

ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA THROUGH INTEGRATED EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES, TEACHER TRAINING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between the Nigerian tertiary education system and early childhood education, with a particular focus on the impact of tertiary education on the quality of early childhood learning and development. It looked at the challenges faced by Nigerian tertiary institutions, which range from limited resources and outdated curricula to insufficient practical training for aspiring educators. The study emphasizes the influence of tertiary education curricula, the competence of trained teachers, the availability of resources, and the efficacy of government policies in shaping early childhood education in Nigeria. The findings highlight the urgent need for systematic reforms within the Nigerian tertiary education system. This urgency is echoed in the study's call for curriculum revisions, augmented practical training experiences, and collaborative initiatives between educational institutions, governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. The study's implications offer insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers nationally and globally, emphasizing the importance of contextually relevant and updated early childhood education practices. Importantly, this study highlights the special role of early childhood education as the bedrock of societal development. It emphasizes the significance of ensuring that every child receives a comprehensive and robust educational foundation. Recommendations included coordinated efforts and shared responsibility of various stakeholders, advocating for a future where early childhood education in Nigeria is not just a goal but a fundamental right, thereby contributing substantially to the nation's progress and fostering a generation of well-equipped, empowered, and knowledgeable individuals.

Keywords: Nigerian Tertiary education system, quality, early childhood, learning, development

Introduction

The Nigerian Tertiary Education System comprises of universities, colleges, and polytechnics. Tertiary education in Nigeria is regulated by the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), as mandated by the Nigerian Constitution. The system consists of federal, state, and private institutions, each possessing distinct characteristics and facing individual issues (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 2013). The tertiary education system in Nigeria has

encountered various challenges such as insufficient financial resources, obsolete curricula, and poor facilities (Ajayi, 2015). These problems have implications not only for higher education but also for the quality of education at earlier stages, including early childhood education.

Early childhood development and learning establish the foundation for a child's future success in education and in life. Children acquire essential cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills during the early years (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, and Barnett (2010) found a correlation between high-quality early childhood education programmes and improved academic performance, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced social and emotional abilities. Investing in early childhood education is crucial in Nigeria as it plays an important role in disrupting the cycle of poverty, enhancing literacy rates, and promoting national development (Federal Ministry of Education, 2016). The training gained by educators in the tertiary education system has a considerable impact on the quality of early childhood education.

Literature Review

The Nigerian Tertiary Education System: An Overview

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's education system has gone through significant changes. Initially influenced by British colonial models, the system has evolved through the implementation of numerous educational policies and reforms. Historically, the Nigerian education system has been marred by disparities in access, quality, and relevance, which are frequently influenced by political, economic, and social factors (Ajayi, 2006).

The tertiary education system in Nigeria consists of universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics, each of which serves a distinct educational function. Universities in Nigeria provide the highest level of tertiary education. They offer both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and are recognised for their emphasis on theoretical knowledge and research-based education. In Nigeria, colleges of education emphasise specialised disciplines in education leading to the award of Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE). Other colleges provide trainings in the fields of agriculture, health, and technology. They offer certificate and diploma programmes and bridge the divide between secondary school and university. Polytechnics provide technical and vocational education programmes for national and Higher National Diploma (ND/ HND). In fields such as engineering, computer science, and business studies, they emphasise practical skills and prepare students for specific vocations.

In Nigerian higher institutions, the curriculum is often organised into academic departments, with courses designed around academic specialties. Core courses, electives, and practical training in specialised disciplines are frequently included in the curriculum. However, curricular relevance has been criticised, with suggestions for a more practical, industry-oriented focus (Adeyinka & Adebukola, 2017). Lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, and field experiences are common methods of teaching in Nigerian higher education institutions. The major method of

instruction is lectures, with increasing efforts to incorporate interactive and student-centred teaching methods to improve learning results (Ajadi, 2017).

In Nigeria, teacher education is mostly provided at universities and colleges of education. Individuals who want to become educators obtain the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) or Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree, which provide pedagogical knowledge and skills for teaching. There are also specialised postgraduate programmes for those who want to be teachers, such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) (FRN, 2013).

The challenges encountered by institutions of higher education include funding, the quality of the education provided, infrastructure, and political instability. The endemic underfunding of tertiary institutions in Nigeria has led to inadequate infrastructure, obsolete facilities, and limited resources for research and development (Ololube, 2013). Concerns regarding the quality of education include obsolete curricula, insufficient practical training, and a mismatch between the skills of graduates and industry needs. Furthermore, the standardisation of education across institutions is a source of concern (Aluede & Imhonde, 2016). In addition, many tertiary institutions lack essential infrastructure, such as well-equipped laboratories, libraries, and internet access. This hinders students' research activities and overall educational experience (Ogundele, 2015). Lastly, periodic strikes by academic staff unions like the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU), and Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) in response to issues such as unpaid salaries and poor working conditions disrupt the academic calendar, resulting in delayed graduation and extended education periods (Adeyinka, 2018). These issues impede the provision of quality education and have a disproportionate impact on early childhood education programmes (FGN/UNICEF, 2018; World Bank, 2019).

Early Childhood Learning and Development in Nigeria

Early childhood education is critical because it establishes a child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. High-quality early childhood programmes regularly promote school readiness, academic achievement, and lead to positive social behaviours later in life (Barnett, 2011). Early education also aids in the development of important abilities such as language competence, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, giving children a head start in life.

Several theoretical frameworks guide early childhood education. Piagetian theory focuses on cognitive stages, whereas Vygotsky's sociocultural theory focuses on social interaction and cultural background. Environmental influences on a child's development are considered in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, while psychological demands are highlighted in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Berk, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Countries around the world also adopt diverse approaches to early childhood education. The Reggio Emilia approach in Italy emphasizes child-led learning and creativity. In Finland, play-based learning is central, while in China, academic rigour starts early. Comparative studies provide guidance regarding effective

early childhood education strategies (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Stacey, 2007).

Despite the fact that there have been efforts made to advance early childhood education in Nigeria, obstacles such as restricted access to high-quality programmes continue to exist. According to FME (2016), rural areas suffer from a shortage of both infrastructure and awareness, which leads to lower enrolment rates. Ogunyemi (2016) found that there are disparities in the quality of early childhood education exist between urban and rural areas. Urban centres often have better-equipped facilities and trained teachers, while rural areas struggle with inadequate resources.

The factors influencing the Quality of Early Childhood Education include teacher training, curriculum relevance, and infrastructure and resources. The qualifications and training of teachers significantly impact the quality of early childhood education. Well-trained educators understand child development principles, leading to effective teaching strategies (Egunyomi & Olorukooba, 2015). The relevance of the curriculum to the cultural context and the needs of the children is crucial. A curriculum that integrates local culture and language fosters better engagement and learning outcomes (Osokoya & Okwilagwe, 2014). Adequate infrastructure, including safe classrooms, play areas, and learning materials, is essential for a conducive learning environment. Lack of resources negatively affects the quality of education (Adegbile, 2017).

Caregivers and parents have a crucial role to play in early childhood development through the provision of emotional support, early stimulation and health and nutrition. According to Landry, Smith, Swank and Assel (2001), emotional support from caregivers and parents is fundamental for a child's development. Positive interactions and a nurturing environment contribute to emotional well-being and social skills. Caregivers and parents play a vital role in stimulating a child's curiosity and creativity through activities such as reading, storytelling, and interactive play enhance cognitive and language skills (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006). In addition, ensuring access to proper nutrition and healthcare is critical. This is because malnutrition and health issues can hinder a child's physical and cognitive development as noted by Black, Allen, Bhutta, Caulfield, de Onis, Ezzati, ... and Rivera (2008).

Impact of Nigerian Tertiary Education on Early Childhood Learning

Early childhood education is highly influenced by the curricula that are taught in tertiary education institutions. The knowledge and abilities of future educators can be improved by ensuring that their training programmes are in line with current results from research on child development, pedagogy, and educational psychology. In addition, a curriculum that is well-designed helps foster an awareness of age-appropriate teaching methods, child psychology, and

socio-emotional development, which has a direct impact on how young children are taught and nurtured (Goffin & Wilson, 2018).

Tertiary institutions are responsible for shaping future educators. The quality of training directly impacts teachers' pedagogical competence. Well-trained teachers possess a strong theoretical foundation, teaching techniques, and classroom management skills necessary for effective early childhood education (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Tertiary education instils professional ethics in future educators, emphasizing the importance of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and ethical conduct. These qualities are vital when working with young children and their families, ensuring a positive and inclusive learning environment (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1995). Tertiary institutions equipped with modern teaching aids and learning materials enable educators to understand the significance of age-appropriate resources. Exposure to diverse teaching tools enhances creativity and innovation in designing engaging learning experiences for young learners (Clements & Sarama, 2017). In addition, access to well-equipped preschools or childcare centres within tertiary institutions provides future teachers with opportunities for practical experience. Direct interactions with children under supervision enhance their understanding of classroom dynamics, child behaviour, and effective teaching strategies (Katz, 1993).

In Nigeria, government policies regulate the standards of early childhood education. Tertiary institutions, aligning their programmes with these policies, ensure that teachers are well-versed with the latest regulations, contributing to the creation of safe, high-quality learning environments (Bennett & Vygotsky, 2013). Government funding directly impacts the availability of resources in tertiary institutions. Adequate financial support ensures the development of state-of-the-art facilities, research opportunities, and scholarships, encouraging more students to pursue careers in early childhood education (Carnoy, 2019). Government initiatives for continuous professional development of early childhood educators encourage collaboration between tertiary institutions and practicing teachers. This collaboration enhances the exchange of knowledge, ensuring that educators are updated with the latest teaching methodologies and research findings (Yinger & Hendricks, 1995).

Research on the influence of tertiary education on early childhood development in Nigeria reveals that well-trained educators significantly enhance children's learning experiences. Nigerian teachers who are equipped with advanced knowledge and pedagogical skills create stimulating environments that are conducive to learning and social development. Studies by Olaleye and Omotayo (2009); as well as Ajayi and Ekundayo (2011) have demonstrated that well-educated teachers contribute to improved cognitive and social outcomes in early childhood education settings. These findings highlight the critical role of teacher education programmes in preparing educators to foster young learners' development effectively.

Case Studies and Empirical Evidence of Successful Early Childhood Education Programmes

There is a wealth of available evidences regarding schools in Nigeria that adopted early childhood education practises and saw positive results as a result of their implementation. The Rainbow Nursery School, Lagos school implemented an integrated curriculum focusing on play-based learning, child-centred teaching, and parental involvement. Through community engagement and continuous teacher training, the school created a nurturing environment that significantly enhanced children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Adebukola, 2017). Another example is the Childville School, Lagos. The school effectively uses a holistic approach to early childhood education, integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development into their curriculum. They use technology, music, and arts to address various aspects of learning and individual needs. This approach fosters creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence, resulting in well-rounded students with enhanced problem-solving skills and resilience (Osaretin & Uwadiae, 2018).

There are also empirical evidences in Nigeria which support the impact of tertiary education on early childhood learning. For example, studies have shown that teachers who graduate from institutions with comprehensive early childhood education programs are better prepared to teach young children. Research by Ajayi and Ogunyemi (2018) demonstrated a positive correlation between teacher training in tertiary institutions and the quality of early childhood education, emphasizing the importance of pedagogical training in shaping effective early childhood educators. Similarly, research by Aladejana and Odejobi (2006) found that well-trained early childhood educators in Nigeria significantly enhance children's cognitive and social development. Another study by Oduolowu (2009) confirmed that teachers with specialized training in early childhood education from tertiary institutions implement more effective teaching strategies, which lead to better learning outcomes for young children.

Comparative analyses between Nigeria's early childhood education system and international standards, such as the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy, the High/Scope approach in the United States, and the Te Whāriki framework in New Zealand, reveal several areas for potential improvement in Nigerian programmes. The Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes child-led learning, creativity, and the importance of the environment as the third teacher (Danga, 2024). This method encourages children to explore and express themselves through various forms of art and play. In contrast, Nigerian early childhood education programmes often follow more traditional, teacher-centred methods, which may limit opportunities for child-led exploration and creative expression. Therefore, principles from the Reggio Emilia approach, such as fostering a rich, stimulating environment and allowing children more autonomy in their learning activities, when adapted into the Nigerian programmes can better support children's natural curiosity and creativity (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012).

The High/Scope approach focuses on active participatory learning, where children have a say in what they do each day. They plan, carry out, and review their activities, which promotes decision-making and problem-solving skills. Nigerian early childhood education programmes might not emphasize such high levels of child autonomy and active learning, often following more rigid curricular structures. Incorporating elements of the High/Scope approach can help Nigerian programmes encourage children to take an active role in their learning. This includes creating opportunities for children to make choices, interact with their peers, and engage in hands-on activities (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002).

The Te Whāriki framework emphasizes holistic development, integrating cultural values and fostering relationships among children, families, and communities. It is designed to be inclusive and culturally responsive, reflecting New Zealand's diverse society. Nigerian early childhood programmes may sometimes overlook the importance of cultural context and holistic development, focusing more on academic readiness. By adopting aspects of the Te Whāriki framework, Nigerian early childhood education can become more culturally sensitive and inclusive. This would involve valuing and including local traditions, languages, and family practices into the curriculum, thus fostering a sense of identity and belonging among young learners (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Challenges and Solutions in Improving Early Childhood Education through the Nigerian Tertiary Education System

As previously highlighted, the Nigerian tertiary education system faces a number of challenges, including those listed below which affect early childhood education programmes:

1. **Limited Resources:** Tertiary institutions often lack adequate funding and resources to offer comprehensive training in early childhood education. Outdated facilities and a lack of modern teaching aids hinder the quality of education provided to future educators (FME, 2014).
2. **Outdated Curricula:** Many tertiary education programmes have curricula that do not align with current research and international best practices in early childhood education. This mismatch affects the preparedness of graduates to meet the demands of modern teaching environments (Obomanu & Gbamanja, 2019).
3. **Insufficient Practical Experience:** Limited access to practical teaching experiences, such as internships and classroom observations, leaves future educators ill-equipped to handle real-world early childhood education scenarios (Prah & Agbenyega, 2019).

In view of the aforementioned challenges, the following are recommended as solutions:

1. **Curriculum Revision:** Tertiary institutions in Nigeria should regularly update their curricula to align with global standards and incorporate the latest research findings. Collaboration with early childhood education experts and practitioners can aid in curriculum development.

Studies by Nigerian scholars, such as Osanyin and Oladejo (2016), emphasize the importance of continuously evolving the curriculum to meet contemporary educational needs and global best practices. Regular revisions ensure that educators are equipped with the most current pedagogical strategies and knowledge, ultimately benefiting early childhood education in Nigeria.

2. **Practical Training Enhancement:** Tertiary institutions should form collaborations with preschools, kindergartens, and early childhood education centres to provide student-teachers with practical experience. According to Akinpelu and Ojo (2019), teaching practice and practicum programmes offer essential opportunities for students to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. These practical experiences are vital for bridging the gap between classroom learning and actual teaching practice in early childhood education.
3. **Continuous Professional Development:** Tertiary institutions should encourage lecturers and early childhood educators to participate in continuous professional development to stay abreast of the latest trends and innovations in early childhood education. In Nigeria, workshops, seminars, and conferences can be instrumental in facilitating knowledge exchange and updating teaching practices. Bello and Ahmed (2021), emphasize the importance of ongoing training for educators to enhance their skills and effectively implement contemporary educational strategies.

Role of Government, NGOs, and Community Involvement

- i. **Government Support:** The government should increase funding for tertiary institutions, specifically allocating funds for early childhood education programmes. Establishing quality assurance mechanisms and regulatory standards can ensure the consistency and effectiveness of these programmes (Olayiwola & Fasasi, 2017).
- ii. **NGO Initiatives:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can collaborate with tertiary institutions to provide financial support, training resources, and expertise. Initiatives that focus on curriculum development and teacher training can significantly enhance the quality of education (UNESCO, 2015).
- iii. **Community Involvement:** Communities can play an active role by supporting local schools and colleges. Parent-teacher associations, community workshops, and awareness campaigns can create a supportive environment, fostering a sense of collective responsibility for early childhood education. Community engagement, through initiatives such as local support groups and collaborative projects, enhances the quality of early childhood education, building strong community ties to support educational development and improve outcomes for young learners (Adebayo & Olaniyan, 2021).

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the Nigerian tertiary education system on early childhood education, highlighting the influence of curricula, teacher quality, resources, and government

policies. The key challenges identified include limited resources, outdated curricula, and inadequate practical training for future early childhood educators. The findings stress the need for comprehensive reforms, including updating curricula, enhancing practical training, and encouragement of partnerships with government, NGOs, and communities. Improving early childhood education in Nigeria is central towards building a strong and solid foundation for lifelong learning and development. It requires a collective effort from educators, policymakers, parents, and the broader community to ensure that every child receives high-quality education and a strong start in life. Prioritizing early childhood education will significantly contribute to the nation's progress and future prosperity.

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