

Review of Unicef’s Child-Friendly School’s Guidline in Promoting Quality and Accessible Education for Early Childhood Care and Education in North Central Nigeria

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doi:<https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol12n64556>

Published August 09, 2024

Citation: Yunusa, S.A., Amidu O.O., and Doma S.A. (2024) Review of Unicef’s Child-Friendly School’s Guidline in Promoting Quality and Accessible Education for Early Childhood Care and Education in North Central Nigeria, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.12, No.6, pp.45-56

Abstract: *This study set out to evaluate how child-friendly North Central ECCE schools were. Two hypotheses and two research questions served as the study's compass. All 272 of the teachers at the 34 North Central schools that UNICEF had designated as child-friendly schools made up the study's population. 68 parents of ECCE students and 272 teachers made up the study's sample. Data were gathered using structured questionnaires in order to address the research objectives and develop hypotheses that would direct the investigation. Three professionals verified this instrument. Mean scores and standard deviation were used to arrange and analyze the data in accordance with the research questions, and the t-test was run at the 0.05 significance level. The study's main deductions were that: North Central ECCE schools are generally child-friendly in terms of quality learning outcomes; they are generally accessible; and there is no discernible difference between the mean child-friendly status of North Central's urban and rural ECCE schools. These results led to the conclusion that, in order to enhance basic ECCE in North Central, a child-friendly school model would need to be implemented. Therefore, the study's main educational implication was that stakeholders should work harder to establish an environment that is interesting enough to encourage kids to learn new things through kid-friendly school models. Thus, the researchers suggested that teacher and community capacity building be used to demonstrate quality assurance. This study's primary drawback is intrinsic to the way it was designed. As a result, the researchers recommended using a checklist and other research designs to confirm the study's relevant factors.*

Keywords: Unicef’s child-friendly school’s guideline, promoting quality, accessible education early childhood care, education, North Central Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Every Nigerian child must have the right to equal educational opportunities, regardless of any perceived or actual impairment, in order to fulfill the government's commitment to the child's right to a quality basic education. Based on this idea, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) has assumed the responsibility of establishing, overseeing, and approving Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in public primary schools across the country through the Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB). This includes working with both public and private organizations like UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). Since early childhood education (ECCE) is seen to be essential to a child's development, improving the quality of young children's lives and their cognitive growth has elevated ECCE to a national priority.

A school that embraces a multifaceted definition of quality and "serves the whole child" is designated as having Child Friendly Status (CFS). It meets the requirements of the child as a whole by advancing a right-based understanding of quality that encompasses health, safety, and enough school supplies in addition to effective teaching strategies and learning objectives. Therefore, a range of children's characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, ability, disability, age, gender, language, and preferred learning styles, are taken into consideration in accessible education. Among the improvement of the child's life is the creation of child-friendly school guideline by It is expected that children of different characteristics such as disabilities, age gender should be acknowledged in schools, bearing in mind learning style that will enhance the all-round development and achievement while the community will be seen as an environment for economic growth as stimulus to education for early childhood. UNICEF's Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) strategy aims to support children's rights, improve education standards, and provide welcoming learning environments (Orkodashvili, 2010). Regardless of a child's financial circumstances, establishing safe, friendly, and encouraging learning settings is highly valued in Nigeria's National Early Childhood Education Curriculum (Obiweluozor, 2015).

However, the reality often falls short of policy expectations, with challenges in access and quality persisting (Adekunle et al., 2021). Technological advancements offer potential solutions, making learning more enjoyable and accessible, although implementation challenges remain (Adekunle et al., 2021).

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria faces several challenges, including inadequate resources and overpopulation in ECE centers (Osho Oluwafemi et al., 2014). Proffering solution to some of the challenges, Oluwafemi et al. (2014), declared that, to improve ECE quality, researchers recommend employing more specialist teachers, providing training for caregivers, and ensuring necessary resources. Digitization in education, including collaborative and game-based learning, has shown potential for enhancing ECE management. Furthermore, Learner-centered

approaches, active learning, and higher-order thinking have been positively correlated with skill development in ECE (Abdullahi & Nimota, 2020). Quality assurance in ECE is crucial for national development, requiring proper supervision, monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of the system (Ndagi et al., 2020). Checks and balances are crucial for the development of any system and to enhance quality service delivery, Ndagi et al., recommended that well-equipped quality assurance units be established in all ECE centers and institutions across Nigeria .

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a crucial role in children's development and future success, particularly for those with disabilities or at risk of exclusion (Bartolo et al., 2016). That is why Underwood et al., (2012), endorsed that a high-quality inclusive ECEC programs should be accessible to all children and families, designed to meet individual needs, and regularly evaluated. Key components of inclusive ECEC include active participation, social interactions, and skill development opportunities for all children (Underwood et al, 2012). Unequal accessibility to high-quality ECEC is influenced by governance, service management, and parental factors (Vandenbroeck et al., 2013). Government as well as parents has a grate of deal with regards to equal accessibility to high quality education children acquire. The parent encourages the disabled to be in school while the government supports the disabled while in school. To address this, international and European policies promote inclusive ECEC, emphasizing five key principles for improving quality (Bartolo et al., 2016). However, there is a need for further research and improvement in accessibility and active participation of children at risk of exclusion in ECEC settings (Bartolo et al., 2016). Enhancing ECEC quality globally is essential for children's well-being and later school success (Paz-Albo, 2018). From the forgoing, it is seen that for children to receive optimal attention and proper the well-being, quality teacher participation and educational accessibility need to be stressed.

Early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria faces significant challenges despite its importance regarding child development and poverty reduction. Studies have identified issues such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient resources, and overcrowded classrooms (Oluwafemi et al., 2014). The employment of unqualified teachers and poor implementation of the ECE curriculum further hinder its effectiveness (Aguh & Olutola, 2022). Social inequality in ECE provision persists, with low enrollment rates compared to other educational levels (Ajayi, 2019). While digitization offers potential benefits through collaborative and game-based learning, its impact on ECE management in Nigeria remains unclear (Kadir & Adebayo, 2019). To address these challenges, researchers recommend increased government commitment, improved funding, proper supervision, and employment of specialist teachers (Aguh & Olutola, 2022; Osho Oluwafemi et al., 2014). Additionally, adhering to the use of local languages as the medium of instruction and reducing corruption in ECE programs are crucial steps for enhancing accessibility and quality (Aguh & Olutola, 2022). Attentiveness need to be given to ways in which ECCE can be sustained through government commitment, proper funding , supervision and encouragement of high

enrolment rate among others. Encouraging this is enhancing accessibility and quality teacher participation in ECCE programmes.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is acknowledged as a potent instrument for fostering equity and ending the cycle of poverty (Ajayi, 2020). Inequality in ECCE provision endures in Nigeria despite being included in national policy; enrollment rates are low and staffing levels are inadequate when compared to elementary education levels (Ajayi, 2020). It is imperative that these problems are resolved if Nigeria is to have accessible and high-quality education.

North Central Nigeria, characterized by its diverse cultural and socio-economic landscape, faces unique challenges in providing equitable educational opportunities for young children. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, limited access to educational resources, and socio-economic barriers that impede children's ability to attend school. Against this backdrop, UNICEF's CFS initiative seeks to address these issues by establishing child-centered educational environments that cater to the holistic needs of children.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the CFS guidelines' efficacy in raising educational standards and expanding access to ECCE in North Central Nigeria. This study will offer important insights into the CFS program's effects on early childhood education in the area by evaluating the program's implementation tactics, accomplishments, and difficulties. It will also include suggestions for stakeholders, educators, and policy makers on how to improve the CFS initiative's effectiveness and guarantee that every child in North Central Nigeria has access to high-quality early childhood education.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

Six states (Kwara, Niger, Nassarawa, Plateau, Benue, and Kogi) and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) made up the North-Central region of Nigeria, sometimes known as the Middle Belt, which spans the country longitudinally and occupies 242,425 km².

Research design

Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. Survey research design as seen by Check and Schutt (2012) is the collection of information from sample of individuals through their responses to questions. The choice of descriptive survey was to enable the researchers the use of questionnaire to elicit responses from the population as regards the UNICEF's child-friendly guidelines.

Population of the Study

The population of the study was all the teachers and parents of pupils in these UNICEF designated Child Friendly schools in the ECE Centres in the North Central Zone.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The sample size for the study was 200 comprising 100 teachers and 100 parents. The sample size was determined using 5% of the total population of four sampled states. Multi-stage sampling procedure was used to draw the sample. In the first stage, simple random sampling technique was used to draw four states (Nasarawa, Kwara, Kogi and Niger) from six states and FCT. Specifically, slips of paper will be used. The name of each state as well as FCT was written on slips of paper. The slips was folded and put in a bag. In the second stage, proportionate stratified random sampling technique was employed to draw 100 teachers from public primary schools with ECE centres in both rural and urban. Finally, in the third stage, proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used to draw 100 parents from the schools.

Instrument for Data Collection

Questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. The instrument was titled CFS Appraisal Questionnaire (CFSAQ). Rating scale was adapted from the UNICEF proposed objectives on Early Childhood/Pre-primary education as contained in the CFS manual. This provided a primary baseline data on the status of the UNICEF designated schools. Reviewed literature and personal interactions with the UNICEF desk Officer gave the researchers insight on the nature of the UNICEF proposed objectives for ECCE programme. Consequent on this insight, these instruments were clustered in line with the two variables of interest of this study. These will be in the areas of quality learning outcomes and accessibility. The options of the scale ranges from Very Great Extent (VGE) = 4 point, Great Extent (GE) = 3 point, Very Low Extent (VLE) = 2 point, Low Extent (LE) = 1 point.

Validity of the Instrument

The instrument was given to three experts from measurement and evaluation, early Childhood and Education Federal College of Ede Education Kontagora for validation. Their observations, amendment and comments with regards clarity of language and relevance of the instrument to the research were effected in order to give the instrument both the face and construct validity.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was tested through a pilot study conducted using Early Childhood Schools outside the sampled population. The data obtained from the pilot study were subjected to statistical analysis the outcome of which was used to determine the reliability of the instrument.

Procedure for Data Collection

The instrument was produced and distributed by the researchers and three skilled research assistants directly to the sampled population. It was collected immediately to facilitate the maximum return of the instruments and to avoid any influenced response.

Method of Data Analysis

The data for the study were arranged and analyzed according to the research questions. Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in line with the research questions and hypotheses which guided the study.

Table 1: Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation of the Respondents to the Research Questions

S/N	Research Questions	Cluster Mean	SD
1	To what extent do Niger State ECCE Schools create environment that promotes quality learning outcomes?	2.92	0.80
2	To what extent are Niger State ECCE Schools accessible?	3.05	0.82

Research question 1 reveals that parents and teachers in North-Central ECCE schools create an environment that promotes quality learning outcomes for pupils. Items excluding item 20 were rated very great, indicating a great extent of commitment. Items 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, and 23 were ranked great extent, indicating a decision level of great extent (appendix i). The study also found no significant difference in teachers' and parents' opinions on the quality of education in ECCE schools in urban and rural areas, rejecting the null hypothesis of no significant difference. Research question 2 reveals that parents and teachers in North-Central ECCE Schools are highly accessible and affordable to all children, with all items excluding item 27 rated very great (appendix ii). The overall mean is 3.05 table 1. This indicates a decision level of great extent above the agreed criterion mean of 2.50, indicating the schools are accessible. The study found no significant difference in mean ratings of teachers and parents in urban and rural areas regarding accessibility of ECCE Schools in North-Central, indicating that research hypothesis three was not rejected.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Based on the research questions and formulated hypotheses that guided the study, a number of findings were made, which include:

1. With respect to quality learning outcomes, ECCE Schools in North-Central to a great extent are child friendly
2. To a great extent, ECCE Schools in North-Central are accessible

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings of this study are discussed in line with the research questions and hypotheses that guided the study. These will be in the areas of quality learning outcomes and accessibility.

Promotion of Quality Learning Outcomes in North-Central ECCE Schools

Research question one was formulated to appraise the child friendly status of Niger State ECCE schools with respect to quality learning outcome. The findings indicated that the ECCE Schools in North-Central to a very great extent help children master the essential enabling skills of speaking. The findings agree with that of Osakwe (2009) which showed that the ECCE Schools boost the pupil's performance.

Similarly, the findings of this present study indicated that to a great extent, the Niger State ECCE Schools encourage children to think critically, ask questions, express their opinions, participate in class work and learn how to learn. The schools were also found to help children master the essential enabling skills of writing, reading, mathematics, general knowledge and enabling skills required for living in the new century including useful traditional knowledge and the values of peace and democracy. These are consistent with the findings of Enueme and Oju (2005) which showed that child-friendly schools impact positively on pupils' performance. These findings supported the findings of Ekenem, Essien and Ekenem (2011) that child-friendly environment boosts cognitive development and psycho-social motor skill of pupils.

A corresponding hypothesis two was formulated to test for any significant difference in the mean opinions of sampled parents and teachers on the extent urban and rural ECCE schools in North-Central promote quality learning outcome. The t-test analysis showed that the Significant 2-tailed test of 0.43 is greater than Probability level of 0.05. Hence, the null hypothesis was not rejected. The researcher therefore accepted the null hypothesis and concludes that there is no significant difference in the extent urban and rural schools in Niger State ECCE Schools promote quality learning outcome.

Accessibility of North-Central ECCE Schools

Research question three was formulated to appraise the child-friendly status of North-Central ECCE Schools with respect to accessibility. This indicated that the official enrolment fee at the North-Central ECCE schools is to a very great extent affordable. The findings of this present study also indicated that to a great extent, the North-Central ECCE Schools welcome children with special needs, and do not keep children from the poorest families from gaining education and the costs of school fees and uniform are affordable. Other findings indicated that the schools do not

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK

encourage pupils to miss school through working or assisting at home. The school also promotes easy transmission from one class to another. These findings are similar to that of Ismaila (2013) that ECCE schools are increasingly becoming inclusive for all children.

Likewise, hypothesis two was meant to test for any significant difference in the mean opinions of sampled parents and teachers on the extent urban and rural ECCE Schools in North-Central are accessible. The t-test analysis indicated that there was no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and parents in urban rural areas with respect to accessibility of ECCE schools in North-Central. The null hypothesis was therefore accepted.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, the following conclusions were drawn.

1. With respect to quality learning outcomes, ECCE Schools in North-Central are child-friendly
2. To a great extent, ECCE Schools in North-Central are accessible

Educational Implications of the Findings of the Study

The findings of this study have some important educational implications. The implications of each finding as they relate to early childhood education in particular are hereby highlighted

- i. With respect to quality learning outcomes, the schools were found to have done enough to boost achievement. Quality learning outcomes also entail the provision of simple tools, methods and concepts to make classrooms and schools more efficient and effective. This implies that the schools in North-Central capitalize on all available human and material resources to broaden perspectives and enrich the learning experience. From the perception of parents and teachers in North-Central. It can be gathered that they do not run a flexible curriculum. This implies that the schools do not respond to diversity to ensure equal opportunities for all children. Hence differing needs of all children are not met in such environment. This explains that the schools must localize its curriculum to accommodate all.
- ii. The findings of the study indicated that accessibility is high. This implies that provision of accessible and affordable education, especially to families and children most at risk is another characteristic of North-Central. Affordability of education as described in the CFS blueprint (2009) is in terms of family's ability to pay school fees while accessibility is in terms of children needing to miss school in order to work or to assist at home. According to Jones, (2012), these external and internal organizational realities help to shape the core values inherent in pupils' educational experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Improved learning outcomes should be geared towards greater engagement; increased responsibility for pupils' learning; better relationship with teachers and peers; higher level of cooperation and trust; and more fun learning at school. ECCE school environment should so be organized to be more *flexible* so as to respond to diversity in order to meet differing circumstances and needs of all children.

- ii. Accessibility should be extended to inclusive practices.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The generalization and conclusions of the result of this study is subject to some limitations. This research work adopted descriptive design, and as such, the research could not manipulate variables to study their effect. Questionnaire was the major instrument for data collection. The CFS School teachers were not too comfortable in answering and responding to the Questionnaires while some rejected the questionnaires. Hence, the validity of the findings of this study rested much on the honesty of the respondents who provided the much-needed information. This constitutes the major limitation of the findings of this study. North-Central is diverse and ECCE/CFS schools are spread throughout the state. Since all the schools were chosen, it was difficult to administer the instrument on the subjects. This study cannot claim it has investigated all variables regarding North-Central schools' child-friendly status. It is therefore recommended that further studies are conducted to identify other factors of North-Central ECCE status.

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Appendix I

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviations of parents and teachers on the extent ECCE Schools in the North-Central create environment that promotes quality learning outcomes

S/N	The school	Mean	SD	Decision
13	Encourages children to think critically	3.02	0.80	GE
14	Encourages children to ask questions	2.85	0.88	GE
15	Encourages children to express their opinions	2.63	0.97	GE
16	Encourages children to participate in class work	2.88	0.02	GE
17	Help children learn how to learn	2.53	0.99	GE
18	Helps children master the essential enabling skills of writing	2.75	0.85	GE
19	Helps children master the essential enabling skills of reading	3.28	0.94	GE
20	Helps children master the essential enabling skills of speaking	3.63	0.86	VGE
21	Helps children master the essential enabling skills of mathematics	2.82	0.83	GE
22	Helps children master the essential enabling skills of general knowledge	2.72	0.87	GE
23	Helps children master the essential enabling skills required for living in the new century including useful traditional knowledge and the values of peace and democracy	3.05	0.83	GE
Cluster Mean		2.92	0.80	

Key: VGE = Very Great Extent; GE = Great Extent; LE = Low Extent; VLE = Very Low Extent

Appendix II

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviations of parents and teachers on the extent ECCE Schools in North-Central are accessible

S/N	The school:	Mean	SD	Decision
24	Welcomes children with special needs	3.03	0.83	GE
25	Ensures that cost of uniform is affordable	2.91	0.94	GE
26	Supplies do not keep children from the poorest families from gaining an education	2.74	0.74	GE
27	Official enrolment fee is affordable	3.66	0.81	VGE
28	School fees are affordable	2.83	0.80	GE
29	Do not encourage pupils to miss school to work or to assist at home	3.13	0.77	GE
30	Promote easy transmission from one class to another	3.03	0.82	GE
	Cluster mean	3.05	0.82	

Key: VGE = Very Great Extent; GE = Great Extent; LE = Low Extent; VLE = Very Low Extent