

Policy on Paper, Crisis in Practice: An Examination of the Implementation Gap in Early Childhood Care and Development Education in Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract— Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) is globally recognized as foundational for lifelong learning and human capital development. In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education formally integrates ECCDE into the Universal Basic Education framework, establishing clear guidelines and minimum standards. Yet a persistent implementation gap separates policy promises from classroom realities. This paper examines this gap through a case study of Cross River State, drawing on national data, empirical studies conducted within the state, and comparative evidence. The analysis reveals five interconnected dimensions of the crisis: chronic underfunding leading to severe infrastructure decay, with 67 percent of ECCDE centers exhibiting cracked walls, leaking roofs, and unsafe electrical wiring; inadequate teacher supply, poor professional qualifications, and demoralizing working conditions that drive high turnover; weak monitoring and enforcement of the National Minimum Standards; low community awareness and parental engagement; and fragmented governance across federal, state, and local levels. Evidence from Akpabuyo Local Government Area shows that even where teachers are formally qualified, the play-way approach and mother-tongue instruction are inconsistently applied. Infrastructure decay is directly associated with increased teacher turnover intention and reduced child learning outcomes. While initiatives such as the Citizens' Academy and Education Marshals demonstrate political will, they have not been systematically scaled. The paper concludes that closing the implementation gap requires a coordinated strategy including a statewide infrastructure audit, establishment of a dedicated State ECCDE Agency, mandatory professional certification for caregivers, technology-enabled monitoring, and community-based awareness campaigns.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE); policy implementation gap; Cross River State; Universal Basic Education (UBE).

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INTRODUCTION

The first few years of a child's life represent a unique window of opportunity for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Neuroscience and developmental psychology have established that the quality of care, stimulation, and learning a child receives during these formative years profoundly shapes their future academic achievement, earning potential, and contributions to society (Heckman, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In recognition of this, global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.2) call for ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030.

In Nigeria, the importance of Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) has been formally acknowledged since the first National Policy on Education in 1977. The policy was revised in 1981, 1998, 2004, and most recently in 2013 to improve the quality of education provided to young children (Asuquo-Ekpo, 2024). The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 further integrated early childhood education into the nine-year basic education framework, making one year of kindergarten education for children aged five part of the formal school system. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), in collaboration with UNICEF, has developed a National Early Childhood Curriculum for ages 0-5 years, a National Minimum Standard for Early Childhood Centres, and various caregiver training manuals (NERDC, n.d.).

Across Nigeria, according to the 2022 National Personnel Audit conducted by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), 7,234,695 children were enrolled in Early Childhood Care Development Education (ECCDE) programmes, supported by 354,651 teachers and caregivers (UBEC, 2023). However, these national figures mask dramatic variations and deep-seated problems. Despite the existence of a policy framework, its implementation remains strikingly inconsistent across states and local government areas (Asuquo-Ekpo, 2024). The Minister of Education, Dr Tunji Alausa, has acknowledged persistent challenges including inadequate funding, insufficient workforce capacity, weak coordination, substandard learning environments, and poor monitoring mechanisms (Daily Post, 2026). Nationally, only 36 percent of children aged 36 to 59 months attend any form of early childhood education programme, leaving nearly 64 percent, or over 10 million children, without access (UNICEF, 2022). The gap is even starker between rich and poor households, with 78 percent attendance among wealthy families compared to just 8 percent among the poorest (UNICEF, 2022).

Cross River State, located in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, offers a particularly instructive case study of this policy implementation gap. The state has a diverse geography ranging from coastal mangrove swamps to tropical rainforest and mountainous hinterlands. Its population of over 3.7 million people is spread across 18

Local Government Areas, with significant variation in urbanization, infrastructure, and economic activity. While the state government has demonstrated rhetorical commitment to education, including the recent introduction of “Education Marshals” to enforce school attendance and combat street truancy (Prime Time News Online, 2025), empirical evidence suggests that ECCDE centres in the state are in a state of profound crisis.

This paper seeks to answer the following central research question: *What factors account for the persistent gap between ECCDE policy provisions and implementation realities in Cross River State, and what strategies can effectively close this gap?*

To answer this question, the paper draws on a systematic review of policy documents, national data reports from UBEC and UNICEF, empirical studies conducted specifically in Cross River State, and comparative evidence from other Nigerian states. The argument proceeds in six parts. First, the paper reviews the national policy framework and theoretical literature on policy implementation in education. Second, it presents a detailed historical and legal background of ECCDE in Nigeria and Cross River State. Third, it analyzes the five key dimensions of the implementation gap as they manifest in the state. Fourth, it provides case study evidence from Akpabuyo Local Government Area and the Ogoja Education Zone. Fifth, it discusses the interconnected nature of these challenges. Finally, the paper offers a comprehensive set of evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Understanding the gap between policy and practice in early childhood education requires engagement with two interconnected bodies of literature: theoretical frameworks on policy implementation in developing country contexts, and empirical studies on the specific challenges facing ECCDE in Nigeria.

Theoretical Perspectives on Policy Implementation

The study of policy implementation emerged as a distinct field in the 1970s, following the recognition that policy outcomes often diverged dramatically from policy intentions. Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) seminal work, “Implementation,” introduced the concept of the “implementation gap” and identified factors such as inter-organizational coordination failures, unclear policy objectives, and inadequate resources as key barriers to effective implementation. Later scholars, such as Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), refined this perspective by distinguishing between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to implementation analysis. The top-down approach emphasizes the role of clear policy design, hierarchical control, and sanctions

for non-compliance, while the bottom-up approach focuses on the agency of local implementers, bureaucratic discretion, and the influence of local conditions.

In the context of developing countries, implementation failures are particularly common due to factors such as weak institutional capacity, political instability, corruption, inadequate funding, and a disconnect between centrally designed policies and local realities (Grindle, 2017; Hoppe, 2011). Honig (2004) argues that implementation problems are often rooted not in a lack of knowledge about “what works,” but in the difficulty of adapting standardized solutions to diverse and resource-constrained local contexts. This insight is highly relevant to the Nigerian ECCDE situation, where national policies and minimum standards developed at the federal level must be implemented by State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) with vastly different institutional capacities and resource endowments.

ECCDE Implementation Challenges in Nigeria

A growing body of empirical research has documented the specific challenges facing ECCDE implementation in Nigeria. A consistent finding across multiple studies is the severity of infrastructure deficits. A study examining the extent to which classroom facilities in public early childhood centres in Rivers East complied with national minimum standards found significant gaps in availability, adequacy, accessibility, and condition of facilities (Rivers East Gap Analysis, 2025). Similarly, research on public primary schools in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, found that while staff possessed the necessary skills for ECCDE programme implementation, facility provisions were “insufficient” (Zenodo, 2024).

Teacher-related challenges constitute another major theme. The National Personnel Audit conducted by UBEC revealed a severe teacher shortage, with over 7 million ECCDE learners served by only 154,000 available teachers nationwide (UNICEF, 2022). This translates into a pupil-teacher ratio far exceeding the National Policy on Education’s recommended maximum of 25:1, and dramatically exceeding international best practices. A qualitative study on implementation of ECCE programs in Abuja found that “most parents and society lacked adequate awareness of ECCE programs’ significance” (Zenodo, 2024, p. 2). This suggests that even when facilities and teachers are available, low demand driven by lack of awareness remains a barrier.

The issue of teacher quality and professional development is equally pressing. A recent study on implementing the 2020 ECCE Minimum Standard Framework in Colleges of Education investigated the difficulties experienced by ECE teachers in operationalizing the revised standards (AJOL, 2025). The study highlighted that even when minimum standards are established, translating them into classroom practice requires substantial investment in pre-service and in-service teacher training.

Inadequate supervision and poor monitoring and evaluation strategies have also been identified as persistent obstacles (The Sun, 2026; Ige & Orisabinone, 2025).

Scholars have also drawn attention to the specific challenges of ECCDE linkage schools, which were designed to serve as models of quality early education within the UBE framework. Ige and Orisabinone (2025) argue that despite the potential of these linkage schools, “various challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, low community participation, and limited funding hinder their ability to deliver quality education” (p. 4). These challenges are not merely additive but interact in mutually reinforcing ways: poor infrastructure demoralizes teachers, low pay drives qualified teachers away, and lack of community involvement reduces accountability, perpetuating a cycle of poor quality.

The Cross River State Research Gap

While the national literature on ECCDE implementation challenges is substantial, there remains a significant gap in state-level studies, particularly for Cross River State. Most national studies aggregate data across states, obscuring the specific conditions and challenges within individual states. Moreover, the few studies that do focus on Cross River State have examined specific local government areas (e.g., Akpabuyo) or specific issues (e.g., reading readiness), without providing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of the policy implementation gap. This paper addresses that gap by synthesizing available evidence and providing a systematic framework for understanding and addressing the ECCDE crisis in Cross River State.

HISTORICAL AND LEGAL BACKGROUND OF ECCDE IN NIGERIA AND CROSS RIVER STATE

The Evolution of ECCDE Policy in Nigeria

The formal recognition of early childhood education in Nigeria dates to the 1977 National Policy on Education, which for the first time acknowledged the importance of pre-primary education as a foundation for the formal school system. The policy was revised in 1981, 1998, 2004, and 2013, with each iteration seeking to strengthen the provisions for early childhood care and development (Asuquo-Ekpo, 2024). The most significant change came with the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004, which made one year of pre-primary education for children aged five part of the nine-year basic education framework. This integration entitled ECCDE to funding from the UBE intervention fund, theoretically linking early childhood education to the resources available for basic education.

The National Policy on Education (2013 edition) outlines several key provisions for ECCDE. These include the establishment of pre-primary sections in all public primary schools; the development of a national curriculum for early childhood

education; the specification of a maximum pupil-teacher ratio of 25:1; the requirement that all ECCDE teachers be professionally trained; the use of the play-way approach as the primary pedagogical method; and the integration of local languages as the medium of instruction in the early years. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), in collaboration with UNICEF, has developed a range of resources to support these provisions, including a National Early Childhood Curriculum for ages 0-5 years, a National Minimum Standard for Early Childhood Centres, a caregiver's manual, and a toy-making manual (NERDC, n.d.).

The Role of the State and Local Governments

Under Nigeria's federal system, education is on the concurrent legislative list. This means that while the federal government sets national policies and minimum standards, the implementation of basic education, including ECCDE, is primarily the responsibility of state governments through their State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs). Local Government Education Authorities also have a role, particularly in the establishment and supervision of community-based early childhood centres.

The National ECCDE Policy and Minimum Standards provide guidance on the roles and responsibilities of different levels of government. However, in practice, the division of responsibilities is often unclear, leading to gaps and overlaps. As the Minister of Education has noted, weak coordination among the Federal Ministry of Education, UBEC, SUBEBs, and State Ministries of Education is a persistent challenge (Daily Post, 2026). The fragmentation of responsibility means that no single actor feels fully accountable for ECCDE outcomes, and coordination failures are common.

Cross River State's ECCDE Policy Context

Cross River State has demonstrated rhetorical commitment to education as a pathway to development. The state domesticated the Child Rights Act in 2009 and amended it in 2023 into the Cross River Child Rights Law 2023, which explicitly criminalizes harmful practices against children and stipulates sanctions (Ashenewsdaily, 2025). More recently, the state government introduced "Education Marshals" to enforce compulsory school attendance and tackle the rising number of out-of-school children. The marshals are deployed across schools and communities to ensure that children are not found loitering on the streets, in markets, or at recreational centres during school hours (Prime Time News Online, 2025). The government is also working with the Chief Judge to establish mobile courts to handle cases of child neglect and enforce compliance with school attendance regulations.

While these initiatives address school attendance, they do not directly address the quality of education that children receive once they are in school. The establishment

of the Citizens' Academy, a tuition-free school in Calabar that currently serves over 200 pupils on full scholarships, provides a model of what is possible when resources are concentrated (Prime Time News Online, 2025). However, the academy serves a tiny fraction of the state's out-of-school children, and its model has not been systematically replicated across the state. The gap between the state's policy rhetoric and the observable realities in most ECCDE centers remains substantial.

THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP: FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CRISIS IN CROSS RIVER STATE

Drawing on national data, empirical studies conducted in Cross River State, and comparative evidence, this section analyzes the five key dimensions of the implementation gap as they manifest in the state.

Infrastructure Decay: The Broken Foundation

The most visible manifestation of the implementation gap is the physical condition of ECCDE facilities. A seminal study by Mbey (2026) investigated the relationship between infrastructure decay, teacher working conditions, and learning outcomes in ECCE centers across Cross River State. Using a sequential mixed methods design, the study collected quantitative data from 312 teachers across 156 centers, and qualitative data from 45 interviews and photographic documentation of 78 classrooms. The findings are alarming. Sixty-seven percent of centers exhibited severe infrastructure decay, including cracked walls, leaking roofs, compromised floors, and unsafe electrical wiring. The study documented that teachers in severely decayed centers experienced chronic fear for their safety, health problems from mold and dust, lost instructional time managing infrastructure failures, and feelings of shame and frustration with unresponsive authorities.

The consequences of infrastructure decay extend beyond teacher morale to directly affect children's learning outcomes. The same study found that children in severely decayed centers demonstrated significantly lower pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills compared to children in adequate centers, with teacher outcomes partially mediating this relationship (Mbey, 2026). In other words, poor infrastructure demoralizes teachers, and demoralized teachers are less effective in the classroom, harming children's development.

The infrastructure problem is not unique to Cross River State. Nationally, UBEC data show that approximately 48 percent of classrooms in basic education institutions require major repairs or complete reconstruction (Ripples Nigeria, 2021). However, the Mbey's work is significant because it provides the first systematic empirical evidence specifically focused on ECCE centers in Cross River State, revealing that the state is not immune from, and in some respects may be worse than, the national average.

Qualitative findings from the study paint a vivid picture of the daily reality in decayed centers. Teachers reported health problems from exposure to mold and dust, with some developing chronic respiratory conditions. They described losing instructional time to managing infrastructure failures, such as moving children away from leaking roofs or navigating unsafe electrical wiring. They expressed shame about working conditions that they felt were unworthy of the profession. And they voiced frustration with “unresponsive authorities” who seemed indifferent to their plight (Mbey, 2026, p. 122). It is difficult to attract and retain qualified teachers, or to convince parents to send their children to centers where the physical environment is hazardous and demoralizing.

Teacher Quality, Supply, and Working Conditions

The second dimension of the implementation gap concerns the ECCDE workforce. Nationally, the teacher shortage is severe. The National Personnel Audit found over 7 million ECCDE learners served by only 154,000 teachers (UNICEF, 2022). The national pupil-teacher ratio thus stands at approximately 45:1, nearly double the National Policy on Education’s recommended maximum of 25:1. In some states, the ratio is as high as 100:1 (UBEC, 2023).

Cross River State-specific data on ECCDE teacher numbers are limited, but the state overall is classified as having significant teacher shortages across all levels of basic education. Mbey (2026) study found that teacher shortages and poor working conditions were major drivers of turnover intention. Infrastructure decay was significantly associated with increased teacher turnover intention, reduced self-efficacy, higher absenteeism, and occupational stress (Mbey, 2026, p.122). These findings are consistent with national patterns: teachers are not evenly distributed between urban and rural areas, and those in rural and remote locations face particularly harsh conditions (The Sun, 2026).

The issue of teacher quality is equally concerning. Dr Hamid Bobboyi, Executive Secretary of UBEC, has noted that “it is sad to find that some of the people teaching in schools are holders of the First School Leaving Certificate, Basic Education Certificate, Senior Secondary School Certificate, Associate Certificate in Education, Diploma Certificate” (UBEC, 2023, p. 4). This means that many ECCDE caregivers lack even the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), the minimum qualification for teaching in basic education.

The Cross River State Government has made some efforts to address the training gap. In 2013, the state trained 210 teachers in public schools on the newly introduced ECCDE curriculum (The Tide News Online, 2013). However, a single training event for 210 teachers is insufficient for a state with hundreds of ECCDE centers and thousands of teachers and caregivers. The state needs a systematic, ongoing professional

development programme, integrated into pre-service teacher education and reinforced through regular in-service training.

The issue of teacher motivation cannot be separated from the issue of compensation. ECCDE teachers in public schools are often paid less than their counterparts teaching older children, and in many cases are employed on a volunteer or contract basis with irregular salaries. The combination of low pay, poor working conditions, lack of career progression, and inadequate professional support creates a high-turnover environment that undermines the continuity and quality of care that young children need.

Weak Monitoring, Supervision, and Enforcement of Minimum Standards

The third dimension of the implementation gap concerns monitoring and supervision. The National Policy on Education and the National Minimum Standards for ECCDE centres establish clear expectations for infrastructure, teacher qualifications, class size, pedagogy, and curriculum. However, these standards are only as effective as the enforcement mechanisms that back them up. Asuquo-Ekpo's (2024) study of ECCDE implementation in Akpabuyo Local Government Area provides specific evidence of weak monitoring. The study found that while there exists a policy framework for early childhood education overseen by the Local Government Area, there are "significant gaps in the monitoring and application of these policies" (Asuquo-Ekpo, 2024, p. 4). Specifically, the study identified the inconsistent application of the play-way approach and lack of integration of the local language as evidence of weak implementation oversight.

The Minister of Education has acknowledged that poor supervision and lack of effective monitoring are persistent challenges (Daily Post, 2026). Without regular, unannounced inspections by trained supervisors, with clear checklists and authority to sanction non-compliance, the gap between policy and practice will persist.

The problem is compounded by a shortage of qualified supervisors. State Ministries of Education and SUBEBs often lack the personnel, transportation, and budget to conduct regular inspections of ECCDE centers, particularly in remote rural areas. When inspections do occur, they are often announced in advance, allowing centers to temporarily address the most visible deficiencies. Moreover, supervisors themselves may lack the training to assess whether a center is truly meeting the minimum standards, particularly with respect to pedagogical quality.

Low Community Awareness and Parental Engagement

The fourth dimension of the implementation gap is low community awareness and parental engagement. A qualitative study on implementation of public primary school ECCE programs in Abuja found that "most parents and society lacked adequate

awareness of ECCE programs' significance" (Zenodo, 2024, p. 2). This finding is likely applicable to Cross River State as well. In many communities, particularly in rural areas, parents may not understand the benefits of early childhood education, may view it as an unnecessary expense or a luxury, or may prioritize other needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare.

Low awareness leads to low demand, which in turn reduces political pressure on policymakers to invest in ECCDE. If parents do not see early childhood education as a priority, they are unlikely to advocate for its improvement, enroll their children in ECCDE programs, or hold local officials accountable for the quality of those programs.

The lack of integration of local languages into the classroom, identified as a gap by Asuquo-Ekpo (2024), may also contribute to low parental engagement. If the language of instruction in the ECCDE center is not the language spoken at home, parents may feel excluded from their child's learning and may be less likely to engage with teachers and support learning at home. The National Policy on Education emphasizes the importance of using the child's mother tongue as the medium of instruction in early childhood education, but this provision is widely ignored in practice.

Fragmented Governance and Accountability

The fifth dimension of the implementation gap is systemic fragmentation in governance and accountability. Responsibility for ECCDE is shared across multiple actors: the Federal Ministry of Education and UBEC at the national level, State Ministries of Education and SUBEBs at the state level, Local Government Education Authorities and local governments at the local level, and individual schools and head teachers at the institutional level. The National ECCDE Policy attempts to clarify these roles, but in practice, coordination is weak and accountability is blurred.

The Minister of Education has noted that "weak coordination" between the Federal Ministry of Education, UBEC, SUBEBs, and State Ministries of Education is a persistent challenge (Daily Post, 2026). The fragmentation means that responsibility for specific outcomes is often diffuse, with each actor pointing to another as the party responsible for a particular failure. For example, the federal government may argue that it has provided the policy framework and curriculum, and that implementation is the responsibility of the states. The state may respond that it lacks the resources to implement federal mandates without adequate federal transfers. The local government may point to a lack of state support. And head teachers may cite a lack of support from all levels.

This fragmentation is particularly problematic for ECCDE because it is a relatively new addition to the basic education framework and has not yet established strong institutional home in many SUBEBs. In some states, ECCDE is housed within the

Ministry of Education, in others within a separate agency, and in still others it is not clearly located at all. The result is that ECCDE can fall between the cracks of administrative attention, with no single actor feeling a strong sense of ownership or accountability for its success.

CASE STUDIES: THE LIVED REALITY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

Akpabuyo Local Government Area: Policy on Paper, Gaps in Practice

Asuquo-Ekpo's (2024) study of ECCDE implementation in Akpabuyo Local Government Area provides a detailed, localized view of the implementation gap. The study surveyed 97 educators and 11 principals across 20 institutions, using the Early Childhood Education Performance Evaluation Questionnaire (ECEPEQ) to assess the extent to which policy guidelines were being followed.

The study's findings reveal a mixed picture. On the positive side, the research found that "the teaching staff are adequately qualified with the National Policy on Education curriculum duly followed" (Asuquo-Ekpo, 2024, p. 4). This suggests that in terms of formal qualifications and curriculum adherence, the Akpabuyo centers were in compliance with policy requirements. However, significant gaps remained. The researchers found that the "play-way approach to teaching was not uniformly applied as suggested" (Asuquo-Ekpo, 2024, p. 5). This is a critical finding, because the play-way approach is the pedagogical core of the national ECCDE curriculum, reflecting international best practices in early childhood education. If teachers are not implementing the play-way approach consistently, then the curriculum is not being delivered as intended, regardless of whether the curriculum document is being "followed" in a formal sense.

Additionally, the study found that integration of the local language into the classroom setting was lacking. This represents a failure to implement the mother-tongue medium of instruction provision of the National Policy on Education. The absence of local language instruction alienates children for whom the language of the center is not the language of the home, and it reduces the ability of parents to engage with their children's learning.

Asuquo-Ekpo's study underscores that the implementation gap is not simply a matter of resource availability; it is also a matter of supervision, training, and accountability. The teaching staff in Akpabuyo were qualified on paper, but they were not implementing the prescribed pedagogical approach. This suggests that initial teacher education alone is insufficient; ongoing professional development, classroom observation, coaching, and feedback are also required.

Ogoja Education Zone: The Learning Environment and Reading Readiness

A study on the school learning environment and pre-primary children's reading readiness in the Ogoja Education Zone of Cross River State provides additional evidence of the implementation gap's consequences for child outcomes (Sunday & Amalu, 2020). The study investigated the relationship between features of the physical and psychosocial learning environment and children's readiness for reading instruction. While the full study is not available for direct citation, its abstract indicates that the learning environment is a significant predictor of reading readiness outcomes. This finding underscores that when infrastructure is poor and the learning environment is substandard, children's foundational literacy skills suffer.

The Ogoja Education Zone is one of the less urbanized areas of Cross River State, with many communities located in remote, difficult-to-access terrain. ECCDE centers in such areas are likely to experience the infrastructure, teacher supply, and supervision challenges in their most acute forms. If children in these areas are not developing foundational literacy skills before entering primary school, they will be at a disadvantage throughout their educational careers, perpetuating cycles of educational and economic marginalization.

The Citizens' Academy: A Model of What Is Possible

The Cross River State Government's establishment of the Citizens' Academy in Calabar provides a glimpse of what can be achieved when resources are concentrated and political will is present. The academy, which currently serves over 200 pupils on full scholarships covering tuition, uniforms, and learning materials, is a tuition-free school catering to socially deprived children (Prime Time News Online, 2025). The Deputy Governor has pledged support for logistics and infrastructure to ensure its sustainability, noting that 15 of the academy's pupils who were once out of school have written their Common Entrance examinations and are now in secondary school.

However, the Citizens' Academy serves only a tiny fraction of the state's out-of-school children, and its model has not been systematically scaled across the state. The academy benefits from concentrated resources and high-level political attention that most ECCDE centers do not receive. The challenge is to take the lessons from this successful pilot and apply them across the state, creating a system where every child, not just a fortunate few, has access to quality early childhood education.

DISCUSSION: THE INTERCONNECTED NATURE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

The five dimensions of the implementation gap analyzed above are not separate problems; they are deeply interconnected, forming a feedback loop that perpetuates poor outcomes. Lack of funding leads to infrastructure decay, which discourages qualified teachers from working in ECCDE centers and increases turnover, which

reduces the quality of instruction and makes it harder to attract and retain students, which reduces parental and political demand for quality, which reduces the pressure on policymakers to increase funding.

This interconnectedness means that piecemeal, isolated interventions are unlikely to succeed. Building a new classroom block without also training teachers in play-based pedagogy, for example, will not improve learning outcomes. Similarly, providing teacher training without addressing low compensation and poor working conditions will not reduce teacher turnover, as trained teachers will simply leave for better opportunities.

The concept of “system coherence” is useful here. In a coherent education system, the various components—policy, funding, curriculum, teacher preparation, supervision, infrastructure, community engagement—are aligned and mutually reinforcing. In Cross River State, the ECCDE system is not coherent. The curriculum demands play-based instruction, but the classrooms are not equipped for it and teachers have not been trained in it. Policy sets maximum class sizes, but underfunding means that class sizes are far larger. Minimum standards are established, but monitoring is weak and enforcement is absent.

Achieving system coherence requires a systemic approach that addresses all dimensions of the implementation gap simultaneously. This is a significant challenge, but it is not insurmountable. Other states in Nigeria and other countries in Africa have made progress in improving ECCDE outcomes through sustained investment, institutional reform, and community engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This paper has examined the persistent gap between ECCDE policy provisions and implementation realities in Cross River State, Nigeria. Drawing on national data, empirical studies focused on the state, and comparative evidence, the analysis has revealed that the implementation gap manifests across five interconnected dimensions: chronic underfunding and dilapidated physical infrastructure; inadequate teacher supply, professional training, and poor working conditions; weak monitoring, supervision, and enforcement of minimum standards; low community awareness and parental engagement; and systemic fragmentation in governance and accountability.

The evidence presented demonstrates that the ECCDE system in Cross River State is not merely underperforming; it is in a state of crisis. The finding that 67 percent of ECCE centers in the state suffer from severe infrastructure decay, and that this decay is associated with increased teacher turnover and reduced learning outcomes, should serve as a wake-up call for policymakers. The finding that even where qualified teachers are present, pedagogical practices such as the play-way approach and mother-

tongue instruction are inconsistently applied, suggests that initial teacher education alone is insufficient; ongoing professional development and supervision are essential.

However, the paper also identifies grounds for hope. The Cross River State Government has demonstrated political will on education through initiatives such as the Education Marshals and the Citizens' Academy. These initiatives show that when resources are concentrated and political attention is focused, progress is possible. The challenge is to scale these successes and to apply the same level of political will to the foundational challenge of early childhood education.

If the implementation gap is not urgently addressed, the consequences will be severe and long-lasting. Children who do not receive quality early childhood education will enter primary school without the foundational skills they need to succeed. They will be more likely to fall behind, to repeat grades, to drop out, and to end up among the 20 million out-of-school children that UNICEF has documented in Nigeria. The costs of inaction, in terms of lost human potential, reduced national productivity, and increased social spending, are enormous.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, the following evidence-based recommendations are offered to policymakers, state education authorities, development partners, and civil society organizations.

Recommendation 1: Conduct a Comprehensive Statewide ECCDE Infrastructure Audit and Remediation Programme

The state government, in collaboration with UBEC and development partners, should conduct a comprehensive audit of all ECCDE centers in Cross River State, assessing their compliance with the National Minimum Standard for Early Childhood Centres. The audit should use the standardized ECCC Monitoring Tool developed by NERDC, and should prioritize centers in the most remote and underserved areas. Following the audit, the state government should develop and resource a multi-year infrastructure remediation plan, starting with the most urgent safety and health deficiencies (e.g., leaking roofs, cracked walls, unsafe electrical wiring). The cost of infrastructure remediation should be a line item in the state's annual education budget, and progress should be tracked publicly through an online dashboard.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Dedicated State ECCDE Agency with Clear Mandate and Resources

The fragmentation of governance and accountability is a major barrier to effective implementation. The state government should establish a dedicated State ECCDE Agency, separate from the Ministry of Education and SUBEB, with a clear

mandate for ECCDE policy, planning, funding, monitoring, and quality assurance. The agency should have its own budget line and should be staffed by professionals with expertise in early childhood development and education. The agency should be responsible for coordinating the activities of all actors involved in ECCDE, including local governments, schools, development partners, and civil society organizations.

Recommendation 3: Implement a Mandatory Professional Certification and Career Ladder for ECCDE Caregivers

The state government, in collaboration with Colleges of Education and Universities, should establish a mandatory professional certification scheme for all ECCDE caregivers. All caregivers working in public ECCDE centers should be required to hold the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) in Early Childhood Care and Education, or an equivalent qualification, within five years. The state should provide scholarships and study leave for existing caregivers without the required qualification to upgrade their skills. In addition, the state should establish a career ladder for ECCDE caregivers, with clear pathways for promotion, salary increases, and professional development. This will incentivize qualification upgrading and reduce turnover.

Recommendation 4: Renew and Institutionalize the Play-Way Pedagogy through Cluster-Based Teacher Professional Development

The finding that the play-way approach is inconsistently applied, even where teachers are qualified on paper, indicates that initial teacher education alone is insufficient. The state government, in collaboration with UBEC and development partners, should establish a multi-year, cluster-based teacher professional development programme focused on play-based pedagogy. The programme should include regular classroom observation and coaching, peer learning, and the development of locally appropriate play-based learning materials. Teacher professional development should be compulsory and should be linked to the career ladder and compensation system.

Recommendation 5: Launch a Community-Based Awareness Campaign on the Benefits of ECCDE

Low community awareness and parental engagement are major barriers to enrolment and sustained attendance. The state government, in collaboration with local governments, traditional leaders, religious institutions, and civil society organizations, should launch a sustained, community-based awareness campaign on the benefits of early childhood education. The campaign should be conducted in local languages and should be tailored to the specific cultural contexts of different communities. The campaign should use multiple channels, including community meetings, radio, social

media, and mobile messaging, and should engage parents as partners in their children's learning.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen Monitoring and Supervision through Technology-Enabled Systems

The state government should strengthen monitoring and supervision of ECCDE centers by introducing technology-enabled systems for data collection, inspection, and reporting. Inspectors should be equipped with tablets loaded with a standardized inspection checklist linked to the National Minimum Standards. Inspection data should be uploaded in real time to a central database, allowing the new State ECCDE Agency to track compliance, identify patterns of non-compliance, and target enforcement actions. The database should be publicly accessible, creating transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 7: Integrate Mother-Tongue Instruction into ECCDE Practice

The state government should enforce the National Policy on Education's provision for mother-tongue instruction in early childhood education. The State ECCDE Agency should develop and distribute mother-tongue teaching and learning materials for the major languages of Cross River State, including Efik, Ejagham, Bekwarra, and others. Caregivers should receive training in mother-tongue instructional strategies, and parents should be encouraged to support learning in the home language.

Recommendation 8: Mobilize Domestic Resources and Advocate for Increased Federal Transfers for ECCDE

The state government should increase its domestic allocation to ECCDE, recognizing early childhood education as an economic investment rather than a social expense. The state should also advocate for an increase in the federal allocation to ECCDE from the current 5 percent of the 2 percent Consolidated Revenue Fund allocated to UBEC. The state should explore innovative financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, social impact bonds, and diaspora funding, to supplement public resources.

Recommendation 9: Learn from and Scale the Citizens' Academy Model

The state government should conduct a thorough evaluation of the Citizens' Academy model and identify the key success factors that can be scaled across the state. While the full academy model may not be replicable everywhere, certain elements, such as the provision of scholarships for the poorest children, the establishment of parent engagement mechanisms, and the use of data for continuous improvement, can be adapted and implemented in other settings.

Recommendation 10: Establish a State-Level ECCDE Research and Learning Network

Finally, the state government should establish a State-Level ECCDE Research and Learning Network, bringing together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and development partners to generate and share evidence on what works in early childhood education in the Cross River context. The network should commission and disseminate research on ECCDE implementation challenges and solutions, and should facilitate cross-learning between the state and other Nigerian states and between Nigeria and other countries.

The task of closing the implementation gap in early childhood education in Cross River State is urgent and difficult, but it is not impossible. With sustained political will, strategic investment, institutional reform, and community engagement, the state can transform its ECCDE system from a policy on paper to a reality of quality and equity for all children.

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