction

Recognizing the cognitive and cultural advantages of learning in the mother tongue, the National Policy on Education stipulates that instruction in ECE should be conducted primarily in the local language of the child's community. This approach aligns with research indicating that children learn more effectively when taught in a familiar language (UNESCO, 2019). To support this initiative, the government has committed to developing orthographies for Nigerian languages and producing culturally relevant textbooks. However, the implementation of this policy has been slow due to the lack of standard orthographies for many local dialects and the scarcity of teaching materials in indigenous languages. In Rivers State, where multiple local languages exist, this poses a significant challenge, although efforts are ongoing to develop materials in widely spoken languages such as Ikwerre, Kalabari, and Ogoni (Okonkwo & Ogbonna, 2020).

Play-Based Learning as the Main Teaching Method

The government emphasizes that play should be the central method of instruction at the early childhood level. Play-based learning supports creativity, exploration, and social interaction core components of holistic child development. The curriculum for teacher education is also expected to be reoriented to reflect this philosophy. According to UNICEF (2021), play is not merely a recreational activity; it is a critical learning mechanism through which children develop problem-solving skills, motor coordination, and emotional resilience. Unfortunately, many public ECE centers, particularly in Rivers State, lack the necessary learning materials and space to support effective play-based learning. There is an urgent need for investment in play equipment, teacher training, and classroom design to ensure this policy is successfully implemented.

Regulation and Monitoring of Minimum Standards

To ensure quality and accountability, the government is tasked with setting and monitoring minimum operational standards for early childcare centers. This includes enforcing a maximum teacher-pupil ratio of 1:25, ensuring the safety and hygiene of learning environments, and requiring the use of developmentally appropriate curricula. The National Early Childhood Development Standards (NECDS) serve as a guiding framework for this purpose. However, Adepoju (2020) argued that the enforcement of these standards remains weak, especially in informal and unregistered ECE centers. In Rivers State, insufficient monitoring personnel and inadequate data on existing centers hinder effective regulation. Strengthening monitoring frameworks and involving local education authorities and communities in oversight roles could improve compliance.

Ensuring Stakeholder Participation in ECE Delivery

The success of any ECE initiative hinges on the active involvement of stakeholders: government agencies, community members, parent-teacher associations, and non-governmental organizations. The national policy rightly calls for the full participation of these groups in the establishment, management, and funding of early childhood education facilities. Community participation not only enhances ownership and accountability but also ensures that local needs and cultural values are reflected in program delivery. As reported by Eze and Maduewesi (2022), where communities are empowered to contribute land, materials, or volunteer services, ECE centers become more sustainable and responsive to the people they serve. In Rivers State, fostering partnerships between local government authorities, traditional institutions, and civil society groups is essential for bridging service delivery gaps.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Improving Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of educational quality, accessibility, and community involvement. Here are several key strategies for enhancing ECE programs:

Teacher Training

One of the primary strategies for improving ECE programs is through comprehensive teacher training. Research indicates that well-trained teachers are better equipped to deliver high-quality instruction that is responsive to children's developmental needs (Briggs et al., 2012). Professional development programs that focus on evidence-based teaching practices, classroom management, and child development are essential for enhancing teachers' effectiveness. Studies have shown that children taught by teachers with specialized training in early childhood education exhibit better academic and social outcomes (Ololube et al., 2009).

Curriculum Design and Implementation

A developmentally appropriate curriculum that is both challenging and engaging is crucial for fostering children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Integrating play-based learning,

hands-on activities, and exploratory learning opportunities can enhance children's critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Ensuring that the curriculum aligns with developmental milestones and individual learning needs is also vital (Ololube et al., 2009; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

Parental and Community Engagement

Engaging parents and the community in the educational process can create a supportive and enriching environment for children. Strategies include organizing parent workshops, creating volunteer opportunities, and establishing regular communication channels between teachers and families. Community partnerships can also provide additional resources and support, such as health services, nutrition programs, and extracurricular activities (Briggs et al., 2012).

Inclusive Practices

Implementing inclusive practices ensures that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to quality education. This involves adapting teaching methods to cater to diverse learning needs, providing specialized support where necessary, and fostering an inclusive classroom environment that celebrates diversity. Inclusion promotes empathy, respect, and social cohesion among young learners (Ololube et al., 2010).

Assessment and Continuous Improvement

Regular assessment and evaluation of both student progress and program effectiveness are essential for continuous improvement. Formative assessments help educators tailor instruction to meet individual needs, while summative assessments provide insights into overall program outcomes. Using data-driven decision-making can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that ECE programs are meeting their goals (Shepard et al., 1998).

Enhanced Learning Environments

Creating stimulating and safe learning environments is fundamental to children's development. This includes both indoor and outdoor spaces that are well-organized, resource-rich, and designed to encourage exploration and learning. Providing age-appropriate materials, ensuring safety standards, and creating inviting spaces can significantly enhance children's engagement and learning experiences (Briggs et al., 2014).

Policy and Advocacy

Advocacy for supportive policies and increased funding for ECE programs can lead to significant improvements. Policies that ensure equitable access to quality ECE, adequate teacher compensation, and comprehensive support services are critical. Advocacy efforts can also raise public awareness about the importance of early education and garner support for necessary reforms (Ololube et al., 2009).

Use of Technology

Integrating technology in ECE can enhance learning experiences and provide innovative educational tools. Interactive software, educational games, and online resources can support various aspects of learning, from literacy and numeracy to social-emotional skills. However, it is important to ensure that technology is used appropriately and does not replace hands-on, play-based learning.

LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Improved Literacy and Numeracy Skills

One of the most significant long-term benefits of quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills. During the early years, children's brains are highly receptive to structured learning environments that expose them to phonics, language acquisition, number concepts, pattern recognition, and problem-solving activities. According to Adedokun et al. (2021), children who attend well-resourced ECE centres perform better in reading, writing, and arithmetic when they transition into primary education. This early exposure enables them to decode and process information more effectively, thus accelerating their academic growth. Moreover, UNESCO (2019) affirmed that early learning builds cognitive frameworks that support more complex intellectual tasks later in life, such as logical reasoning and abstract thinking. In Nigeria, where primary education often begins with limited individualized attention, pupils with prior ECE experience are better positioned to understand classroom instructions and actively participate in learning.

Better School Readiness and Academic Performance

Early exposure to structured learning prepares children for the demands and routines of formal schooling. Children who attend ECE programmes are more likely to arrive in primary school with the behavioral and cognitive readiness needed for effective participation. School readiness includes not only pre-literacy and numeracy skills but also the ability to follow instructions, engage in group tasks, and exhibit attention control. According to Eze and Maduewesi (2022), pupils in Rivers State who had access to early childhood education demonstrated greater confidence and independence in classroom activities compared to their peers without such backgrounds. These attributes positively affect their long-term academic performance, resulting in better test scores, class participation, and continuous academic progression. In addition, a strong ECE foundation reduces the likelihood of pupils repeating grades or needing remedial support, thereby improving efficiency in the education system.

Enhanced Social Interaction and Emotional Regulation

ECE programmes also support social and emotional development by promoting interaction with peers, teachers, and caregivers in a structured environment. Through group activities, storytelling, role-play, and conflict resolution exercises, children learn to communicate their feelings, share resources, follow rules, and resolve disagreements peacefully. These experiences

are crucial in fostering empathy, self-control, and cooperation skills that are essential for life success. According to UNICEF (2020), children who develop emotional regulation and positive peer relationships during early childhood are more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior, maintain friendships, and avoid behavioral problems in later schooling. In the context of Rivers State, Okonkwo and Ogbonna (2020) emphasized that emotional and social competencies developed through early education help children adapt better to school settings and reduce anxiety and behavioral disruptions. These skills are transferable to future contexts, including secondary schooling, the workplace, and personal relationships.

Reduced Dropout Rates and Improved Life Outcomes

Another key benefit of improved ECE is its long-term impact on school retention and life outcomes. Children who begin their educational journey with a strong foundation are less likely to drop out of school as they progress. Research shows that children who attend quality ECE programmes have higher rates of secondary school completion and are more likely to pursue higher education or vocational training (World Bank, 2020). This educational continuity contributes to better employment prospects, higher income potential, and increased civic participation in adulthood. Furthermore, ECE has been linked to reduced involvement in crime, improved health practices, and greater resilience in the face of adversity. In their longitudinal study, Britto et al. (2020) found that early investment in cognitive and emotional development significantly predicts adult well-being and socio-economic mobility. Therefore, in a state like Rivers where educational inequality and youth unemployment are major concerns, strengthening early childhood education can serve as a proactive strategy for long-term social development and economic empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reaffirm the critical role of Early Childhood Education (ECE) as the foundation for lifelong learning, personal development, and national progress. Despite the Nigerian government's recognition of its importance particularly through policies such as the National Policy on Education and the Universal Basic Education programme the implementation of ECE in Rivers State continues to face substantial challenges. These include inadequate infrastructure, poor funding, lack of qualified educators, weak supervision, and uneven community engagement. Such barriers undermine the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of early childhood education, especially in underserved and rural communities.

However, the study also identifies clear, evidence-based strategies for reversing this trend and achieving the long-term developmental benefits that quality ECE promises. Enhancing teacher training, implementing inclusive and play-based curricula, improving learning environments, ensuring robust policy enforcement, and fostering stakeholder involvement are all crucial for a functional ECE system. If effectively applied, these strategies can significantly improve school readiness, literacy and numeracy outcomes, social development, and life trajectories of children in Rivers State.

To secure the future of its young population, Rivers State must prioritize early childhood education as a strategic investment in human capital. It requires political will, sustainable funding, inter-agency collaboration, and a commitment to equity and excellence in education. By addressing the systemic deficiencies and embracing innovative, child-centered approaches, the

state can harness the transformative potential of ECE and ensure that every child regardless of background has a strong start in life.

Suggestions for Relevant Stakeholders

- Federal Government should increase budgetary allocation to Early Childhood Education (ECE) to ensure sustainable funding for infrastructure, teaching materials, and capacity-building across states.
- Rivers State Government should prioritize the construction and renovation of age-appropriate, child-friendly ECE centers, especially in underserved rural areas.
- Local Government Authorities Should monitor and ensure the implementation of national ECE policies in public schools within their jurisdictions through regular inspections and reports.
- Ministry of education should organize periodic training and retraining programs for early childhood educators to improve pedagogical skills and curriculum delivery.
- Teacher Training Institutions Should incorporate specialized ECE modules into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to produce qualified early childhood educators.
- School administrators should create inclusive, safe, and stimulating environments by integrating play-based learning, health education, and social development into daily activities.
- Parents and guardians should actively participate in their children's early learning by supporting home-based educational activities and collaborating with teachers.
- Community leaders should advocate for and support the establishment of ECE centers through community mobilization, land donations, and volunteer services.
- Private sector should partner with government and NGOs to sponsor ECE initiatives through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), particularly in resource-poor communities.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Should provide technical and material support, conduct advocacy, and implement intervention programs that address gaps in early childhood education.

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