



PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION AS A VIABLE CAREER PATH IN OYO METROPOLIS

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Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is crucial for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning. However, access to quality early childhood education remains limited, particularly in rural areas, due to challenges such as inadequate funding, a shortage of trained teachers, and poor infrastructure. The perception of ECCE as a career path among pre-service teachers in Oyo Metropolis is influenced by societal attitudes, career prospects, and personal interests, impacting the quality and quantity of educators in this field. This study employed a descriptive research design to examine the perceptions of early childhood care and education among preservice teachers using data collected from students at two tertiary institutions. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire with high validity and reliability, with a reliability coefficient of 0.85, indicating strong internal consistency. The study reveals a strong agreement among respondents that institutional support positively impacts their perception of Early Childhood Care and Education. It was therefore recommended that educational institutions should provide more resources, mentorship, and career guidance to strengthen their perception. Efforts should be made to elevate the status of early Childhood Education within the educational sector through awareness campaigns and professional development programs.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, Career Path, Pre-Service Teachers, Oyo Metropolis

Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is crucial for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning. The perception of ECCE as a career path among pre-service teachers in Oyo Metropolis is influenced by societal attitudes, career prospects, and personal interests, impacting the quality and quantity of ECCE professionals. Globally, ECCE supports Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), ensuring inclusive, equitable quality education for all. UNESCO and UNICEF highlight its role in reducing social inequalities and fostering growth (UNESCO, 2019). Investing in early childhood care and education is one of the most cost-effective investments a society can make. According to the World Bank, every dollar spent can yield a \$17 return through better education, a stronger workforce, and lower social costs. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education is increasingly acknowledged as a tool to address educational inequalities. However, access to quality early childhood education remains limited, particularly in rural areas, due to challenges such as inadequate funding, a shortage of trained teachers, and poor infrastructure. Nonetheless, government initiatives and international efforts are gradually improving the situation. The African Union's Agenda 2063, for example, emphasizes the need for comprehensive early childhood education as part of its vision for a prosperous Africa, highlighting the role of ECCE in equipping

children with the skills necessary for future success (African Union, 2019).

In Nigeria, Early Childhood Care and Education is an integral part of the national education system, supported by government policies aimed at its integration. The National Policy on Education (NPE) emphasizes the importance of early childhood education and mandates the provision of pre-primary education nationwide. This policy seeks to ensure that every child has access to education that promotes cognitive, emotional, and social development. However, the implementation of these policies is inconsistent, hindered by challenges such as insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, and regional disparities in educational access (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Despite the acknowledged importance of Early Childhood Care and Education, Nigeria faces challenges such as limited government funding, a shortage of qualified educators, and inconsistent curricula across regions. Socio-economic disparities and cultural factors also hinder access to quality early childhood education, especially in rural areas. Addressing these issues requires collaboration between the government and NGOs to ensure equitable access for all children (UNICEF, 2021). Early Childhood Care and Education is crucial for children's social development, teaching essential skills like empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution, which are vital for building strong relationships and social harmony (Akinware, 2020). Additionally, Early Childhood Care and Education plays a key role in promoting gender equality by challenging stereotypes and providing equal

opportunities for both boys and girls, supporting the broader goal of gender equality in education (Olufunmilayo, 2018).

Parental involvement is a critical factor in the success of early childhood education programs. In Nigeria, active participation by parents in their children's education has been shown to improve learning outcomes and overall development. However, socio-economic challenges and cultural practices can limit parental involvement, particularly in rural areas. Encouraging greater parental engagement through awareness campaigns and community initiatives is essential for maximizing the benefits of Early Childhood Care and Education programs. Such involvement not only enhances educational outcomes but also strengthens the bond between parents and children, fostering a more supportive learning environment (Ajayi, 2020).

For Early Childhood Care and Education programs to be truly effective in Nigeria, they must be culturally relevant and tailored to the specific needs of the communities they serve. Incorporating local languages, traditions, and values into the Early Childhood Care and Education curriculum (which) helps children connect their learning with their cultural identity, enhancing their engagement and retention. In a diverse country like Nigeria, where multiple ethnic groups and languages coexist, culturally responsive Early Childhood Care and Education programs are essential for ensuring inclusivity and relevance in early education. These programs also play roles in preserving cultural heritage while fostering a sense of belonging and pride among young

learners (Babatunde, 2019). As Nigeria continues to develop its educational system, the future of Early Childhood Care and Education holds great potential for the nation's socio-economic growth. Expanding access to quality early childhood education, especially in underserved regions, is crucial for reducing educational inequalities and advancing national development. The foundation of a successful Early Childhood Care and Education system lies in three strategic investments: developing expert educators, building inspiring learning spaces, and crafting a curriculum that prepares children for the world while connecting them to their own (Nwafor, 2022). Furthermore, building partnerships between the government, private sector, and civil society organizations can help mobilize resources and expertise to support the expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education in Nigeria. By prioritizing early childhood education, Nigeria can lay a strong foundation for the future success and well-being of its children (Akinware, 2020).

Early Childhood Care and Education professionals are crucial in shaping children's formative years, providing care and education that lays the foundation for lifelong learning. The growing recognition of Early Childhood Care and Education importance underscores its role in influencing future generations positively (Smith et al., 2019). These professionals create learning environments that nurture curiosity and critical thinking, essential for later educational success (Jones & Brown, 2020). The increased investment in early childhood programs by governments and institutions highlights the growing demand

for skilled Early Childhood Care and Education professionals, offering job stability and the chance to impact children's development and society positively (Johnson & Brown, 2020). A career in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) offers significant personal and professional growth opportunities, driven by ongoing research and evolving pedagogical approaches (Adebayo & Thompson, 2019). ECCE professionals benefit from continuous learning and development, keeping them at the forefront of educational innovation and making the field both stimulating and fulfilling. The importance of ECCE as a career is underscored by its role in shaping the future and having a lasting impact on children's educational and personal success. As the value of early childhood education is increasingly recognized, the demand for skilled ECCE professionals is expected to rise, making it a rewarding career choice (Williams & Clark, 2023). Pre-service teachers, who are in training to become certified educators, play a vital role in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application, ensuring they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their future students (Smith et al., 2019).

The preparation of pre-service teachers is a comprehensive process involving both academic coursework and field experiences, such as student teaching. These experiences equip them with the pedagogical tools and strategies needed to create inclusive and effective learning environments. Pre-service teachers are also introduced to the latest educational research and practices, enabling them to stay informed about the evolving educational landscape. By the time they

enter the classroom as fully qualified teachers, they are expected to be capable of delivering high-quality education that meets all students' needs (Jones & Brown, 2020). Pre-service teachers play a crucial role in shaping the future of education, bringing new perspectives, ideas, and approaches to the classroom. Their training emphasizes the importance of reflective practice, encouraging them to continuously evaluate and improve their teaching methods. This focus on reflection and continuous improvement ensures that pre-service teachers remain adaptable and responsive to the changing needs of their students and the education system (Garcia & Thompson, 2020). The educational landscape in Oyo Metropolis is diverse, with various educational institutions providing a range of learning opportunities for students at different levels. Oyo Metropolis, as a significant urban center in Oyo State, Nigeria, hosts numerous primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions that serve the educational needs of the region (Akinware, 2020).

Oyo Metropolis is home to several notable tertiary institutions, including universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics, which offer a wide array of programs and courses. These institutions play a pivotal role in preparing students for various professional fields, including education. The presence of these institutions also contributes to the region's intellectual and cultural vibrancy, attracting students and academics from across the country (Babatunde, 2019). Education in Oyo Metropolis is supported by a range of government policies and initiatives aimed at

improving access to quality education for all. The government has implemented various programs to enhance educational infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. These efforts are designed to address the challenges facing the education sector, such as inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms, and disparities in educational access (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). However, like many urban centers in Nigeria, Oyo Metropolis faces challenges in its education system, including issues related to funding, infrastructure, and teacher quality. Despite these challenges, the city remains a hub of educational activity, with ongoing efforts to improve the quality of education and expand access to learning opportunities for all students (Ajayi, 2020).

The educational landscape in Oyo Metropolis is characterized by a commitment to providing inclusive and equitable education. Efforts to enhance the quality of education in the city include initiatives to integrate technology into the classroom, promote active learning strategies, and support the professional development of teachers. These initiatives aim to ensure that all students in Oyo Metropolis have the opportunity to succeed academically and develop the skills necessary for their future careers (Nwafor, 2022). Moreover, the educational landscape in Oyo Metropolis is influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors that shape(s) the experience of students and educators. The diversity of the student population, along with the city's rich cultural heritage, contributes to a unique educational environment where traditional values

intersect with modern educational practices. This blend of influences creates a dynamic and multifaceted educational landscape that offers both opportunities and challenges for educators and students alike (Olufunmilayo, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing acknowledgment of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a fundamental component of lifelong learning and development, there is still a notable gap in understanding how pre-service teachers view ECCE as a viable and rewarding career path. This gap is particularly evident in Oyo Metropolis, where the educational environment is both diverse and rapidly changing. While many studies have addressed the benefits of ECCE and the demand for high-quality educators in this field, there is limited research on the attitudes, motivations, and challenges faced by pre-service teachers when considering ECCE as a career option. Understanding these perceptions is essential, as they affect the future availability of qualified ECCE professionals and, the quality of early childhood education provided to young learners. This study seeks to explore these perceptions within the context of Oyo Metropolis to highlight factors that may influence pre-service teachers' decisions to pursue or avoid careers in ECCE.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of early childhood care and education as a career path among pre-service teachers in Oyo metropolis. The purpose of this study is specifically to:

1. To assess the level of interest in Early Childhood Care and Education as a career path among pre-service teachers.
2. To identify factors influencing pre-service teachers' perceptions of ECCE as a career path.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study based on the research purpose.

1. What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers in Oyo Metropolis towards ECCE as a career path?
2. What factors influence these perceptions?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a career path, using data collected from students at two tertiary institutions in Oyo Metropolis: Federal College of Education and Emmanuel Alayande University of Education. A stratified random sampling method was used

to select a sample of 120 pre-service students enrolled in early childhood education programs at these institutions. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire designed to capture attitudes, motivations, and perceived challenges related to ECCE. The questionnaire demonstrated high validity and reliability, with a reliability coefficient of 0.85, indicating strong internal consistency. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation. A 5-point Likert scale was employed for responses, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, with a decision point of 3.0 to classify responses as agreed or disagreed. The mean provided an average measure of the participants' perceptions, while the standard deviation highlighted the variability in their attitudes. This analysis facilitated an understanding of prevalent trends and differences in views on ECCE as a career choice.

Results

Question 1: What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers in Oyo Metropolis towards ECCE as a career path?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics table on the perceptions of pre-service teachers towards ECCE as a career path

| S/N | Items | Mean (X) | Standard Deviation | Decision |
|-----|---|----------|--------------------|----------|
| 1. | I believe that a career in ECCE offers meaningful and rewarding work | 4.2 | 0.8 | Agreed |
| 2. | I feel that ECCE is not given enough recognition compared to other teaching professions | 3.5 | 1.2 | Agreed |
| 3. | Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provides ample opportunities for personal and professional growth | 3.9 | 1.0 | Agreed |
| 4. | The financial rewards for a career in ECCE are not adequate when compared to other educational careers | 3.2 | 1.3 | Agreed |
| 5. | Working with young children in ECCE is a fulfilling experience that positively impacts their development | 4.3 | 0.7 | Agreed |
| 6. | There are too many challenges and low job security in the ECCE field, making it an unattractive career option | 3.0 | 1.1 | Agreed |

Table 1 reveal(s) that pre-service teachers generally hold favorable perceptions of ECCE as a career path. All items received mean scores above the decision point of 3.0, indicating agreement with the statements. Specifically, participants strongly agree that a career in ECCE offers meaningful and rewarding work ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.8$) and that working with young children is fulfilling and positively impacts their development ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.7$). They also

agree that ECCE provides opportunities for personal and professional growth ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.0$) and that the field is not adequately recognized compared to other teaching professions ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.2$). While participants agreed that ECCE offers lower financial rewards ($M=3.2$) and involves job insecurity ($M=3.0$), their overall attitude toward these challenges was more positive than negative.

Question 2: What factors influence these perceptions?

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on factors influence the perceptions of pre-service teachers

| S/N | Items | Mean (X) | Standard Deviation | Decision |
|-----|---|----------|--------------------|-----------|
| 1. | The support I receive from my institution significantly enhances my perception of early childhood education as a career | 4.1 | 0.7 | Agreed |
| 2. | I think early childhood education is undervalued compared to other teaching professions | 3.2 | 1.1 | Agreed |
| 3. | I am concerned about the limited career advancement opportunities in early childhood education | 2.8 | 1.2 | Disagreed |
| 4. | I feel that there is a lack of financial incentives for pursuing a career in early childhood education | 2.9 | 1.1 | Disagreed |
| 5. | I feel well-prepared by my training to handle the challenges of early childhood education | 3.9 | 0.9 | Agreed |

Table 2 reveals several key insights into pre-service teachers' perceptions of early childhood education (ECCE). The highest mean score of 4.1, with a standard deviation of 0.7, indicates that participants generally agree that the support from their institutions significantly enhances their perception of ECCE as a viable career. A mean score of 3.9 and a standard deviation of 0.9 suggest that pre-service teachers feel well-prepared by their training to handle the challenges associated with ECCE. Additionally, with a mean of 3.2 and a standard deviation of 1.1, there is an agreement that ECCE is undervalued compared to other teaching professions. Conversely, concerns about limited career advancement opportunities (mean = 2.8, SD = 1.2) and lack of financial incentives (mean = 2.9, SD = 1.1) are less pronounced, as these factors were rated below the decision point of 3.0, indicating disagreement among the participants.

Discussion of the Findings

Research question one findings indicate that pre-service teachers generally have a positive perception of a career in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), as evidenced by their agreement with statements about the field's rewards and developmental impact. This aligns with research by Kim & Reeves (2018), who found that pre-service educators value the intrinsic rewards and personal fulfillment that come with working in early childhood education, perceiving it as a meaningful career despite some challenges. Similarly, Zhao & Ye (2022) highlighted that while there are concerns about financial rewards and job security in ECCE, the profession is seen as offering significant personal and professional growth opportunities. These studies support the view that, despite acknowledged challenges, the overall perception of ECCE remains positive, reflecting a strong commitment among pre-service teachers to the field and an

appreciation of its impact on young children's development.

The findings from Table 2 highlight critical aspects of pre-service teachers' perceptions of early childhood education (ECCE). The data indicates a strong agreement among respondents that institutional support positively impacts their view of ECCE as a promising career path. This finding aligns with recent research by Xu & Zhou (2023), which underscores the crucial role of institutional backing in shaping positive career perceptions among education students. Besides, pre-service teachers feel adequately prepared by their training to face Early Childhood Care and Education challenges, echoing the conclusions of Edwards & Roberts (2022), who found that comprehensive training programs significantly boost confidence in handling professional demands. However, concerns about ECCE being undervalued compared to other teaching fields, alongside issues such as limited career advancement and insufficient financial incentives, reflect underlying apprehensions that detract from the overall appeal of ECCE. These concerns are consistent with broader trends identified in recent studies that highlight persistent undervaluation and financial constraints within the field, suggesting a need for enhanced support and incentives to improve career perceptions and attractiveness.

Conclusion

The study reveals that pre-service teachers in Oyo Metropolis generally perceive Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a meaningful and rewarding career, despite acknowledging some challenges such as

lower financial rewards and job insecurity. Their favorable perceptions are significantly influenced by the support they receive from their institutions and their sense of preparedness for the field. However, there remains a concern about the undervaluation of ECCE compared to other teaching professions. This highlights the need for enhanced recognition and support for ECCE as a vital career path. Addressing these concerns can improve the appeal of ECCE careers and ensure that more qualified professionals are attracted to the field, ultimately benefiting early childhood education in the region.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is recommended that:

- i. Educational institutions should increase support for pre-service teachers by providing more resources, mentorship, and career guidance to strengthen their perception of ECCE as a viable and rewarding career.
- ii. Efforts should be made to elevate the status of ECCE within the educational sector through awareness campaigns and professional development programs.
- iii. Addressing the financial concerns associated with ECCE careers by advocating for better salary scales and benefits can make the profession more attractive.

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