



Quality Early Childhood Education: Shaping the Future Abuja International Early Childhood Education Conference Concept Note

Background

Financing quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) is one of the most impactful investments a country can make to foster holistic child development, promote gender equality, strengthen social cohesion, enhance human capital, and drive economic development. Quality ECE comprises several components including equitable access to inclusive environments that offer stimulating Learning Through Play (LTP) experiences, knowledgeable educators and communities and the delivery of a balanced curriculum targeted at nurturing young children's holistic development. Quality ECE is well proven to improve school readiness and positively influence learning outcomes, including the development of core skills, knowledge, and attitudes that underlie success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world (UNICEF, 2012). Directly linked to increased primary and secondary school completion rates, access to quality ECE ultimately influences later life outcomes for children, communities and nations. Indeed, the lack of access to quality ECE means that approximately 50% of children worldwide will begin primary school without the necessary skills to complete it and transition to higher education (UNICEF, 2019).

In 2015, Nigeria adopted a play-based ECE approach to accelerate quality pre-primary education for all children. Nigeria has clear policy guidance in education and ECE, particularly as evidenced by the Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy 2007, National Minimum Standard for Early Childhood Centers and National Policy on Education, 2013. Additionally, Nigeria has developed ECE curriculums, including the One-Year Pre-Primary Curriculum, a Play-Based Guide for In-Service Pre-Primary Teacher Training, and capacity development. Challenges, however, persist in ensuring quality and equitable access for all children. Despite significant growth in the number of LTP-trained teachers over the past decade, the numbers remain grossly inadequate to meet the country's needs. Other barriers include poor inclusion environments and materials, insufficient teaching and learning resources, inadequate supervision by school support officers knowledgeable in LTP, low parental and community awareness and understanding of LTP, unsuitable learning environments, and inadequate security measures. Nevertheless, several advancements within the country, across the continent, and globally, hold the potential to significantly improve the quality and implementation of ECE.

With these insights, Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI) in collaboration with the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and UNICEF finds it pertinent to convene the first International ECE Conference titled ***Quality Early Childhood Education: Shaping the Future***.



Conference Objectives

The primary objectives of the conference are to:

1. **Share Evidence of What Works in Advancing ECE Quality:** Highlight contextually relevant evidence-based options for quality centre and community-based ECE advancements. This involves examining the unique challenges and opportunities within different cultural and community contexts to identify innovative solutions for delivering high-quality ECE.
2. **Innovations in ECE Workforce Development:** Examine current trends, research, and successful models in the training, support, and professional development of the ECE workforce to ensure educators are well-equipped to meet the needs of young learners.
3. **Current Approaches in ECE Investments:** Explore effective strategies for ECE funding and investment, highlighting successful case studies and innovative financing mechanisms.

Conference Themes

The conference will bring together key ECE stakeholders, including policy makers, researchers, international and national organizations, civil society organizations and practitioners. It will cover several key themes, including but not limited to:

Theme 1: Advancements in Quality Play-Based ECE

Learning Through Play (LTP) is an effective pedagogical strategy in ECE. Evidence shows that the best way that children learn is through play (LEGO Foundation & UNICEF, 2018). LTP emphasizes hands-on experiential activities that nurture children's critical thinking, executive functioning, self-regulation and language skills, providing the platform for lifelong learning and success. The LTP approach is particularly relevant across Africa, where play is deeply rooted in culture and traditions. Skill-building for child development is organized around traditional games, storytelling, and riddles, among others. This approach aligns with the developmental needs of children, while also addressing the unique cultural, social and economic contexts of the continent.

Sub-themes:

- 1.1. Evidence-based Practices for Learning Through Play
- 1.2. ECE Interventions in Nigeria
- 1.3. Global Policy Frameworks for ECE
- 1.4. Socio-cultural Dynamics and ECE Practice



Theme 2: Expanding Investments in Early Childhood Services.

As the early years are critical for cognitive, emotional, and social growth, investing in early childhood services is essential for societal development and prosperity, and influencing future success. Quality services, including health, nutrition, and early learning, ensure children reach developmental milestones and promote equity by supporting disadvantaged children. Economically, investment in quality early childhood education reduces remedial education needs, lowers dropout rates, and enhances workforce skills, driving societal and economic growth. Comprehensive program design, equitable access, workforce quality, data-driven decision-making, community involvement, and policy integration are among several key considerations that spur increased investments and impact effective resource allocation.

Sub-themes:

- 2.1. Sustainable Financing Models for ECD
- 2.2. Expanding Investments in ECD: What Works
- 2.3. Bridging the Silos in ECD Funding: Successful Holistic Approaches

Theme 3: Technological Innovations in Pre- and Early-Grade Primary Education

Technological innovations in pre- and early-grade primary education are reshaping experiences for young learners, offering diverse learning opportunities. While traditional computers and search engines cultivate digital literacy skills and prepare children for advanced tasks, the use of interactive media and touch screens facilitate exploration and creativity, which nurture a sense of accomplishment and curiosity. To advance literacy outcomes among children, it is necessary to recognize that innovation in early education extends beyond technology, embracing inventive teaching methods and curriculum design. In addition, engaging in age-appropriate personalized learning would promote vibrant learning environments and empower young minds to flourish.

Sub-themes:

- 3.1 Development and Assessment of Educational Technologies for Early Learning
- 3.2 Indigenous African Tools for Measuring ECE Environment and Learning Quality



Theme 4: Inclusion and Equity

Equity and inclusion are fundamental for positive outcomes in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Equity ensures equal opportunities for all children, while inclusion values each child's unique identity and strengths. Strategies like culturally relevant pedagogy, multilingual approaches, and community engagement promote equity and inclusion, and challenges such as access barriers and biases must be addressed holistically.

Sub-themes:

- 4.1. Inclusive ECE for Children with Disabilities: Challenges, Barriers, and Opportunities
- 4.2. Expanding Equitable Access to Quality ECE for Marginalized Groups
- 4.3. Technology and Enhanced Accessibility and Inclusion in ECE

Theme 5: Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Effective partnerships in ECE are crucial for fostering meaningful connections and enhancing education environments, particularly for marginalized children. Meaningful community involvement plays a pivotal role in improving children's outcomes by providing critical awareness and essential resources and facilitating enriched co-learning experiences. Such collaborations fund cultural adaptations of programs and advance the knowledge and implementation of quality, inclusive ECE across home, community and school environments. These partnerships further drive continuous improvement in ECE practices through shared expertise, resource optimization, and culturally responsive methods.

Sub-themes:

- 5.1. Culturally Relevant Parenting Interventions in ECE Advancement
- 5.2. Effective Partnership and Collaboration Models: Lessons Learned
- 5.3. Father Involvement in ECE Initiatives