

## ACCESS, EQUITY AND QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF INSECURITY IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This article examines the effect of insecurity on access, equity and quality of early childhood education in northwest Nigeria. Early childhood education program is now regarded as the foundation for children's development and the key to the success of the education system in Nigeria. The National Policy on Education (FRN 2013) has clearly spelt out objectives of early childhood education (ECE) and guidelines to be taken by government to achieve the goals of the ECE scheme. This article argues that despite the importance of ECE, many children in Nigeria, specifically in the northern region, are denied access to quality ECE due to reasons such as insecurity and poverty. This article identifies destruction of schools and displacement of families as some of the challenges facing the education of children in conflict affected areas of northwest Nigeria. The article also discusses the consequences of insecurity on the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of young children. The article asserts that ensuring access, equity and quality of ECE is crucial for promoting peace, stability and economic development in Nigeria in general. The article suggests that policy makers and stakeholders in education should ensure that safe, inclusive and quality ECE is provided in security challenged communities in northwest as well as other parts of Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** early childhood education, access, equity, quality, insecurity, north-west, Nigeria

### Introduction

Early childhood education is a critical component of child's educational journey, laying the foundation for future academic success and intellectual development. The Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) refers to early childhood care development and education (ECCDE) as the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children from age 0-4 years in a crèche or nursery. However, as noted by Aladejana (2013), early childhood refers to the period between zero to eight years of age (0-8 years) and as such, early childhood education (ECE) is the education given in an educational institution to children from birth to eight years old that is in Day care, Crèche, Kindergarten or Nursery and Lower Primary school. Equally, Obinaju (2011) posited that, since the definition of a child refers to someone below the age of 18 and childhood period last up to 18 years, then early childhood education should go beyond the age of 0-4, or 2 – 6 years, it should at least capture the lower level of the primary school system. Notwithstanding the scholastic view about the ECE programme, Muhammad, Abdulmumin and Ekele (2019) posited that, the early childhood period should be seen as a developmental period at the end of which children develop the ability to reason logically and are usually ready to learn, to read, to write and understand simple arithmetic process. Hence, the early years of life are widely accepted as the most important period during which children experience cognitive, language, perceptual, socio-emotional and motor development which they will need for future achievements and social functioning. Oduolowu and Olowe (2011) noted that, the early years of children are years of extreme vulnerability and tremendous potentials, during which adequate protection, care and stimulation are essential to



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provide the foundation for well-being, holistic development and academic success. In this regard, ECE is recognized by the federal government of Nigeria as a foundational and essential program that Nigerian children must experience. However, it is the contention of this paper that, the practice and provision of quality early childhood education in Nigeria (with particular reference to northern region) is challenged by so many issues among which is that of insecurity. The issue of insecurity in the northern part of Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. The Boko Haram insurgency which began in July 2009 in Borno and other states in the north-east zone has held the region to ransom for the past one and half decades now. However, the northwest geo-political zone of Nigeria has been plagued by insecurity in recent years. The region which covers seven states, namely, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara is experiencing high levels of violence, displacement and poverty. This has had a devastating effect on the education sector, particularly the early childhood education. During the first UNESCO world conference on early childhood care and education (ECCE) which took place on the 27th of September 2010 in Moscow Russia, some challenges affecting achievement of the goals of ECE were identified, and these include; lack of political commitment, inadequate public funding, low external support and lack of effective delivery system (Akinbote and Atumba (2013). The practice and provision of ECE in Nigeria is not unfettered from these challenges. In fact, in the Nigerian context, the challenge facing the provision of early childhood education is further worsen by the issue social insecurity; many communities (specifically in the northern states) have been deprived from the benefits accrued in the ECE programme due to the activities of insurgents and bandits. ECE is fundamental to overall academic achievement of children. The fact that Nigerian government has made the effort towards provision of ECE to the teaming young children by directing establishment of ECE sections in all public primary schools throughout the country (with a directive to all parents to enrol their children) is a pointer to government’s readiness to educate every Nigerian child who has attained the age of schooling (Mohammed & Abba, 2025). However, this article contends that, many children in the northwest region are denied access to quality early childhood education due to challenges such as insecurity, displacement and poverty. Therefore, this article examines the impact of insecurity on access, equity and quality of ECE in northwest Nigeria, with a focus on challenges faced by children, teachers and schools in the region.

### Status of Early Childhood Education in the Northwest Region

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria is provided nationwide in both public and private schools. The programme covers Nursery and Kindergarten for children aged 0-4 years old, while the one-year compulsory pre-primary education is for children aged 5 years, preparatory for primary education. The Table below presents the Statistics for 2022/2023 on ECE and Pre-primary Schools.

**Table 1: Number of Public and Private ECCDE/Pre-Primary Schools by State and Location in the Northwest Region: 2022/2023**

STATE	PUBLIC SCHOOLS			PRIVATE SCHOOLS			PUBLIC AND PRIVATE		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
Jigawa	2,049	310	2,359	44	202	246	2,093	512	2,605
Kaduna	1,999	165	2,164	274	1,017	1,291	2,273	1,182	3,455
Kano	330	701	1,031	164	945	1,109	494	1,646	2,140
Katsina	1,437	251	1,688	173	413	586	1,610	664	2,274
Kebbi	183	109	292	34	99	133	217	208	425
Sokoto	433	153	586	48	164	212	481	317	298
Zamfara	249	129	378	69	228	297	318	357	675

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### Impact of Insecurity on Education in Northwest Nigeria

The challenges to social security cut across very aspect of human endeavor including education in all its various stages (ranging from early childhood to tertiary levels) in Nigeria. Many children are currently living without access to educational opportunities. Of the 10.5 million children in Nigeria who are out of school, 60 per cent are in the north, and most of them are girls; and those are the primary target of Boko Haram’s brutal hate campaign against Western education. “We still see resistance to sending children, and particularly girls, to school. This is in part due to mistrust of what is considered Western education. The insecurity in northwest Nigeria has had an adverse effect on ECE. This is attestable in the fact that many public and private schools providing early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes, have been destroyed or forced to close down, leaving children in their thousands out of schools (without access to education). According to United Nations Children Funds (UNICEF) (2020) report indicated that over 1000 schools have been closed down in the region due to

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security and this has affected over 300, 000 children because many parents in the rural areas are forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in urban centres or in other part of the country, making it very difficult for their children to access education.

### **Challenges Faced by Children, Teachers and Schools**

Children, teachers and schools in the northwest geo-political zone of Nigeria face numerous challenges in getting access to quality early childhood education (ECE). Prominent among these challenges include but not limited to:

1. **Destruction of Schools and Displacement of Families:** The development of children's cognitive, social, emotional and motor skills is embedded in children's learning environments at home and the early childhood education (ECE) settings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The family is the first developmental context for children. Particularly the quality of parent-child-relationships and -interactions are assumed to support the development of social-emotional skills. After the family the school takes over and tried to refine what skills the children have so far acquired from the home. However, today many schools and homes in the security challenged communities in northwest region have been destroyed or damage through the activities of bandits which consequently exposed children to unnecessary hardships in getting access quality early childhood education.
2. **Shortage of Human and Material Resources:** Many schools in the region lack basic resources (both human and materials) which are required for effective instructional delivery. For instance, many public schools operating at the basic education level have not adequate text books, furniture and other infrastructural facilities, and this tends to make it difficult for the eligible number of children and youths to acquire quality education. This is more so in urban areas where there is population pressure. Under these conditions, teaching and learning cannot be effective; hence the outcomes are usually below expectation. Another challenge is the issue of girls' education. In the north, the gender gap remains particularly wide and the proportion of girls to boys in school ranges from one girl to two boys to one to three in some of the northwestern states. In addition, Muhammad, Jega and Isah (2014) noted that, the northwest region has been battling with the issue of qualified teachers particularly in the rural areas long before the sad commencement of insurgency. Now, with the prevalence of banditry activities, the issue of shortage of human and material resources in schools has deteriorated the more and this has made access to quality education difficult to the teaming youths in the region (particularly access to quality education for children in the ECE settings).

### **Consequences of Insecurity on Children's Development**

There is no gainsaying that children's quest for cognitive, emotional, social, physical and other set of abilities could be adequately enriched through formal teaching and learning in schools, hence, the importance of school as the significant learning environment in the society for the formal training of young generation cannot be over emphasized. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) provides that, the key objectives of early childhood education included effecting smooth transition of children from the home to the school for further development of cognitive, emotional, social and physical. However, the issue of insecurity in the northwest zone of Nigeria has some consequences on the development of young children. The consequences include but not limited to the followings:

#### **1. Consequences of Insecurity on Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development has to do with intellectual or mental development of an individual. The rate of intellectual development is quite rapid among children during the early stage of life. As observed by Mangal (2008), the process of mental growth and development is responsible for the development of an individual's entire cognitive abilities such as sensation, perception, imagination, memory, reasoning, understanding, intelligence, generalization, interpretation, language ability, conceptual ability and problem-solving ability. These abilities are interrelated and never develop in isolation. As such, children's development which is governed by the overall development of these abilities can be properly guided (for the positive transformation of children) through efficient of early childhood education practice. However, in situation where children are exposed to traumatic experiences which are related to social insecurity, can hinder the development of cognitive skills such as memory, attention and problem-solving abilities. Also, constant disruptions and lack of social stability can be great challenges to children's ability to focus and retain information. It is an established fact that, children at the early stage of life need a lot of cognitive exposure and this can be attained through well-designed developmental activities in schools or homes. As noted by Ekpo (2018), a well-planned and systematic stimulation of the child through activities such as play, music and communication is vital within the school set up. However, the issue of insecurity can be seen as a threat to the cognitive development of young in terms of subjecting the children to delay in cognitive growth. Mohammed (2021) posits that the cognitive development of children involves what they see and what they do leading to what they eventually know through experience. However, the current security situation in northwest Nigeria, which makes free movement almost impossible for people (children inclusive) has negatively impacted on the right of school children to engage freely in various activities (such as exploring the surrounding, making discovery from nature outside the schools) which are essential for

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promoting cognitive development. It may not be an exaggeration to assert that children who are denied access to early education may experience delayed cognitive development and that will make it difficult for them to catch up with their peers in secured communities. It is therefore, disheartening to note that, the security situation in northwest zone of Nigeria is detrimental to the practice and provision of education in general and early childhood education in particular.

## **2. Consequences of Insecurity on Children's Physical Development**

The early period of the child's growth and development witness growth of the nervous system and other parts of the body. The brain increases in size and the child learns to control his muscles gradually. From birth to the age of five, children are in need of training that will enhance these aspects of physical development. Children are always seen doing one thing or the other as they learn throughout the childhood period. According to Chowdhury and Choudhury (2002) during the impressionable stage of childhood, the child's physical development is fastest and the surrounding environment creates deepest impact on the child. It is therefore important that security is ensured in every society to warrant the setting up of early childhood care and education institutions which are safe and secured for children to be engaged in activities that aid their physical growth. However, the issue of insecurity can be seen as threatening the physical development of young children, in terms of hindering opportunities for physical activities, exploration, and play, potentially delaying the development of various motor skills which children usually acquired through walking, running and jumping freely, as well as engaging in other forms of play activities such as tree climbing, swinging on branches of trees, playing football, within their surrounding environment. However, other significant consequences that insecurity can have on the physical development of children may include the issue of poor health outcomes (resulting from increased stress level) and malnutrition (resulting from inadequate nutrition).

## **3. Consequences of Insecurity on Children's Social Development**

The early childhood education schools play host to children from different family backgrounds. The children in early childhood education settings are made to learn together, interact and associate as a family, as well as to learn to respect the rights of other children and to be law-abiding. As noted by Mangal (2008) children at the early childhood stage develop social tendencies and pick up many virtues; they like to play in group and share their toys with each other. By living together, children develop feelings of mutual cooperation, team spirit, group loyalty and leadership traits, hence grooming them in a conventional setting well planned for learning, will lay a solid foundation for social unity in adult life; helping to reduce ethnic and tribal discriminations. Mahuta (2007) reported that the aims of early childhood education include fostering proper development of children, identifying and addressing their problems, harnessing their potentials, molding their characters, enhancing their learning and equipping them for life so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal, communal and global development. Social skills comprise a variety of intra- and interpersonal competencies that enable children to understand, regulate and express emotions as well as participate in social interactions and establish healthy relationships (Malti & Noam, 2016). Almost all aspects of children's social development in the northwest zone are severely affected by the activities of bandits and insurgents. For instance, children's peer relations have been affected by insecurity to such an extent that the ability to keep and establish healthy relationships among peers in school has turned into social distancing and separation, leading to development of social problems. As noted by Bisalla (2024) children that experienced trauma and displacement are likely to develop social and emotional problems such as anxiety, depression and aggression. However, the issue of insecurity can be seen as threatening the social development of young school children in the sense that constant social violence resulting in criminal attacks to schools and abduction of school children can lead to development of mistrust in learning and schooling among children.

## **4. Consequences of Insecurity on Children's Emotional Development**

Insecurity can have negative impacts on the emotional development of ECE children in security challenged areas, in terms of causing children to experience intense anxiety, fear, and panic due to uncertainty and danger surrounding them. There is also the tendency for increased aggression and violence in children (resulting in behavior problems) due to exposure to insecurity. Insecurity can also negatively impact on children self-esteem, thereby causing the children to have doubt in their abilities and develop feeling of inadequacy. Similarly, children exposed to insecurity may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which is a condition that can have long-term effects on children's emotional well-being. From the forgoing, therefore, it can be established that children's emotional functioning has been affected by insecurity to the extent that their ability to remain in a positive emotional state is characterized by uncertainty and stress they are experiencing.

## **Disparity in Access, Equity and Quality of Early Childhood Education Insecurity Challenged Northwest zone of Nigeria**

In the northwest region of Nigeria, a significant disparity exists in access, equity and quality of early childhood education (ECE) between urban and rural areas. Rural areas face substantial challenges, which include among others, inadequate school

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infrastructure, insufficient electricity and water supply as well as shortage of qualified teachers and relevant instructional materials. This depicts lower educational outcomes compared to urban areas, which generally offer better learning resources. Equally, poverty in rural areas (indicated by poor living standards) exacerbates social challenges keeping many parents out of action regarding their children's quest for education. Security challenges also kept many teachers away from rural schools. Thus, schools in rural communities are mostly managed by teachers with limited professional training. This appears to be a challenge leading to higher dropout rates, especially among children at the childhood education level. In view of this situation, urban children are better up compared to those in the rural areas when it comes to equal access of quality ECE.

### Suggestions

Based on the highlights provided with regard to the effect of insecurity on access, equity and quality of early childhood education in northwest Nigeria, this article put forward the following suggestions:

1. The federal government in collaboration with the various state governments in the northwest region should be more committed in their effort toward eradication of insecurity. This is essential in providing a stable and nurturing environment that will facilitate access to quality early childhood education that will help in building strong foundation for the future for all children.
2. The government should increase funding for education, particularly in areas affected by insecurity. This is essential for the overall development of schools (including development in the area of security).
3. The state governments in the northwest region should be more committed to the training and deployment of qualified teachers to teach children in the camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). This is to facilitate the attainment of the child right to education as contained in the Child Rights Act.
4. The federal and state governments in the northwest should make their presence more positive in the security challenged areas by rendering essential support services to displaced children, including access to education, healthcare and psychosocial support.
5. The federal and state governments in Nigeria (particular states in the northwest region) should focus more attention and closely watch the activities of International Partners and Humanitarian Support Organizations with aim of preventing foreign influence on social security in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

Early childhood education and care are services for children involving elements of both physical care and education. The ECE scheme provides critical contribution to cognitive stimulation, socialization, development and early education to children. However, the insecurity in northwest geo-political zone of Nigeria has had a devastating effect on early childhood education (ECE) in the region. Many children who have attained the age of schooling have been denied access to quality education due to numerous challenges such as the destruction of schools and so on. To improve access, equity and quality in ECE in northwest Nigeria, security situation has to be addressed to promote supportive learning environment which can help children develop cognitively, socially, physically and emotionally. In addressing the issue of insecurity, it is essential that government at the state and federal level make their presence much stronger than it is at present. By so doing, the return of peace and stability as well as rapid development in the northwest region is certain. Equally, the return of normalcy in the northwest will facilitate equal access to quality early childhood education among children in the region, regardless of their background or social circumstances.

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