

# Early Childhood Education Quality and Inclusivity in Nigeria: A Study of Teacher Competencies and Classroom Environment

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## Abstract

This study investigates how teacher competencies and classroom environments shape the quality and inclusivity of early childhood education in Nigeria. A context marked by policy ambition but persistent implementation gaps. With fewer than forty percent of early childhood educators holding formal qualifications and many classrooms lacking basic inclusive infrastructure, the need for evidence-based reform is urgent. Three research questions guided the study. This study adopted a mixed methods research design. One hundred and fifty early childhood teachers from public and private schools across Nigeria, participating in the 2024 National Association of Childhood Educators Conference in Owerri, were surveyed using a validated Teacher Competency Scale. Thirty classrooms were observed using the ECERS R, and twenty teachers participated in in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviations, frequencies as well as inferential tests including Pearson correlations to examine relationships between teacher scores and environmental ratings. Findings revealed moderate overall teacher competency, with strengths in socio emotional responsiveness but critical gaps in cultural and linguistic inclusivity. Classroom environments were rated minimally adequate, with physical space being the weakest area. Strong correlations emerged between teacher competencies; especially classroom management and cultural inclusivity and environmental quality, particularly in interaction and language development. Based on the findings, it was recommended that Nigerian government should upgrade classrooms with ramps, lighting, and play materials, prioritizing rural areas and enforce inclusive education policies with accountability among others

*Keywords:* Early childhood education, teacher competencies, inclusive classrooms, Nigeria, ECERS R, classroom environment, teacher training, educational equity, preschool quality, child development

## Introduction

Early childhood education stands as the foundational stage upon which lifelong learning, behavior, and health are built. It is during these formative years that children develop cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and social capacities that shape their future academic performance and societal contribution. In Nigeria, where over forty percent of the population is under fifteen years of age, investing in early childhood education is not merely an educational imperative but a strategic necessity for national human capital development. Research by Adefeso and Okeke (2023) underscores that children who receive quality early learning experiences are more likely to complete primary and secondary education, exhibit better social adjustment, and contribute meaningfully to economic productivity later in life. The returns on investment in early childhood education are well documented globally, yet Nigeria continues to lag in translating this knowledge into consistent, equitable, and inclusive practice.

Despite the existence of policy frameworks such as the National Policy on Education and the National Early Childhood Development Policy, the quality and inclusivity of early childhood education in Nigeria remain uneven and often inadequate. Many early childhood classrooms, especially in rural and underserved urban communities, lack basic learning materials, trained personnel, and safe physical environments. A report by the Universal Basic Education Commission in 2022 revealed that fewer than thirty percent of early childhood educators in public schools hold formal qualifications in early childhood development. This gap is even wider when it comes to training in inclusive pedagogy, which is essential for supporting children with disabilities, those from minority language groups, or those living in extreme poverty.

The purpose of this study is to examine how teacher competencies and classroom environments influences the quality and inclusivity of early childhood education in Nigeria. Specifically, the research seeks to understand what core competencies Nigerian early childhood educators need to foster inclusive learning, how the physical and emotional classroom environment either supports or hinders inclusion, and what systemic or contextual factors mediate the effectiveness of teachers in delivering equitable early learning experiences. These questions are urgent. Without clear evidence on the interplay between teacher capacity and learning environment, interventions risk is being fragmented or misdirected.

This study matters because it speaks directly to the lived realities of Nigerian children and teachers. It contributes empirical insight to ongoing national conversations about curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and infrastructure investment. It also offers transferable lessons for other low- and middle-income countries grappling with similar

challenges. Okafor and Yusuf (2024) opined that inclusive early childhood education cannot be achieved through policy pronouncements alone. It requires deliberate alignment of teacher preparation, classroom conditions, and community engagement. This research aims to map that alignment in the Nigerian context, using current, ground level data to inform scalable and sustainable change. The urgency is clear. Every day that passes without improving the quality and reach of early childhood education in Nigeria is a day lost in building a more equitable and capable future generation. What happens in the earliest classrooms echoes for decades, getting it right is not optional, it is essential.

### **Literature Review**

What makes early childhood education truly effective is not just the presence of a teacher or a classroom, but the quality of interactions, the richness of the environment, and the intentionality behind every learning moment. Globally, researchers and policy bodies have identified key indicators that signal high quality early childhood education. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development emphasizes that low teacher child ratios, developmentally appropriate curriculum, play based pedagogy, and stimulating physical environments are non-negotiable elements for nurturing young minds. UNESCO echoed this in its 2021 global monitoring report, noting that countries investing in these indicators see measurable gains in school readiness and social cohesion. When children are not crammed into overcrowded rooms and when teachers have the space to respond to individual needs, learning becomes deeper and more joyful.

Inclusion in early childhood education is not an add on. It is a fundamental right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Salamanca Statement both affirm that every child, regardless of ability, language, gender, or socioeconomic background, deserves equitable access to quality early learning. Inclusion means more than physical presence in a classroom. It means active participation, meaningful engagement, and individualized support. Yet, Mwaura and Ndege (2023) opined that barriers to inclusion remain stubbornly high across many African contexts. Children with disabilities are often turned away or ignored. The rural urban divide also plays a cruel role. Urban centers may have more resources, but they also have larger class sizes and less community cohesion. Rural areas may offer warmth and familiarity, but often lack trained teachers and basic infrastructure.

Teacher competencies are at the heart of making inclusion real. It is not enough to care for children. Teachers must know how to teach them. A teacher who can read a child's frustration, who can calm a tantrum with empathy, who can turn a moment of conflict into a lesson in

cooperation, is practicing a form of expertise that no textbook alone can provide. Cultural responsiveness matters too. Adom and Mensah (2024) posited that teachers must understand the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their learners to build bridges, not walls. Differentiated instruction is a necessity due to the fact that the needs of pupils vary.

Evidence from Sub Saharan Africa shows that where teachers receive targeted training in inclusive practices, outcomes improve dramatically. In Ghana, a study by Owusu and Darko ((2022) revealed that teachers trained in differentiated instruction reported higher confidence and observed better participation from children with learning differences. In Kenya, a government supported mentorship program led to measurable gains in classroom inclusion, especially for children with physical and communication disabilities. Rwanda's community-based teacher coaching model, described by Uwimana (2023), demonstrated that even with limited resources, consistent professional support can transform practice. These are not isolated successes. They are blueprints.

The classroom environment itself is a silent teacher. Its walls, its light, its noise level, its arrangement of furniture, its availability of materials — all speak to the child. A meta-analysis by Chen and Rivera (2023) showed that physical environments that are safe, organized, and rich in print and manipulatives correlate strongly with higher engagement and language development. Emotional climate matters just as much. Children learn best when they feel safe, seen, and valued. Instructional climate refers to how routines are structured, how transitions are managed, and how learning is scaffolded. When these three elements: physical, emotional, instructional align, inclusion becomes possible, when they do not, even the most passionate teacher struggles.

Yet in Nigeria, there is a troubling gap. While global and regional literature abounds, few empirical studies have directly examined how teacher competencies and classroom environments interact to shape inclusive outcomes in Nigerian early childhood settings. Adebayo in 2024 called this a "critical research void." Most Nigerian studies focus either on policy analysis or on access rates, rarely diving into the lived classroom dynamics. Ogunleye and Okonkwo (2023) pointed out that even when teachers are observed, the focus is often on compliance rather than pedagogical quality or inclusion. Without this granular, classroom level evidence, reforms remain theoretical.

This literature review reveals a clear pattern. Quality early childhood education is multidimensional. It requires competent teachers, supportive environments and an intentional inclusion. Nigeria stands at a crossroads. The global knowledge exists. The regional examples

are promising. What is missing is a locally grounded, empirically rich understanding of how these elements come together or fall apart in Nigerian preschools. That is the gap this study filled.

### **Methods**

This study adopted a mixed methods research design to capture both the measurable patterns and the lived experiences shaping early childhood education quality and inclusivity in Nigeria. Combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and classroom observations allowed for a more complete and nuanced understanding than either approach could offer alone. The sample for this study included one hundred and fifty early childhood education teachers drawn from public and private preschools across Nigeria. These teachers were selected because they participated in the 2024 National Association of Childhood Educators Conference held at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education in Owerri. This venue provided a unique opportunity to access educators from diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and institutional backgrounds; including urban Lagos, rural Sokoto, semi urban Enugu, and conflict affected Borno State. While convenience sampling was used, efforts were made to ensure representation across regions, school types, and years of experience. In addition to the survey, thirty classroom observations were conducted in schools nominated by participating teachers who volunteered their classrooms for onsite visits. Twenty of these teachers also agreed to participate in in-depth, one on one interviews.

Three main instruments guided data collection. First, the Teacher Competency Scale, a thirty-five-item questionnaire adapted from the International Early Learning and Child Wellbeing Study framework and validated for Nigerian context through pilot testing with fifteen educators not included in the final sample. The scale measured four domains: pedagogical knowledge, socio emotional responsiveness, cultural and linguistic inclusivity, and classroom management. Second, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised Edition was used to assess physical space, materials, routines, and teacher child interactions during classroom observations. Observers trained to eighty five percent inter rater reliability conducted all visits over a two-week period. Third, a semi structured interview guide with open ended questions probed teachers' perceptions of inclusion, their training experiences, and the daily realities of managing diverse learners. Sample questions included "Describe a time you adapted your teaching for a child with different needs" and "What in your classroom helps or hinders every child's participation?"

Data analysis followed parallel tracks. Quantitative data from the Teacher Competency Scale were entered into SPSS version 28 and analyzed using descriptive statistics; means, standard deviations, frequencies as well as inferential tests including Pearson correlations to examine relationships between teacher scores and environmental ratings. Qualitative data from interviews and observation field notes were transcribed, anonymized, and imported into NVivo 14 for thematic analysis. Initial coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data. These were later refined through constant comparison and grouped into broader categories such as “resourcefulness under constraint” and “emotional labor of inclusion.”

Ethical considerations were central to every phase of the study. Approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education before data collection began. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving clear explanations of the study’s purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Teachers were assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. To protect confidentiality, all names and identifying details were removed from transcripts and datasets. Pseudonyms were assigned during reporting. No child was directly interviewed or assessed, and classroom observations were conducted with minimal disruption and full permission from school administrators and parents.

## Results and Findings

This section presents the key results from the mixed-methods analysis, drawing on quantitative data from the Teacher Competency Scale and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R), as well as qualitative insights from interviews and observations.

### Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
- Male	45	30.0
- Female	105	70.0
Years of Experience		
- 0-5 years	60	40.0
- 6-10 years	50	33.3
- 11+ years	40	26.7
Region		

- Urban (e.g., Lagos)	70	46.7
- Semi-urban (e.g., Enugu)	40	26.7
- Rural (e.g., Sokoto)	40	26.7
School Type		
- Public	100	66.7
- Private	50	33.3
Formal ECE Qualification		
- Yes	55	36.7
- No	95	63.3

In Table 1, the demographic profile reveals a predominantly female workforce (70%), consistent with global ECE trends, and a significant portion of teachers (40%) with limited experience (0-5 years), highlighting potential gaps in seasoned expertise. Regional distribution shows urban dominance (46.7%), which may skew findings toward better-resourced areas, while the low rate of formal ECE qualifications (36.7%) underscores the UBEC report's concerns about inadequate training.

### Teacher Competencies

Domain	Mean	SD	Range
Pedagogical Knowledge	3.2	0.8	1.5-4.8
Socio-Emotional Responsiveness	3.8	0.7	2.0-5.0
Cultural and Linguistic Inclusivity	2.9	0.9	1.0-4.5
Classroom Management	3.5	0.6	2.2-4.9
Overall Competency Score	3.35	0.75	1.7-4.8

(Note: Scores on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = Very Low Competency and 5 = Very High Competency.)

In Table 2, teacher competencies show moderate overall levels ( $X=3.35$ ), with strengths in socio-emotional responsiveness ( $X=3.8$ ), reflecting teachers' empathy-driven approaches as echoed in interviews (e.g., "I calm children with stories from their culture"). However, cultural and linguistic inclusivity scores lowest ( $X=2.9$ ), aligning with qualitative themes of "language barriers silencing minority children," indicating a critical training void for diverse learners. Qualitative data enriched these scores: Interviews revealed that 65% of teachers (13/20) adapted lessons informally (e.g., using local dialects), but lacked formal tools, while observations noted high emotional labor, with teachers managing conflicts in overcrowded settings.

**Classroom Environment Assessment**

**Table 3: (X) Mean Ratings on Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) Subscales (N=30 Observations)**

Subscale	X	SD	Range
Space and Furnishings	2.8	1.0	1.0-4.5
Personal Care Routines	3.4	0.8	2.0-4.8
Language-Reasoning	3.1	0.9	1.5-4.7
Activities	2.9	1.1	1.2-4.6
Interaction	3.6	0.7	2.3-5.0
Program Structure	3.2	0.8	1.8-4.9
Overall Environment Rating	3.17	0.88	1.6-4.75

(Note: Ratings on a 7-point scale, where 1 = Inadequate, 3 = Minimal, 5 = Good, 7 = Excellent; adapted for Nigerian context.)

In Table 3, classroom environments rate minimally overall ( $M=3.17$ ), with interactions strongest ( $M=3.6$ ), suggesting positive teacher-child dynamics despite constraints, as observed in warm group activities. Space and furnishings score lowest ( $M=2.8$ ), corroborated by field notes of "overcrowded rooms lacking play areas," which hinder inclusivity for children with disabilities. Qualitative observations highlighted emotional climates: 70% of classrooms (21/30) fostered safety through routines, but physical barriers (e.g., no ramps) excluded some children, as one teacher noted, "We improvise with what we have, but it's never enough."

**Interrelationships**

**Table 4: Correlations Between Teacher Competency Domains and ECERS-R Subscales (N=30)**

Competency Domain	Space & Furnishings	Personal Care	Language-Reasoning	Activities	Interaction	Program Structure	Overall Environment
Pedagogical Knowledge	.42*	.35	.51**	.48*	.39	.44*	.47*
Socio-Emotional Responsiveness	.28	.46*	.37	.33	.62**	.41*	.50**
Cultural and Linguistic Inclusivity	.31	.29	.55**	.52**	.40*	.38	.45*
Classroom Management	.50**	.43*	.36	.41*	.45*	.58**	.52**
Overall Competency	.45*	.41*	.49**	.47*	.53**	.50**	.51**

(Note: Pearson correlations; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .)

In Table 4, significant positive correlations emerge between overall teacher competency and environment ratings ( $r=.51$ ,  $p<.01$ ), particularly in interactions ( $r=.53$ ,  $p<.01$ ), indicating that competent teachers enhance emotional climates. Cultural inclusivity strongly correlates with language-reasoning ( $r=.55$ ,  $p<.01$ ), supporting interview themes where teachers using diverse languages boosted engagement, while classroom management links to program structure ( $r=.58$ ,  $p<.01$ ), suggesting skilled management mitigates resource shortages.

These interrelationships reveal that competencies amplify environmental strengths: In resourced urban settings, high scores aligned; in rural ones, low correlations reflected systemic barriers, as per qualitative data on "making do with passion alone."

### Discussion of Findings

The findings presented in the tables offer more than numbers. They reveal the heartbeat of early childhood education in Nigeria, where passion meets constraint, and where teacher ingenuity often compensates for systemic neglect. When we examine the demographic profile in Table 1,

the dominance of female educators (70%) mirrors global patterns noted by Chen and Rivera (2023) who argued that care-giving roles in early education continue to be gendered, often undervalued, and underpaid. The high proportion of teachers with less than five years of experience (40%) speaks to a workforce in flux, energetic but under mentored. This aligns with Uwimana's 2023 observation in Rwanda that without structured induction and ongoing coaching, even motivated new teachers struggle to translate enthusiasm into effective inclusive practice. The low rate of formal qualifications (36.7%) confirms what the Universal Basic Education Commission warned in 2022: Nigeria's early childhood system is being carried on the backs of underprepared educators.

Table 2's competency scores tell a story of resilience and gaps. The relatively high mean in socio emotional responsiveness (3.8) reflects what Adom and Mensah (2024) described as "relational pedagogy" the African tradition of teaching through care, empathy, and community connection. Teachers are not just instructors; they are emotional anchors. Yet, the low score in cultural and linguistic inclusivity (2.9) exposes a critical blind spot. Bello (2024) noted that when teachers do not understand or validate children's home languages and cultural identities, learning becomes alienating rather than empowering. The qualitative data support this, teachers are improvising with local dialects, but they lack the training, materials, or confidence to do it systematically. This is not a failure of will, but of preparation.

The classroom environment ratings in Table 3 painted a picture of minimal adequacy. An overall mean of 3.17 on the ECERS R scale suggests that most classrooms barely meet the threshold for basic functionality. The lowest score in space and furnishings (2.8) echoes Onyema (2022) findings that Nigerian early childhood classrooms are often repurposed spaces; overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and ill equipped for play or movement. Yet, the higher score in interaction (3.6) is a testament to the human spirit. Even in cramped rooms with broken chairs, teachers are creating moments of joy, connection, and safety. As Maluleke and Dlamini observed in 2023 in South Africa, emotional warmth can buffer against physical deprivation, but only up to a point. When a child in a wheelchair cannot enter the classroom because there is no ramp, warmth alone cannot make that child feel included.

The correlations in Table 4 are perhaps the most revealing. They showed that teacher competencies and classroom environments are not separate variables — they are deeply intertwined. The strong link between socio emotional responsiveness and classroom interaction ( $r=.62, p<.01$ ) confirms what Owusu and Darko found in Ghana in 2022: when teachers are emotionally attuned, children participate more, conflicts decrease, and learning deepens. The

connection between cultural inclusivity and language reasoning ( $r=.55$ ,  $p<.01$ ) supports Ibrahim's 2023 argument that language is not just a tool for communication but a gateway to cognition. When children hear their mother tongue in stories or songs, their brains light up in ways that abstract, foreign language instruction cannot replicate.

Most telling is the correlation between classroom management and program structure ( $r=.58$ ,  $p<.01$ ). In contexts where materials are scarce and space is tight, structure becomes survival. Teachers who can establish routines, manage transitions, and organize limited resources create islands of predictability in chaotic environments. This echoes Touré's 2024 findings in Mali, where teachers in rural schools used song, rhythm, and peer grouping to impose order without relying on physical infrastructure.

What these findings collectively suggest is this: Nigerian early childhood teachers are not failing. They are functioning under impossible conditions. They are applying global principles with local creativity. But they are being asked to do too much with too little. The system is not broken; it was never fully built. The correlations show that when teachers are competent, they can elevate even poor environments. But when environments are severely deficient, even the most competent teachers hit a ceiling. This is not a teacher problem. It is a policy problem. It is a funding problem. It is a national priority problem.

#### Recommendations for ECE Reform in Nigeria

1. Nigerian Government should upgrade classrooms with ramps, lighting, and play materials, prioritizing rural areas. Enforce inclusive education policies with accountability.
2. Teacher Educators should integrate cultural inclusivity and differentiated instruction during workshop, seminar or conferences.
3. School administrators should pair novice teachers with mentors to boost skills and also form inclusion committees.
4. NGOs/Communities should advocate for funding and provide resources like mobile libraries. Engage parents in inclusive practices.
5. Researchers should study long-term reform impacts and regional disparities to guide targeted interventions.

#### Conclusion

This study illuminates the intricate interplay between teacher competencies and classroom environments in shaping the quality and inclusivity of early childhood education in Nigeria. Findings reveal a workforce rich in socio-emotional responsiveness but hampered by gaps in cultural inclusivity and formal training, with classrooms often minimally adequate due to

physical constraints. Strong correlations underscore that competent teachers can enhance even suboptimal environments, fostering better interactions and language development, yet systemic barriers—particularly in rural areas—limit their impact. Ultimately, Nigeria's ECE system teeters on resilience amid neglect, where teachers' ingenuity compensates for inadequate resources and policies. To build equitable foundations for young learners, urgent, coordinated reforms are essential. By prioritizing teacher preparation and infrastructure, Nigeria can transform ECE from a patchwork of survival into a robust pillar of national development, ensuring every child—regardless of background—thrives. The echoes of early classrooms define futures; investing now secures a more inclusive, prosperous tomorrow.

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## Author Profile

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With extensive experience in the field of education, she has participated in ten academic conferences and has ten journal publications to her credit. She has also supervised five teaching practice programs, demonstrating her commitment to fostering academic excellence and professional growth among students. Nkemjika Ogechi is a member of the World Curriculum Council for Instruction (WCC1) and serves on the Curriculum and Publication Committee of the Department of Continuing Education and Development Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Her professional dedication and academic involvement reflect her passion for advancing adult education and lifelong learning.