

# Exploring Effective Management Strategies for Improving Early Childhood Education in Delta State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The study explored effective management strategies for improving early childhood education in Nigeria. Two research questions were raised in the study. The descriptive survey design was used. The study population was made up of 1,350 public Nursery School heads and 5,000 teachers in Delta State. A total number of 274 respondents consisting of 27 school heads and 247 teachers were selected from 27 Nursery schools attached to public Primary Schools in Delta State. In selecting Public Nursery schools, proportional stratified sampling technique was used. 27 schools were selected from 9 Local Government Areas across the 3 Senatorial Districts in Delta State. Three Local Government Areas (LGAs) were randomly selected from each senatorial district given a total of Nine LGAs across the state. A self - designed questionnaire titled “Management Strategies for Improving Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (MSFIECEQ)”, was validated and its reliability was equally determined through a pilot study using test re-test reliability technique with a coefficient index of 0.83. Each item was anchored on a Likert four rating scale of: Strongly Agree (SA), Agreed (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The research questions raised were answered using simple percentage, mean score and standard deviation. From the findings, it was concluded that management strategies for improving early childhood education in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach. The Nigerian government, private sector and international organizations must collaborate to address funding challenges, improve resources utilization and ensure equitable access. Based on the conclusion, it was therefore recommended that government and policy-makers should increase government allocation for early childhood education, encourage private sector investment through tax incentives and corporate social responsibility, encourage inspection and supervision of early childhood education centers, review the curriculum, foster community engagement and parental involvement.

**Keywords:** Management, Strategies, Improving, Early Childhood, Education.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is gaining increasing recognition globally as a fundamental pillar for fostering human capital and the knowledge economy. High-quality childcare from birth is now acknowledged as the optimal starting point. Consequently, the quality and intensity of care, nutrition, and stimulation a child receives during this period significantly influence their physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development (UNICEF, 2021). The learning process commences with parents at home and subsequent transitions to teachers in the school.

Early Childhood Education (ECE), also referred to as integrated early childhood development (IECD) in Nigeria, encompasses the educational experiences of children during their early childhood years (REAP, 2021). Additionally, Early Childhood Education can serve as a valuable supplement to a child's formal education. The significance of early childhood education lies in its impact on the development of children's mental functions, including language, motor skills, psychosocial skills, cognitive skills, and learning (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2021). Furthermore, early childhood education enhances children's school readiness, yielding positive economic and social outcomes that persist into adulthood, including the attainment of advanced degrees and reduced risks of engaging in criminal activities, ultimately leading to higher status jobs (Schweinhart, 2017; Sparling, Ramey, & Ramey, 2017).

As outlined in the National Education Policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013), early childhood education is formally defined as pre-school education, catering for children aged three to five years and above, prior to primary school enrollment. The policy document stipulates that the primary objectives of preschool education encompass facilitating a seamless transition from home to school, preparing children for primary level of education, providing adequate care and supervision for children while their parents are engaged in work-related activities, and fostering a spirit of inquiry and creativity in children through exploration of their natural surroundings, play based activities, artistic and musical pursuits, among others.

Moreover, they gain foundational knowledge of numbers, letters, colors, shapes, and other essential concepts through play-based learning and social norm integration. They also learn through health education how to improve their own health and protect others in the community (Atakpo, 2020). State and Local Government involvement are essential for establishing and enforcing educational legislation that guarantees well-managed preschools, qualified teachers, and adequate academic infrastructure. The significance of early childhood education in comprehensive child development is internationally recognized. This recognition is reflected in the priority accorded to early childhood education in various developing countries. Nigeria, as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Education for All (EFA) in 1990, is dedicated to providing comprehensive early childhood education and care for all preschool students.

Early Childhood Education, previously confined to the private sector, is now incorporated in the formal school system, necessitating public schools to establish links with preschool education. The Education Policy (2014) incorporates Early Childhood Education, the Federal Government of Nigeria has demonstrated increased commitment through the inauguration of the Early Childhood Education Policy in 2014. Realizing the laudable goals of Early Childhood Education necessitates providing basic resources, including qualified and competent teachers and educators, as well as an adequate learning environment in terms of space, safety, and security materials.

### **Challenges in Effective Management of Early Childhood Education**

There are many problems facing the management of early childhood education in Nigeria. Some of them according to (Alabi, 2023) include; insufficient government allocation/funding, dependence on international donors, inadequate private sector investment, corruption and inefficient resource utilization. Others are lack of infrastructure, teacher shortages and training, community engagement, policy inconsistencies and economic constraints also, the problem of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Atakpo, Obed-Chukwuka and Akpotu, 2024)

- **Insufficient Government Allocation/Funding:** Nigeria's government budget for education is frequently inadequate, resulting in underfunding for early childhood education. In Nigeria, inadequate funding has been a significant challenge facing the management of education, particularly the early child education programme. The Early child education programme relies on the Ministry of Education for its budget, which is allocated by the federal, state, and local government authorities. According to Ogunode (2020), the annual allocation for education administration in Nigeria is insufficient and falls below the UNESCO-recommended 26% for developing countries like Nigeria.

In the field of Early Childhood Education, sufficient funds must be available to provide numerous resources. These resources include facilities and stimulating materials for teaching, training and retraining of staff (teachers and care givers) in appropriate institutions such as teacher training colleges and universities), the enrichment of programs and awareness through regular seminars, monitoring, uniforms, feeding, vaccination, surveillance and inspection, report writing, publications, school meals and training manuals. Adequate funding is essential to provide these resources.

Ijaiya (2021) has noted that with sufficient resources, access to education can be enhanced, whereas quality education is hindered by inadequate funding. In developed nations, preschool education financing typically holds a prominent position in national budgets. The United States, for example, has estimated the annual cost of providing quality preschool education at \$70 billion, with an annual cost per child of approximately \$8,700 (Ajayi, 2018). Similarly, Ireland has allocated a substantial amount of €436.7 million (\$580 million) for

childcare funding. Other countries that have acknowledged the economic and social benefits of early childhood education and invested heavily in it include Brazil, Zambia, Niger, South Africa, and Ghana (Ramires, Paira, and Almeida, 2019). Consequently, in such an unfavorable environment, children's learning outcomes are severely impacted. Similarly, the learning environment of rural preschools is often characterized by substandard facilities and teacher quality. With a few exceptions, such as some preschools established by universities, teacher training colleges, businesses, and affluent individuals, the overall quality of facilities and staff is generally below expectation (Ejeh, 2016).

- **Inadequate private sector investment:** Private organizations often prioritize profit over social responsibility.
- **Corruption:** Mismanagement and diversion of funds hinder effective resource utilization.
- **Inefficient resource utilization:** Poor resource allocation and management exacerbate funding challenges.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Insufficient classrooms, materials, and facilities hinder the delivery of quality education. In Nigeria, inadequate infrastructural facilities pose a significant challenge to the effective management of early child education. The infrastructural facilities necessary for the successful implementation of early child education programs are lacking.
- **Teacher shortages and training:** Insufficient trained teachers and poor working conditions affect educational quality. Atakpo (2024) emphasized the importance of access to appropriate training, quality standards and remuneration that retains trained staff for this sector.
- **Community engagement:** Limited parental and community involvement hinders education outcomes.
- **Policy inconsistencies:** Frequent policy changes and lack of implementation create uncertainty.
- **Economic constraints:** Poverty, inflation, and economic instability impact education funding.

### Strategies to Improve Management of Early Childhood Education

Ogunode, Jegede, & Ajape (2021) outlined management strategies to improve early childhood education as follows:

- **Increased government allocation:** Advocate for increased budgetary allocation for early childhood education.
- **International partnerships:** Collaborate with organizations like UNICEF, World Bank, and USAID. Various international organisations have contributed funds, materials and technical support to get Early Childhood Education to its present level/status in Nigeria. Such organizations include UNICEF, UNESCO, ESSPIN and World Bank. In order to sustain and possibly increase such contributions, efforts need to be made by the various governments and their agencies (UBEC, SUBEB etc) towards prudence and accountability in their use of such supports. The donors should insist on at least two years of independent private monitoring.
- **Private sector investment:** Offer tax incentives for corporate social responsibility initiatives.
- **Efficient resource utilization:** Implement cost-effective measures, reduce waste.
- **Teacher training:** Provide capacity-building programs for educators.
- **Sustainable funding models:** Explore social impact bonds, public-private partnerships.
- **Community engagement:** Foster parental involvement through community-based programs.
- **Context-specific curriculum:** Develop culturally relevant materials.
- **Institutional strengthening:** Enhance regulatory frameworks, monitoring.
- **Policy implementation:** Ensure effective execution of early childhood education policies.

### Statement of the Problem

Nigeria faces significant challenges in providing quality and sustainable early childhood education (ECE). Early Childhood Education is plagued with insufficient government allocation (less than 10% of the national budget). Inadequate private sector investment, limited access to resources and utilization, lack of capacity building for Early Childhood Education, inadequate infrastructures and learning materials and poor policy

implementation and coordination. Therefore, there is need for government and policy makers to adopt effective management strategies for improving Early Childhood Education.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised in the study:

- What are the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education in Delta State, Nigeria?
- What are the management strategies for improving Early Childhood Education in Delta State, Nigeria?

**METHOD**

The study population was made up of 1,350 public Nursery School heads and 5,000 teachers in Delta State. A total number of 274 respondents consisting of 27 school heads and 247 teachers were selected from 27 Nursery schools attached to public Primary Schools in Delta State. In selecting Public Nursery schools, proportional stratified sampling technique was used. 27 schools were selected from 9 Local Government Areas across the 3 Senatorial Districts in Delta State. Three Local Government Areas (LGAs) were randomly selected from each senatorial district given a total of Nine LGAs across the state. A self - designed questionnaire titled “Management Strategies for Improving Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (MSFIECEQ)”, was validated and its reliability was equally determined through a pilot study using test re-test reliability technique with a coefficient index of 0.83. Each item was anchored on a Likert four rating scale of: Strongly Agree (SA), Agreed (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The research questions raised were answered using simple percentage, mean score and standard deviation.

**Research Question 1**

- What are the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education in Delta State, Nigeria?

Table 1: Responses to challenges of improving Early Childhood Education

	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	MEAN	STD
1	Insufficient government allocation	115(42.2%)	42(15.3%)	88(32%)	29(10.5%)	2.84	.83
2	Dependence on international donors	156(56.7%)	60(22.2%)	34(12.4%)	24(8.7%)	3.76	.77
3	Corruption	120(43.6%)	76(28%)	50(18.2%)	28(10.2%)	3.71	.81
4	Policy inconsistencies	118(42.9%)	78(28.4%)	58(21.5%)	20(7.3%)	3.88	.75
5	Economic constraints	66(24%)	71(25.8%)	83(30.2%)	54(20%)	3.67	.78

From table 1, out of 274 respondents 115(42.7%) and 42(15.3%) respondents agreed that insufficient government allocation is one of the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education while 88(32%) and 29(10.5%) respondents disagreed. Also, 156(56.7%) and 60(22.2%) respondents agreed that dependence on international donors is one of the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education while 34(12.4%) and 24(8.7%) respondents opposed the statement. 120(43.6%) and 76(28%) respondents agreed that corruption is one of the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education while 50(18.2%) and 28(10.2%) respondents think otherwise. In the same vein, 117(42.9%) and 78(28.4%) respondents agreed that policy inconsistencies is one of the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education while 58(21.5%) and 20(7.3%) respondents disagreed. Finally, 66(24%) and 70(25.8%) respondents agreed that economic constraints is one of the challenges of improving Early Childhood Education while 83(30.2%) and 54(20%) respondents disagreed.

**Research Question2**

- What are the management strategies for improving Early Childhood Education in Delta State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Responses to management strategies to improve Early Childhood Education

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	MEAN	STD
1	Increase government allocation	71(25.8%)	66(24%)	82(30.2%)	55(20%)	2.76	.79
2	Inspection and supervision of ECE centers	156(56.7%)	61(22.2%)	34(12.4%)	23(8.7%)	3.76	.79
3	Curriculum improvement	120(43.6%)	77(28%)	50(18.2%)	27(10.2%)	2.84	.84
4	Policy implementation	117(42.9%)	78(28.4%)	58(21.5%)	20(7.3%)	3.05	.76
5	Community engagement	42(15.3%)	116(42.2%)	88(32%)	27(10.5%)	2.90	.82

From table 2, out of 274 respondents, 71(25.8%) and 66(24%) respondents agreed that increase allocation is a strategy to improve Early Childhood Education while 82(30.2%) and 55(20%) respondents disagreed with the statement. Also, 156(56.7%) and 61(22.2%) respondents agreed that inspection and supervision of ECE centers is a strategy to improve Early Childhood Education while 34(12.4%) and 23(8.7%) respondents is of another view. Also, 120(43.6%) and 77(28%) respondents agreed that curriculum improvement is a strategy to improve Early Childhood Education while 50(18.2%) and 27(10.2%) respondents disagreed. In another development, 118(42.9%) and 78(28.4%) respondents agreed that policy implementation is a strategy to improve Early Childhood Education while 58(21.5%) and 20(7.3%) respondents disagreed to the statement. Finally, 42(15.3%) and 116(42.2%) respondents agreed that community engagement is a strategy to improve Early Childhood Education while 88(32%) and 27(10.5%) respondents disagreed.

**DISCUSSION**

The outcome of the analyzed data showed that Nigeria faces significant challenges in improving and sustaining early childhood education (ECE) due to insufficient government allocation, dependence on international donors, corruption, policy inconsistencies and economic constraints. This is in line with Ogunode (2020) who observed that the annual allocation for the administration of education in Nigeria is inadequate and it is below the recommendation of the UNESCO 26% for developing countries like Nigeria. Ogunode, Jegede, & Ajape (2021) submits that inadequate funding is one major challenge facing the implementation of the early child education policies in Nigeria.

Ogunode, Jegede, & Ajape (2021) outlined management strategies to improve and sustain early childhood education such as advocating for increased budgetary allocation for early childhood education. In order to sustain and possibly increase such contributions, efforts need to be made by the various governments and their agencies (UBEC, SUBEB etc) towards prudence and accountability in their use of such support.

The problems of limited access to resources and utilization, lack of capacity building for early childhood educators, inadequate infrastructures and learning materials and poor policy implementation and coordination also need to be addressed. The issue of curriculum uniformity is a very paramount one, more especially now that we need to integrate technology meaningfully into the curriculum. There is therefore the need to also foster digital literacy in children and their educators (Atakpo 2024b). Capacity building is also, very important for educators at the level not only to develop themselves academically but also, morally or character wise because children learn more from observing their teachers (Owhe- Ureghe and Atakpo, 2023).

**CONCLUSION**

From the findings, it was concluded that management strategies for improving early childhood education in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach. The Nigerian government and all stake holders in early childhood

education must collaborate to address funding challenges, improve resources utilization and ensure equitable access.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion, it was therefore recommended that government and policy-makers and other stake holders in early childhood education should:

- Increase government allocation for early childhood education.
- Encourage curriculum uniformity.
- Foster community engagement and parental involvement
- Establish a national early childhood education fund.
- Develop a comprehensive early childhood education policy
- Supervise establishment of early childhood institutions and even those that are already existing.

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