



Broken Cradles, Broken Classrooms: The Triple Burden of Poverty, Insecurity, And Poor Nutrition on Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the compounded vulnerabilities faced by young children in Nigeria, particularly within conflict-affected and impoverished communities. It introduces the concept of the “triple burden”—poverty, insecurity, and weak systems—which converge to undermine the survival, development, and protection of children in their early years. Despite national policies and international frameworks supporting Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), systemic challenges persist, including underfunded programs, fragmented service delivery, and insufficient multi-sectoral collaboration. The paper outlines the pivotal roles of caregivers, educators, and communities in sustaining child well-being, while highlighting the immense stress and resource constraints they endure. It also draws attention to policy and programmatic gaps, notably the lack of integrated responses and weak coordination between education, health, and protection sectors. By reviewing current responses and exposing their limitations, the paper proposes actionable recommendations, such as multi-sectoral approaches, school feeding programs, social protection for vulnerable households, and greater investment in ECCE infrastructure in underserved areas. The study ultimately argues for a reimagined early childhood agenda—one that safeguards the dignity, rights, and potential of Nigeria’s youngest citizens through collective responsibility and systemic reform.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Poverty and Insecurity, Child Nutrition

I. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is universally acknowledged as a cornerstone for fostering a child's comprehensive development. It is

within this phase, spanning from birth to the age of eight, that foundational skills such as language, cognition, motor coordination, and emotional regulation are cultivated (UNESCO, 2021). Research consistently shows that high-quality ECE yields long-term benefits, including increased school readiness, improved academic performance, higher rates of high school graduation, and reduced involvement in crime and social welfare dependency in later life (Heckman, 2006). However, for millions of children across sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, these benefits remain largely out of reach due to a confluence of structural and socio-political challenges.

Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation, bears a unique paradox. While its national policy recognizes the value of early learning, implementation remains fraught with barriers, especially in marginalized and rural communities. Among the most pressing threats to ECE in Nigeria today are the triple burdens of poverty, insecurity, and malnutrition, an intersection of adversities that threatens to cripple the early learning environment before it can even take root.

Poverty, which affects nearly 63% of the Nigerian population (NBS, 2022), poses perhaps the most visible constraint. Families living in extreme poverty are often unable to enroll their children in early learning programs, not due to unwillingness, but because of more immediate survival needs, such as feeding their households or avoiding unsafe transit routes. Children in such households often experience limited verbal interaction, inadequate play materials, and poor hygiene, all of which hinder early development (UNICEF, 2023). For many, school attendance is either postponed or completely missed, contributing to entrenched cycles of illiteracy and deprivation.

Insecurity further exacerbates the crisis. Ongoing insurgency in the Northeast, communal



clashes in the Middle Belt, and widespread banditry and kidnapping across the North-West and even parts of the South have rendered many school environments unsafe. Between 2020 and 2023, hundreds of schools were shut down, and thousands of children were abducted or displaced due to violence (GCPEA, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2022). In such situations, early learners are exposed to trauma, which can impair brain development and disrupt emotional and social learning. Teachers also flee, school infrastructure is destroyed, and early learning becomes an afterthought in emergency education responses.

Compounding the situation is the silent yet insidious impact of malnutrition. The National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018) reports that 37% of Nigerian children under five are stunted, and 7% suffer from wasting, conditions strongly linked to poor educational outcomes. Malnutrition diminishes attention span, memory retention, and problem-solving skills, core competencies required for effective learning (Black, 2017). Furthermore, malnourished children are more susceptible to infections and absenteeism, thereby undermining their capacity to consistently engage in school activities.

This interwoven crisis has produced what can be called “broken cradles and broken classrooms.” When children begin life with disrupted development, they bring that brokenness into the classroom, if they reach it at all. Schools, under-equipped and under-resourced, struggle to bridge the gap. In turn, teachers face insurmountable challenges in addressing the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of their pupils.

Poverty remains one of the most persistent barriers to quality early childhood education in Nigeria. Many families cannot afford basic educational materials, safe transportation, or learning centers with trained caregivers. Inadequate home stimulation and overstretched early learning environments mean that children from low-income households often begin their education journey already at a disadvantage (World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Without financial stability, consistent schooling becomes a privilege rather than a right, particularly for children in rural and underserved communities.

Insecurity adds a volatile dimension to these challenges. Armed conflicts, terrorist attacks, kidnapping, and communal clashes have forced the closure of hundreds of schools in northern Nigeria alone. Thousands of children have been displaced, while many educators have fled or been killed, leaving entire communities without access to early

education (GCPEA, 2020; Save the Children, 2021). The constant threat of violence instills fear in both children and caregivers, making the concept of a “safe classroom” nearly impossible in many regions. Beyond physical safety, the psychological trauma associated with conflict severely impacts a child’s ability to concentrate, form attachments, and engage with learning materials (Shonkoff, 2015).

Poor nutrition is another silent but powerful disruptor of early learning. According to the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018), 37% of Nigerian children under five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition. Malnourished children are more susceptible to illness, reduced energy levels, and delayed cognitive development, all of which hinder their classroom engagement and long-term academic potential (UNICEF, 2023; Shonkoff, 2015). Nutrition is not only a matter of survival but also a prerequisite for brain development, memory formation, and language acquisition during the critical early years (UNESCO, 2021).

Together, these three forces, poverty, insecurity, and malnutrition- intertwine to form a triple burden that places millions of Nigerian children at risk of being left behind before they ever enter a formal classroom.

Impact on Early Learners

The combined effects of poverty, insecurity, and poor nutrition create a fragile and often hostile environment for early learners in Nigeria. These burdens not only interfere with children’s right to education but also compromise the quality of their developmental journey, mentally, emotionally, and physically.

1. **Irregular Attendance:** Due to economic hardship, children from low-income households often miss school because families cannot afford transport, uniforms, or learning materials (UNICEF, 2023). Some children walk long distances to reach the nearest learning center, often exposed to unsafe paths or harsh weather conditions.

2. **Dropout Rates:** Families facing extreme poverty may withdraw children, especially girls, from school to engage in hawking, domestic work, or farming (World Bank, 2022). This early withdrawal reduces the likelihood of future school reentry and increases vulnerability to child marriage and exploitation.

3. **Conflict-Induced School Closures:** Insecurity in northern Nigeria has led to over 1,500 school closures in the past few years (GCPEA, 2020). When schools shut down due to abduction fears or insurgent attacks, learning is halted, and



recovery often takes months or years, if it happens at all.

4. **Barriers for Internally Displaced Children:** In displacement camps, early learning centers are rare, under-resourced, or entirely absent. Even where learning spaces exist, the lack of trained teachers and structured routines hinders effective learning (UNHCR, 2022).

5. **Toxic Stress and Cognitive Delays:** Exposure to chronic stress, due to hunger, fear, or displacement, leads to the release of stress hormones that impair the development of brain circuits responsible for learning and memory (Shonkoff et al., 2015). This results in lower IQ levels, poor problem-solving skills, and reduced attention spans.

6. **Emotional Instability and Behavior Issues:** Children affected by conflict or witnessing violence often suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms, including aggression, withdrawal, nightmares, and poor emotional regulation. These symptoms hinder participation in group activities and limit learning through play and interaction (Save the Children, 2021).

7. **Malnutrition and Stunting:** Over 37% of Nigerian children under five are stunted due to chronic malnutrition (NDHS, 2018). Malnourished children are physically smaller, easily fatigued, and slower to reach developmental milestones, such as speech and motor skills (WHO, 2020).

8. **Poor Language and Communication Skills:** Cognitive delays caused by poor nutrition and emotional trauma directly affect language acquisition. Children in these conditions may enter primary school without the ability to communicate clearly or follow basic instructions, putting them at a learning disadvantage (Britto et al., 2017).

9. **Foundational Learning Deficits:** According to UNESCO (2021), children lacking early stimulation and preschool education are less likely to master foundational literacy and numeracy skills by age 10. This “learning poverty” translates to persistent underachievement through adolescence and adulthood.

10. **Reduced Life Opportunities:** Children who fail to gain basic competencies early are less likely to complete secondary education or pursue higher learning. The long-term implication is a generation locked out of skilled labor markets, civic leadership, and socioeconomic mobility (World Bank, 2022). The cycle of poverty thus continues, passed from one generation to the next.

The Role of Caregivers, Educators, and Communities

In the face of the triple burden confronting early learners, poverty, insecurity, and malnutrition

caregivers, educators, and communities serve as vital pillars in ensuring children’s survival, growth, and learning. They collectively form the immediate environment in which children develop, particularly in emergencies and fragile settings. Their coordinated actions are central to sustaining early childhood education and care.

Caregivers

Caregivers, particularly parents and guardians, are the first educators in a child’s life. They lay the foundation for emotional bonding, communication, social behaviour, and cognitive development long before children enter formal school settings. In many households, especially during displacement or emergencies, caregivers engage in storytelling, singing, praying, and communal parenting practices to soothe the children and reinforce cultural values (Ager, 2015).

Their role extends to early stimulation, ensuring safety, emotional support, and basic hygiene. When formal education is disrupted, caregivers often become de facto teachers, improvising learning activities at home. In contexts where early learning centers are inaccessible, caregivers who have received training or support from NGOs can facilitate structured home-based learning using simple, low-cost resources (UNICEF, 2022).

Educators

Early childhood educators are central to organizing safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. Their role includes delivering play-based learning, identifying developmental delays, supporting social-emotional learning, and fostering language and numeracy skills in young children. In emergency or low-resource settings, educators often take on additional responsibilities, such as providing psychosocial support and maintaining classroom continuity amid displacement (INEE, 2020).

Educators also play a key role in inclusive education. Trained teachers can adapt instruction for children with disabilities or trauma-related challenges. Where formal training is unavailable, educators may still draw from experience and peer support to make learning engaging and meaningful. Through consistency and empathy, they help restore a sense of normalcy in children’s lives after crises (UNESCO, 2021).

Communities

Communities act as enablers of early learning. Community leaders, faith-based



institutions, women's groups, and local NGOs provide both formal and informal support to promote early childhood education. Their role includes setting up temporary learning spaces, advocating for school safety, organizing parenting workshops, and ensuring that learning continues even in the absence of government structures (Save the Children, 2021).

In areas affected by conflict or natural disasters, communities have initiated school-based protection mechanisms and psychosocial support groups for caregivers and children. They also help monitor child well-being, mobilize local resources, and reestablish disrupted services. Community involvement enhances ownership and accountability, ensuring that early childhood programs are culturally sensitive and contextually relevant (GCPEA, 2020).

The roles of caregivers, educators, and communities are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Caregivers provide the immediate and consistent presence that nurtures early development, educators offer structured learning experiences and support, and communities provide the collective framework that sustains education in challenging contexts. Strengthening these roles through training, collaboration, and resources is essential to ensuring continuity and quality of early learning, especially during times of crisis.

Challenges for Educators and Parent-Caregivers

The critical roles of educators and caregivers in early childhood education are heavily undermined by numerous systemic and socio-economic challenges in Nigeria. The triple burden of poverty, insecurity, and poor nutrition not only affects children but also places enormous stress on the adults responsible for their upbringing and education.

1. Burnout and Work Overload among Educators: Many early childhood educators, especially in underserved regions, are burdened with large class sizes and unrealistic workloads. With few trained staff and limited time, they often multitask beyond their teaching roles, acting as counselors, caregivers, and security overseers. This leads to chronic fatigue, mental exhaustion, and eventual burnout (UNESCO, 2021).

2. Lack of Professional Training and Development: Teachers at the early childhood level often lack access to quality training that addresses not only pedagogy but also trauma-informed and inclusive education. Many are ill-equipped to handle children affected by violence, displacement, or malnutrition, thereby weakening their ability to provide responsive care (INEE, 2020).

3. Inadequate Learning Materials and Facilities: Classrooms are often ill-equipped with appropriate

learning tools such as books, play materials, or visual aids. Some teachers operate in poorly ventilated or overcrowded spaces without proper sanitation facilities. Such environments limit effective teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2021).

4. Low Wages and Lack of Incentives for Educators: Early childhood educators in Nigeria are among the lowest-paid workers in the education system. The absence of job security and financial incentives discourages teacher commitment and retention, especially in rural and insecure areas (World Bank, 2022).

5. Fear and Absenteeism due to Insecurity: Educators in conflict-prone regions often live in fear of abduction, attacks, or violence. This leads to high rates of absenteeism or complete withdrawal from schools, leaving children without continuity in learning (GCPEA, 2020).

6. Economic Struggles among Caregivers: Many parents and caregivers are trapped in daily survival mode due to unemployment or underemployment. Their limited income means school fees, feeding, and transportation are often unaffordable, leading to poor attendance and engagement in their children's education (UNICEF, 2022).

7. Limited Awareness about Early Childhood Education: A significant number of caregivers are unaware of the importance of the early years in brain development. As a result, some delay school enrollment or rely solely on unstructured home care, which may lack developmental stimulation (Save the Children, 2021).

8. Emotional and Psychological Trauma among Parents: Displacement, violence, or chronic poverty often exposes caregivers to trauma. Such experiences impair their emotional availability, making it difficult to offer children the stable relationships and emotional regulation needed for optimal development (Ager, 2015).

9. Gendered Expectations and Inequities: In many communities, women bear the full responsibility of child-rearing without adequate support, while also contributing to household income. This dual burden limits their capacity to support their children's learning consistently (UNESCO, 2021).

10. Weak Support Systems and Community Engagement: There is a lack of formal systems to support both caregivers and educators. Parent support groups, community-based training, and psychosocial services are either scarce or absent in most underserved areas, increasing the isolation and stress experienced by these key actors (INEE, 2020).

Policy and Programmatic Gaps

While Nigeria has made commendable policy strides in recognizing the critical importance



of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), the implementation of these policies remains fragmented, inconsistent, and, in many cases, insufficient. Frameworks such as the National Policy on Education have emphasized ECCE as a foundational stage for lifelong learning and development. However, the operationalization of these policies often lacks coordination, adequate funding, and political will. As a result, the gap between policy formulation at the national or state level and the lived realities at the community level continues to widen particularly in marginalized, conflict-affected, and impoverished regions where children are most vulnerable. In these areas, formal ECCE services are either non-existent or under-resourced, leaving caregivers and educators without the institutional support necessary to foster safe, nurturing, and stimulating learning environments. These policy and programmatic shortcomings not only undermine the effectiveness of early interventions but also compromise the systemic and holistic response needed to address the complex and overlapping vulnerabilities facing Nigeria's youngest generation.

1. Absence of Integrated Response Systems: Early childhood development is a multi-sectoral issue involving education, health, nutrition, child protection, and social welfare. Unfortunately, Nigeria lacks a comprehensive, integrated framework that unites these domains under a coherent national strategy. This results in disjointed interventions that fail to meet the holistic needs of children (UNICEF, 2022).

2. Weak Collaboration Among Education, Health, and Security Sectors: The lack of synergy among key sectors hampers coordinated responses to emergencies affecting early learners. For example, schools in conflict zones may remain closed due to insecurity, with little or no involvement from security personnel to safeguard access, while health and nutrition support is often disconnected from educational recovery efforts (INEE, 2020).

3. Insufficient Funding for ECCE Programs: Government investment in early childhood education remains low compared to primary and secondary education. Many ECCE programs rely heavily on donor funding or community goodwill, making them vulnerable to collapse when external support dwindles (World Bank, 2022).

4. Poor Implementation of Existing Policies: Though the National Policy on Education recognizes ECCE as the foundation of learning, the translation of this policy into concrete action is inconsistent across states. Implementation often suffers from

poor governance, corruption, and bureaucratic delays (UNESCO, 2021).

5. Lack of Emergency Preparedness in ECCE Plans: Most ECCE policies and curricula do not include emergency preparedness, trauma-sensitive pedagogy, or mechanisms for continuity of learning during crises such as displacement or pandemics. This leaves children highly vulnerable to educational disruptions during emergencies (GCPEA, 2020).

6. Inadequate Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks: Data on early childhood development indicators such as learning outcomes, nutrition status, or emotional well-being are limited, unreliable, or outdated. Without solid monitoring systems, it is difficult to assess impact, scale successful programs, or identify children in need (UNICEF, 2022).

7. Marginalization of Local Actors in Policy Design: Local communities, traditional leaders, and grassroots educators are often excluded from the decision-making processes that shape ECCE policies. This top-down approach ignores local realities and weakens program ownership and effectiveness at the community level (Save the Children, 2021).

8. Neglect of Children in Conflict and Hard-to-Reach Areas: Many policies do not prioritize marginalized populations such as internally displaced children, children with disabilities, or those in remote areas. This exclusion leads to unequal access to early learning and perpetuates cycles of poverty and underachievement (INEE, 2020).

9. Limited Inclusion of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS): Despite the psychological toll of poverty and conflict on young children, mental health services remain largely absent from ECCE programming. This results in unaddressed trauma that hinders learning and emotional development (Ager, 2015).

10. Gaps in Workforce Policy and Professional Development: There is a shortage of strategic frameworks to attract, train, and retain qualified ECCE personnel. Issues like low pay, unclear career progression, and lack of in-service training make it difficult to build a professional, motivated workforce (World Bank, 2022).

II. Recommendations

To restore broken cradles and rebuild early classrooms in Nigeria, a multi-pronged and inclusive approach is essential. The triple burden of poverty, insecurity, and poor nutrition must be addressed through a combination of policy reform, institutional



investment, and grassroots involvement. Below are key recommendations:

1. **Holistic, Multi-Sectoral Responses:** The intersectionality of early childhood challenges demands a coordinated, multi-sectoral response involving the education, health, nutrition, child protection, and social welfare sectors. Ministries and agencies must break silos and integrate efforts through unified planning and delivery of services. For instance, early learning centers should serve as hubs for immunization, nutrition screening, psychosocial support, and parenting education. International frameworks like the Nurturing Care Framework (WHO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2018) offer models for such intersectoral coordination to ensure a comprehensive response to children's needs in their earliest years.

2. **School Feeding Programs:** The reintroduction, expansion, and strengthening of school feeding programs across all regions, especially in conflict-prone and food-insecure zones can significantly improve enrollment, attendance, and concentration among young learners. Research shows that school feeding is associated with improved cognitive outcomes, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced nutritional status in early childhood (Bundy, 2009; WFP, 2020). Programs must prioritize locally-sourced, nutrient-rich meals and involve community women in food preparation and delivery for sustainability and economic empowerment.

3. **Safety Nets for Poor Households with Young Children:** Poverty reduction measures such as conditional cash transfers (CCTs), subsidies, and targeted livelihood support should be directed at households with children aged 0–6. Evidence from the National Social Safety Nets Programme (NASSP) and other interventions in sub-Saharan Africa shows that CCTs not only increase school participation but also reduce malnutrition and improve caregiver capacity to support learning at home (World Bank, 2021). Expanding these programs to include early childhood indicators such as preschool enrollment and growth monitoring can strengthen protective factors during the critical early years.

4. **Investment in Early Childhood Education Infrastructure in Vulnerable Areas:** State and federal governments must prioritize investment in early childhood education infrastructure, particularly in underserved rural communities, informal settlements, and areas hosting displaced populations. This includes the construction and rehabilitation of child-friendly classrooms, provision of play-based learning

materials, training and deployment of ECCE teachers, and establishment of mobile and community-based early learning centers. Development partners, NGOs, and private sector actors should be encouraged to support and adopt schools under a regulated framework to ensure standards and equity (UNESCO, 2022).

5. **Psychosocial and Trauma-Informed Services:** Given the extent of conflict-related trauma in children and caregivers, ECCE systems should be equipped with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions. Teachers must receive basic training in trauma-informed care, and safe spaces for play, expression, and counseling should be integrated into early learning settings (INEE, 2020; Save the Children, 2021). This will help mitigate toxic stress and promote emotional recovery and resilience.

6. **Strengthen Workforce Capacity:** Professional development and remuneration of early childhood educators must be prioritized. Governments should invest in training programs focused on inclusive education, play-based pedagogy, child rights, and health and nutrition integration. A national ECCE workforce strategy can help reduce attrition, improve teacher well-being, and ensure qualified personnel reach the most at-risk populations (UNICEF, 2022).

7. **Community Engagement and Ownership:** Communities should be empowered through participatory planning, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building initiatives. Engaging local leaders, faith-based groups, and youth in school governance, safety planning, and parent support groups builds accountability and strengthens local resilience to shocks (Ager et al., 2015).

8. **Digital and Mobile Learning Innovations:** In areas where traditional access to ECCE is limited, digital innovations such as radio learning, mobile apps, and offline educational devices should be explored. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these solutions helped bridge learning gaps, especially in crisis settings (UNESCO, 2021). Governments can partner with tech organizations to scale age-appropriate, multilingual content accessible to children and caregivers.

9. **Equitable Financing of ECCE:** Current budgetary allocations to ECCE in Nigeria are insufficient. Governments must fulfill commitments to allocate at least 10% of education budgets to early childhood, as recommended globally (GPE, 2020). Transparent budgeting and public-private partnerships will help close the financing gap and support scale-up.



10. **Monitoring and Data Systems:** Robust data systems are needed to track enrollment, learning outcomes, nutritional status, and psychosocial well-being in early learners. Disaggregated data by age, gender, disability, and location will guide targeted interventions and foster accountability (UNICEF, 2021). National Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) must include early childhood indicators and be harmonized with health and social protection data sources.

III. Conclusion

The early years of life represent a critical window for cognitive, emotional, and social development. Yet, for millions of young children in Nigeria, this window is marred by poverty, insecurity, and poor nutrition, conditions that threaten their right to survive, thrive, and learn. The triple burden they face is not just a humanitarian concern but a developmental emergency with long-term consequences for the nation's future.

While caregivers, educators, and communities are doing all they can within constrained environments, their efforts are not enough without comprehensive and sustained support. Structural issues such as policy gaps, fragmented service delivery, underinvestment in early childhood infrastructure, and the neglect of holistic child development persistently undermine progress. These challenges demand urgent, integrated, and context-sensitive responses.

To restore broken cradles and rebuild early classrooms, Nigeria must recommit to a future where every child, regardless of birthplace or circumstance, can access safe, inclusive, and nurturing learning environments from the earliest years. This includes scaling up multi-sectoral interventions, protecting caregivers and educators, investing in early childhood systems, and building resilient community structures.

The path forward requires political will, adequate funding, and collective action from government, civil society, development partners, and local communities. Only through such united efforts can Nigeria unlock the full potential of its youngest citizens and lay a strong foundation for sustainable national development.

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