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Integrating Prevocational Skills in Early Childhood Care and Education to Bridge Future Skills Gap in Niger State

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Abstract: *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provide a critical foundation for developing competencies that support later adaptability, problem-solving, creativity and vocational readiness. This study examined the integration of prevocational skills into ECCE programmes in Niger State, Nigeria, focusing on classroom practices, teacher competence, institutional resources and perceived contributions to future skills. A descriptive research design was adopted, involving 120 ECCE teachers drawn from Kontagora, Borgu and Wushishi Local Government Areas through multistage sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U tests with Benjamini-Hochberg correction. Findings showed that prevocational activities were present but unevenly integrated, with 61.7–73.1% of respondents reporting regular use of practical-learning activities. Teachers demonstrated stronger competence in facilitating cooperation (73.1%) and selecting age-appropriate activities (72.3%) than in assessing learning during hands-on activities (59.7%). Institutional support was moderately favorable, although space, instructional time and professional training remained constraints. No significant urban-rural differences were observed. However, low internal-consistency coefficients across questionnaire domains limited composite-scale interpretation. The study concludes that prevocational learning should strengthen existing play-based, culturally responsive activities rather than constitute a separate vocational subject. Sustained teacher development, formative assessment capacity and institutional support are essential for meaningful integration.*

Keywords: integrating prevocational skills, early childhood care, education, skills gap, Niger State

INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological change, labor-market restructuring and the increasing automation of routine tasks are reshaping the competencies required for productive participation in contemporary economies. Beyond conventional academic knowledge, emerging workplaces increasingly require

adaptable combinations of problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, communication, technological awareness, initiative and practical competence. This shift has intensified concerns about the future skills gap, particularly in developing economies where formal education does not always translate into employability, entrepreneurship or occupational readiness. Although interventions aimed at addressing such gaps are commonly introduced during secondary, vocational or tertiary education, emerging evidence suggests that several competencies underlying later occupational readiness begin developing much earlier. Problem-solving, for example, can be deliberately strengthened during early childhood through appropriately structured learning experiences (Burns et al., 2025; Tay & Kaveri, 2026).

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) therefore has significance beyond preparing children for formal schooling. It represents a formative period during which dispositions towards exploration, persistence, creativity, cooperation, decision-making and purposeful engagement with materials can be established. Recent scholarship increasingly positions early childhood settings as environments in which future-oriented competencies can be cultivated through play, making, inquiry and practical activity. Bahr (2026), for instance, demonstrates that making activities can provide opportunities for young children to develop problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, although successful implementation depends substantially on teachers' competencies. Similarly, Burns et al. (2025), through a systematic review and meta-analysis, demonstrate the growing importance of structured approaches to developing problem-solving within early childhood STEM activities. These findings support a broader conception of ECCE in which developmentally appropriate practical experiences complement foundational literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional development.

Within this perspective, prevocational skills should not be interpreted as premature occupational training or the early specialization of young children into particular trades. Rather, they encompass developmentally appropriate experiences that introduce children to the dispositions, elementary practical abilities and problem-solving processes that underpin later vocational learning. Activities involving construction, sorting, gardening, modelling, simple tool awareness, craft, repair-oriented play, creative production, digital exploration and collaborative projects can enable children to connect learning with purposeful action. Such experiences may progressively nurture curiosity, dexterity, creativity, self-efficacy, responsibility and elementary entrepreneurial thinking. Evidence from prevocational education more broadly indicates that carefully designed programmes can facilitate later transitions into vocational education and training, particularly when they provide meaningful orientation and experiential learning opportunities (Busse & Maué, 2025).

The relevance of this approach is particularly pronounced in Nigeria, where persistent concerns remain regarding the capacity of the education system to connect curriculum, competencies and changing societal needs. Recent scholarship calls for a reconceptualisation of Nigerian early childhood education towards more child-centred, contextually meaningful and developmentally

responsive practices (Olalowo et al., 2025). At the same time, evidence indicates that implementation challenges continue to constrain the translation of ECCE policy into consistent classroom practice. A recent systematic integrative review identified interconnected problems involving provision, financing, personnel, teaching materials, professional support, curriculum enactment, equity and accountability within Nigerian early childhood education (Nwachukwu et al., 2026). These constraints are important because expanding the objectives of ECCE towards future skills without addressing curriculum and implementation capacity could widen the distance between policy aspiration and children's actual learning experiences.

The issue is not simply whether additional skills should be included in the ECCE curriculum, but how such competencies can be embedded without compromising the developmental principles of early childhood education. This distinction is critical. An excessive emphasis on employability at an early age could instrumentalise childhood and transfer adult labour-market expectations into settings intended primarily for holistic development. Recent critical scholarship cautions against unreflective use of terms such as creativity, problem-solving and future skills within early childhood education when these concepts are detached from children's relationships, care, agency and lived experiences (Günther-Hanssen et al., 2026). Consequently, prevocational integration should be grounded in play-based, exploratory, culturally relevant and age-appropriate pedagogy rather than conventional vocational instruction.

This consideration is especially relevant in culturally diverse Nigerian communities, where practical knowledge has historically been transmitted through observation, imitation, storytelling, craft, farming, household activities and community participation. Kolade (2026) argues that integrating indigenous knowledge into Nigerian early childhood curricula can strengthen contextual relevance and cultural sustainability, highlighting the continuing disconnect between children's local experiences and formalized curricular practices. A context-responsive prevocational framework could therefore connect indigenous and community-based practical knowledge with contemporary competencies such as creativity, problem-solving, technological awareness and entrepreneurship. Such integration may provide a more locally meaningful pathway towards future skills development than simply importing competency frameworks developed for substantially different socioeconomic contexts.

Niger State provides a particularly pertinent setting for examining this relationship. The state has increasingly placed skills development, entrepreneurship and workforce adaptability within its development agenda. It’s Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Vocational Skills explicitly emphasize entrepreneurship, vocational skills, creativity, institutional partnerships and the development of a skilled and adaptable workforce. In parallel, the Niger State skills for the future initiative targets emerging areas such as digital skills, modern agriculture, entrepreneurship and other industry-relevant capabilities. These initiatives demonstrate institutional recognition of future skills needs. However, their principal orientation is towards youths and individuals approaching or already within the labor market. The possibility of developing the foundational

dispositions underlying these competencies much earlier, through ECCE, remains comparatively underexplored.

Available local evidence also indicates the importance of the learning environment at the preschool level. Research among preschoolers in Chanchaga Local Government Education Area of Niger State, for example, has examined the relationship between play facilities and early skill acquisition, illustrating the significance of learning resources and activity-based experiences within the state's ECCE environment. Yet research specifically examining the systematic integration of prevocational experiences into ECCE as a foundation for future skills remains limited. Much of the existing Nigerian literature concentrates on access, policy implementation, instructional resources, inclusion, literacy and general curriculum delivery, while vocational and entrepreneurial skill studies predominantly focus on older learners. This produces a conceptual and empirical gap between early childhood development and later skills-development policies.

Addressing this gap requires evidence on whether existing ECCE practices provide opportunities for practical and future-oriented learning, which prevocational competencies are considered developmentally appropriate, and what institutional factors could facilitate or constrain their integration. Teacher competence is particularly important because curriculum intentions cannot translate into meaningful experiences without educators capable of designing practical, play-based activities and connecting them to children's developmental needs. Recent Nigerian evidence continues to highlight concerns regarding curriculum quality and teacher preparation in ECCE (Abdulrasheed & Uloaku, 2026), while international evidence similarly shows that teachers' competencies substantially influence the successful integration of technology-related making activities in early childhood classrooms (Bahr, 2026).

Against this background, the present study investigates the integration of prevocational skills into Early Childhood Care and Education as a strategy for laying the foundations required to bridge future skills gaps in Niger State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines the extent to which prevocational competencies are reflected in ECCE practices, identifies relevant skills and pedagogical opportunities, and evaluates the conditions that may support or constrain their effective integration. The study contributes to the literature by connecting three areas that have largely developed separately: early childhood education, prevocational learning and future skills development. Rather than treating employability preparation as an intervention that begins only when learners approach the labour market, the study advances a developmental perspective in which age-appropriate practical learning during early childhood establishes foundational dispositions that can subsequently support vocational competence, entrepreneurship, adaptability and lifelong learning.

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive design to investigate the integration of prevocational skills into Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes in Niger State, Nigeria. This design

was considered appropriate because the study sought not only to quantify the extent and quality of prevocational skills integration but also to explain the pedagogical, institutional, policy, and contextual conditions that shaped its implementation. Data were collected within the same phase of the study, analyzed independently, and integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of prevailing practices across ECCE centers.

Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in selected ECCE centers across Niger State, Nigeria, covering both urban and rural communities. The target population comprised ECCE teachers and caregivers working in registered public and private early childhood centers. Additional participants included head teachers.

Sampling Procedure

A multistage sampling procedure was employed to ensure adequate representation across the geographical and institutional diversity of Niger State. In the first stage, the state was stratified according to its existing senatorial or educational zones. Selected Local Government Areas were then drawn from each zone to ensure geographical spread. Within the selected Local Government Areas, ECCE centers were stratified according to location into urban and rural categories and, where applicable, according to ownership into public and private centers.

ECCE centers were subsequently selected from the established strata, while teachers within the selected centers were sampled using simple random or systematic sampling procedures, depending on the availability of staff registers. These included selected teachers, head teachers, proprietors, education administrators, and policy officers. Classroom observations were conducted in a purposively selected subsample of participating centres to capture variations in location, ownership, staffing, and resource conditions.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured teacher questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed around the principal constructs reflected in the study objectives. The first section obtained demographic and professional information, including teachers' qualifications, years of experience, professional training, center ownership, and location. Subsequent sections measured the extent of prevocational skills integration, teachers' knowledge and pedagogical competence, readiness to implement activity-based learning, and the availability and utilization of relevant instructional resources.

Validity, Reliability of the research Instrument

The research instruments were subjected to expert review to establish content relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study objectives. Specialists in Early Childhood Education, Technical and Vocational Education, Curriculum Studies, and Educational Measurement and Evaluation reviewed the questionnaire, observation schedule, resource audit, and interview guides before field

administration. A pilot study was conducted among ECCE teachers and centers outside the main study sample but with characteristics similar to those of the target population.
The internal consistency of the quantitative scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and, where appropriate, McDonald's omega. Reliability coefficients of approximately 0.70 or higher were considered acceptable for multi-item measures.

Data Analysis
Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize respondents' characteristics and describe the extent of prevocational skills integration, teacher competence, readiness, and resource conditions. Composite scores were generated for the major constructs, including prevocational skills integration, teacher preparedness, and resource adequacy and utilization. Differences between urban and rural ECCE centers were examined using the independent-samples t-test. Correlation analysis was conducted to determine associations among teacher knowledge, pedagogical competence, readiness, resource availability, and the extent of prevocational skills integration.

RESULTS

Data Screening and Characteristics of the Respondents
A total of 120 questionnaire records were available for analysis, comprising 40 respondents each from Kontagora, Borgu, and Wushishi Local Government Areas. The instrument contained 21 substantive questionnaire items across four sections measuring prevocational skills integration, teacher knowledge and competence, resources and institutional support, and perceived contribution to future skills.

Initial screening identified a small number of invalid or missing responses. Out-of-range values on the four-point response scale were treated as missing, while unambiguous textual entries such as “Agree” and a numeric value stored as text were recoded according to the questionnaire coding scheme. After cleaning, 10 of the 2,520 expected substantive responses were missing, representing approximately 0.4% of item-level observations. Because missingness was minimal, available-case estimates were used for item-level analyses.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study respondents (N = 120)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
LGA	Kontagora	40	33.3
	Borgu	40	33.3
	Wushishi	40	33.3
Centre ownership	Public	73	60.8
	Private	47	39.2
Location	Urban	55	45.8
	Rural	65	54.2
Qualification	NCE	64	53.3
	B.Ed./B.Sc.Ed.	42	35.0
	Diploma/Other	14	11.7
Teaching experience	0–5 years	45	37.5
	6–10 years	40	33.3
	11+ years	35	29.2
Relevant practical/play-based training	Yes	42	35.0
	No	78	65.0

The sample was relatively balanced geographically, although rural teachers constituted a slightly larger proportion than their urban counterparts. More than half of the respondents possessed an NCE qualification, while approximately one-third held a bachelor's degree in education or related qualification. Of particular relevance to the study, only 35.0% reported having received relevant training in practical or play-based learning. This suggests a potentially important professional-development gap, despite the presence of formally qualified teachers.

Psychometric Assessment of the Questionnaire Domains

Before constructing composite indices, the internal consistency of each proposed domain was examined. The results indicated low reliability: prevocational skills integration, $\alpha = 0.36$; teacher knowledge and competence, $\alpha = 0.21$; resources and institutional support, $\alpha = 0.05$; and perceived future-skills contribution, $\alpha = 0.12$. These coefficients were substantially below conventional thresholds for reliable multi-item scales.

Consequently, the individual questionnaire items were treated as the principal units of interpretation, while domain means were considered exploratory descriptive summaries only. This decision prevented potentially heterogeneous behaviors, competencies, and institutional conditions from being collapsed into psychometrically unsupported composite constructs.

Extent of Prevocational Skills Integration in ECCE Centers

Table 2: Extent of prevocational skills integration in ECCE practice

Indicator	n	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
Regular use of practical, hands-on activities	120	2.77	0.79	61.7
Play-based activities for simple problem-solving	119	2.84	0.86	63.9
Gardening or plant-care activities	119	2.84	0.75	69.7
Creation using blocks, paper, clay or recycled materials	120	2.77	0.89	61.7
Sorting, arranging, classifying or assembling objects	119	2.91	0.71	73.1
Pretend play based on everyday community roles	120	2.84	0.81	66.7

Note: *Scale ranged from 1 = Strongly disagree to 4 = Strongly agree.*

The findings indicated that prevocational relevant activities were present in the sampled ECCE settings, but integration was uneven rather than comprehensive. The strongest practice concerned sorting, arranging, classifying, or assembling objects, with 73.1% of teachers agreeing that children were regularly provided with such opportunities. Gardening or plant-care activities also received relatively strong endorsement at 69.7%.

By comparison, only 61.7% reported regular hands-on learning and the same proportion reported using constructive materials such as blocks, clay, paper, or recycled objects. These patterns indicate that practical learning was occurring, but not consistently enough to suggest systematic curriculum integration. The evidence therefore points to an emerging rather than fully institutionalized model of prevocational learning.

Teachers' Knowledge and Pedagogical Competence

Table 3: ECCE teachers' knowledge and pedagogical competence

Teacher competency indicator	n	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
Understanding of prevocational learning in ECCE	120	2.91	0.82	66.7
Ability to select age-appropriate practical activities	119	2.97	0.77	72.3
Ability to plan activities promoting creativity and initiative	120	2.73	0.82	63.3
Ability to facilitate cooperation and turn-taking	119	2.92	0.86	73.1
Ability to assess children's learning during hands-on activities	119	2.68	0.91	59.7

Teachers generally expressed greater confidence in selecting age-appropriate activities and facilitating cooperation than in designing and assessing practical learning. Approximately 72.3% considered themselves capable of selecting age-appropriate activities, while 73.1% reported competence in facilitating cooperation and turn-taking. However, only 59.7% indicated confidence in assessing children's learning during hands-on activities.

The comparatively low result for assessment is noteworthy because effective activity-based pedagogy requires teachers to recognize, document, and interpret children's learning processes rather than merely provide practical activities. The results therefore suggest that teacher capacity development should extend beyond introducing activity-based methods and include formative assessment of creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, initiative, and practical engagement.

Availability of Resources and Institutional Support

Table 4: Resources and institutional conditions supporting prevocational learning

Indicator	n	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
Sufficient safe materials for practical activities	119	2.86	0.86	67.2
Access to teaching guides/curriculum guidance	120	2.89	0.83	68.3
Training in practical or play-based approaches	119	2.81	0.76	66.4
Leadership support for activity-based learning	120	2.87	0.79	70.0
Adequate space and time for practical activities	120	2.77	0.79	63.3

Leadership support emerged as the most positively rated institutional condition, with 70.0% of respondents agreeing that school leadership supported practical and activity-based approaches. Access to curriculum guidance was reported by 68.3%, while 67.2% perceived the availability of safe practical-learning materials as adequate. Space and instructional time represented the weakest institutional condition, with 63.3% indicating adequate provision.

An important inconsistency, however, was observed between the background question on relevant professional training and the corresponding Likert item. Only 35.0% answered "Yes" when directly asked whether they had received relevant practical/play-based training, whereas 66.4% agreed with the statement that they had received such training.

Perceived Contribution of Prevocational Learning to Future Skills

Table 5: Perceived contribution of prevocational activities to future-oriented skills

Perceived contribution	n	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
Supports creativity	120	2.83	0.75	65.0
Supports problem-solving	119	2.83	0.76	68.1
Promotes cooperation and responsibility	120	2.66	0.86	60.0
Develops initiative and persistence	120	2.83	0.84	70.0
Supports readiness for future learning	119	2.76	0.83	60.5

Teachers generally perceived practical learning as relevant to children's longer-term development. The strongest endorsement concerned initiative and persistence, reported by 70.0% of respondents, followed by problem-solving at 68.1% and creativity at 65.0%. Perceptions were less pronounced for cooperation and responsibility and future-learning readiness.
Accordingly, the findings establish perceived educational relevance but cannot demonstrate causal effects on children's future skills.

Urban-Rural Differences in Prevocational Skills Integration
Because individual items were ordinal and the proposed integration scale demonstrated weak internal consistency, urban-rural comparisons were conducted at the item level using Mann-Whitney U tests. Benjamini-Hochberg adjustment was applied to reduce the risk of false-positive findings arising from multiple comparisons.

Table 6. Urban-rural comparison of prevocational skills integration

Integration indicator	Urban Mean	Rural Mean	Rank-biserial effect	Adjusted p
Practical hands-on activities	2.71	2.82	-0.069	0.821
Play-based problem-solving	2.82	2.86	-0.030	0.918
Gardening/plant care	2.80	2.88	-0.059	0.821
Constructive/material-making activities	2.65	2.86	-0.155	0.743
Sorting/classifying/assembling	2.96	2.86	0.059	0.821
Community-role pretend play	2.85	2.83	-0.005	0.960

Note: *Positive rank-biserial coefficients favor urban centers; negative coefficients favor rural centers. p values were adjusted using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure.*

No statistically significant urban-rural difference was detected for any of the six integration indicators after correction for multiple testing. Effect sizes were also small. Rural centers showed slightly higher mean values for several practical activities, including gardening and constructive play, whereas urban centers showed marginally higher values for sorting and community-role play. However, these differences were insufficient to support a systematic urban-rural divide in the supplied sample.

Location may interact with center ownership, teacher preparation, infrastructure, community practices, and access to resources in ways that require a larger and more geographically representative sample

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the foundations of prevocational learning were already present within the sampled ECCE settings, but implementation appeared partial, activity-specific, and weakly institutionalized. Between approximately 62% and 73% of respondents reported using the six practical-learning activities examined. Sorting, classification, gardening, and community-role play appeared more common than broader hands-on construction and making activities. This pattern is important because it suggests that integrating prevocational learning into ECCE may not require the introduction of an entirely separate curriculum. Rather, it may involve strengthening, structuring, and pedagogically connecting activities that are already familiar within early childhood settings.

This interpretation is consistent with contemporary evidence that problem-solving and future-oriented competencies can be supported through developmentally appropriate early childhood activities. Burns et al. (2025), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of early childhood STEM interventions, demonstrated growing evidence for structured approaches to problem-solving development in early childhood education. Similarly, Bahr (2026) showed that making-oriented activities can support the integration of problem-solving, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking, while emphasizing the importance of teachers' competencies in implementing such activities effectively.

The teacher-level findings reinforce this concern. Although approximately two-thirds of respondents reported understanding prevocational learning, competence was not uniform across pedagogical functions. Teachers appeared more confident in selecting age-appropriate activities and managing children's cooperation than in planning creativity-oriented activities and assessing children's learning during practical tasks. The relatively weak assessment capacity is particularly significant. Without appropriate observational and formative assessment strategies, practical activities risk becoming recreational additions rather than purposeful learning experiences. Teacher professional development should therefore address activity design, scaffolding of children's inquiry, observation, assessment, and adaptation of locally available materials as an integrated competence rather than treating practical learning as a collection of classroom exercises. The importance of teacher preparation is supported by recent Nigerian and international literature. Bahr (2026) found that teachers' technology-related competencies influenced the effective integration of making activities in early childhood education. In the Nigerian context, Abdulrasheed and Uloaku (2026) similarly raised concerns regarding teacher-education curriculum arrangements and their implications for professional competence in ECCE. The present findings therefore suggest that integrating prevocational learning is likely to depend less on simply

adding curriculum content than on developing teachers' capacity to translate practical activities into meaningful developmental experiences.

The resource and institutional findings showed moderately favorable perceptions of leadership support, instructional guidance, and materials. Nevertheless, the proportion reporting adequate space and time remained comparatively lower. This result corresponds with the broader Nigerian ECCE literature. Nwachukwu et al. (2026) identified recurrent constraints involving financing, personnel, materials, supervision, professional support, and unequal access across Nigerian early childhood education settings. The implication is that curriculum reform alone would be insufficient. Successful implementation would require alignment among teacher preparation, learning materials, timetable flexibility, classroom space, supervision, leadership, and sustained institutional support.

The data further indicated generally positive perceptions of the contribution of practical learning to creativity, problem-solving, initiative, persistence, cooperation, and readiness for future learning. These perceptions lend conceptual support to positioning prevocational learning as a developmental foundation rather than premature occupational training. This distinction is essential. Busse and Maué (2025), working with older learners, demonstrated that meaningful prevocational experiences and institutional resources can facilitate later transitions into vocational education and training. However, such findings should not be transferred uncritically to preschool children. In ECCE, the objective should be to build dispositions and foundational capabilities rather than train children for specific occupations.

This developmental caution aligns with Günther-Hanssen et al. (2026), who questioned uncritical reliance on terms such as creativity, problem-solving, and future skills when these concepts are detached from children's relationships, agency, care, and lived experiences. Thus, the policy implication of the present study is not that ECCE should become employment-oriented. Rather, practical learning should remain child-centered, play-based, exploratory, culturally grounded, and developmentally appropriate. This is also consistent with Olalowo et al. (2025), who called for a reconceptualization of Nigerian early childhood education towards more child-centered and contextually responsive policy and practice.

The absence of significant urban-rural differences provides an additional point of interpretation. It suggests that geographical location alone may not adequately explain variation in prevocational integration. Institutional characteristics, teacher competence, professional training, leadership, and resource utilization may be equally or more important.

Implications for ECCE Policy and Practice

Taken together, the findings suggest that effective integration of prevocational learning should focus on strengthening existing child-centered activities rather than creating a separate vocational subject at ECCE level. A practical implementation framework could organize age-appropriate

learning around making and construction, gardening and environmental exploration, sorting and manipulation, role play, collaborative problem-solving, creative production, and simple decision-making. These activities should be connected explicitly to developmental outcomes such as curiosity, persistence, cooperation, skill, creativity, and problem-solving.

Teacher development represents a second priority. Training should extend beyond awareness of prevocational education to practical lesson design, scaffolding of children's inquiry, formative assessment, safe use of materials, adaptation of locally available resources, and integration with literacy and numeracy. The recently published Nigerian ECCDE policy framework places early learning, equity, safety, responsive caregiving, and multi-stakeholder implementation among its core priorities, providing a broader policy platform within which such developmentally appropriate activities could be situated.

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