



Quality Assurance Systems in Early Childhood Care and Education: Implications for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Quality assurance in early childhood care and education (ECCE) is central to the achievement of inclusive, equitable and sustainable development because the early years provide the foundation for health, learning, social competence and future productivity. In Nigeria, policy documents recognise ECCE as a critical stage of education, yet many centres continue to experience uneven standards in caregiver qualification, learning environment, supervision, child protection, health, nutrition, documentation and parental involvement. This paper examines quality assurance systems in ECCE and their implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. Anchored on systems theory, the paper argues that ECCE quality should be understood as an interaction among inputs, processes, outputs and feedback rather than as a checklist of isolated facilities. The paper draws on Nigerian policy documents, foundational Nigerian quality assurance literature and recent global sources on pre-primary quality standards, sustainable development, nurturing care and learning systems. It discusses structural and process dimensions of quality, analyses implementation challenges, and considers tensions between standardisation and contextual flexibility, compliance-based inspection and developmental support. The paper concludes that quality assurance can contribute to sustainable development only when monitoring is continuous, child-centred, evidence-informed and improvement-oriented. It suggests stronger regulatory coordination, caregiver professional development, practical quality indicators, family engagement, and locally responsive quality assurance mechanisms for ECCE centres in Nigeria.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Early Childhood Care, Education, Sustainable Development, Systems Theory

Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become a major concern in national and global development discussions because the first years of life influence the child's cognitive, social, emotional, physical and language development. When young children experience safe environments, responsive caregiving, adequate nutrition, stimulating learning materials and developmentally appropriate interaction, they are more likely to enter primary school ready to learn and to sustain progress across later levels of education. Conversely, poor early childhood provision can widen inequality, weaken school readiness and reduce the social returns expected from later educational investments. In Nigeria, ECCE has received policy recognition through the National Policy on Education and related minimum standards for early child care centres. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN, 2013) identifies early childhood education as a programme that supports smooth transition from home to school, prepares children for primary education, and promotes curiosity, creativity and social development. These policy commitments reflect the broader international recognition of early childhood development in Sustainable Development Goal 4, especially target 4.2, which calls for access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that children are ready for primary education (UNICEF, 2024). However, policy recognition does not automatically lead to quality practice. Across many ECCE settings, there are persistent concerns about unqualified caregivers, overcrowded classrooms, unsafe learning environments, inadequate play and learning materials, weak supervision,

poor records, limited health and nutrition services, and minimal parental involvement. These weaknesses raise questions about the effectiveness of existing quality assurance systems. The issue is not merely whether ECCE centres exist, but whether the services children receive in those centres meet minimum standards and promote their holistic development.

Quality assurance in education is commonly associated with standard setting, monitoring compliance, supervision, inspection, evaluation, continuous improvement and the protection of children's right to quality experiences. In ECCE, it has particular significance because young children are vulnerable and depend on adults and institutions for protection, care, stimulation and learning. A quality assurance system that focuses only on buildings and documents may miss the central issue: the child's daily experience. Therefore, ECCE quality assurance must examine both structural factors, such as caregiver qualifications, class size, safety, curriculum and facilities, and process factors, such as caregiver-child interaction, emotional support, play, language use, inclusion and learning engagement. Concern for quality has long been present in Nigerian educational discourse. Foundational Nigerian writers such as Fadipe and Oyedele (2000), Arikewuyo (2004), Ehindero (2004), Fadokun (2005), Ajayi and Adegbesan (2007), and Adegbesan (2010) emphasised standards, supervision, accountability, teacher quality and institutional effectiveness. Although some of these sources are dated, they remain useful for understanding the evolution of quality assurance thinking in Nigerian education. Their limitation is that they emerged before the current global emphasis on SDG 4.4.2, nurturing care, systems alignment and child-centred quality indicators (United Nations, 2015). This target shows that early childhood development is not a welfare issue alone; it is an educational, social and economic development issue, and that quality ECCE also relates to poverty reduction, health, gender equality, reduced inequalities and decent work (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2017; World Health Organization et al., 2018). The problem addressed in this paper is that quality assurance in ECCE in Nigeria is often treated as a regulatory exercise rather than as a developmental system for improving child outcomes. Inspection visits may focus on physical facilities, registration and compliance, while the quality of interaction, inclusion, child protection, caregiver support and learning processes may receive less attention. In addition, private ECCE providers, community centres and school-based pre-primary classes may experience different levels of monitoring, resulting in uneven quality across settings. These realities make it necessary to examine ECCE quality assurance as a system connected to sustainable development.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse quality assurance systems in early childhood care and education and explain their implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper clarifies the concept of quality in ECCE, presents a theoretical framework for understanding quality assurance as a system, discusses dimensions of ECCE quality, analyses the strengths and weaknesses of quality assurance practice, and suggests practical ways to make quality assurance more child-centred, improvement-oriented and developmentally relevant. This paper contributes to the discussion by treating quality assurance as more than school inspection. It presents quality assurance as a continuous improvement process that should connect policy standards, centre-level practice, caregiver support, parental participation and child development outcomes. This emphasis is important because ECCE centres may appear compliant on the surface while children still experience weak interaction, limited play opportunities, poor sanitation or unsafe routines. A theoretical analysis is therefore useful for clarifying what should be monitored and why it matters for sustainable development. This paper synthesizes policy documents, scholarly sources and professional literature to develop an argument on how quality assurance in ECCE can support sustainable development. It presents a theoretical framework, discussion, analysis, conclusion and suggestions appropriate for a conceptual manuscript.

Theoretical Framework

Systems Theory as an Analytical Lens

This paper is anchored on systems theory. Von Bertalanffy (1968) explains a system as a set of interrelated parts whose interactions influence the functioning of the whole. In education, the school system may be understood through inputs, processes, outputs, feedback and the environment. Inputs include policy, finance, infrastructure, personnel, curriculum, health and safety resources, and family support. Processes include teaching, care, supervision, play, assessment, leadership, parent communication and record keeping. Outputs include children's learning readiness, health, social competence, emotional security and transition to primary education. Feedback includes monitoring reports, caregiver reflection, parent feedback, child observations and improvement plans.

Systems theory is appropriate for this paper because ECCE quality cannot be explained by one factor alone. A centre may have attractive classrooms but weak caregiver-child interaction. Another may have trained teachers but unsafe toilets or poor nutrition practices. Another may have adequate policy documents but no evidence of continuous

assessment or parental involvement. Quality emerges from the relationship among several parts of the system. When one part is weak, the whole system can be affected. This makes quality assurance a systems issue rather than a one-time inspection activity.

A systems view also shows that sustainable development is connected to ECCE through long-term pathways. Quality ECCE contributes to children's readiness for primary education, improved learning outcomes, healthier development, reduced inequality and stronger human capital. These outcomes support SDG 4 and indirectly influence other goals related to poverty reduction, health, gender equity, decent work and social inclusion. The World Bank (2018) similarly argues that education systems must align actors and institutions around learning, while the Nurturing Care Framework stresses that young children need integrated support across health, nutrition, security, responsive caregiving and early learning (World Health Organization et al., 2018).

In applying systems theory to ECCE quality assurance, this paper adopts a simple input-process-output-feedback model. The input dimension considers policies, caregiver qualification, facilities, finance, materials, class size and family background. The process dimension considers interactions, play, curriculum implementation, care routines, safety practices, supervision and inclusion. The output dimension considers children's developmental progress and school readiness. The feedback dimension considers how monitoring information is used to correct weaknesses and improve practice. The model suggests that quality assurance should not end with identifying problems; it should create a cycle of evidence, support, correction and improvement.

This theoretical frame also helps to address a major weakness in compliance-based monitoring. When quality assurance is reduced to inspection forms, centres may focus on satisfying external visitors rather than improving children's daily experiences. A systems approach requires that standards be connected to improvement support. For example, if a centre fails to meet the standard for caregiver-child ratio, the response should not only be sanction but also planning for staffing, enrolment control, financing and caregiver deployment. If children are not engaged in meaningful play, the response should include caregiver mentoring and curriculum support. Quality assurance is therefore both regulatory and developmental.

Conceptual Background

Quality in ECCE can be viewed through structural quality and process quality. Structural quality refers to the relatively visible and regulated conditions of a centre. These include caregiver qualification, caregiver-child ratio, group size, physical space, sanitation, learning materials, health and safety measures, curriculum documents, records and management procedures. Structural quality matters because it creates the conditions under which good interaction and learning can occur; however, Cryer et al. (1999) caution that structural features predict process quality only when they are connected to actual classroom practice. For example, a caregiver handling too many children may find it difficult to observe each child, respond sensitively and guide play-based learning.

Process quality refers to the experiences children actually have within the centre. It includes the warmth of caregiver-child relationships, language interaction, emotional support, responsiveness, stimulation, peer interaction, play opportunities, inclusion and learning engagement. Raikes, Neuman and Burton (2019) note that quality assurance systems for pre-primary education must attend to both standards and monitoring mechanisms. In ECCE, the quality of children's daily experiences is especially important because young children learn through relationships, routines, play, talk, imitation and exploration.

Quality assurance is the organised process of setting standards, monitoring practice, providing feedback and supporting improvement. It is related to quality control but goes beyond checking whether rules have been followed. Quality control may identify whether a requirement has been met, while quality assurance examines whether the system is capable of maintaining and improving quality over time. In ECCE, quality assurance should therefore ask whether the centre is safe, whether caregivers are competent, whether children are active and respected, whether families are involved, and whether monitoring evidence leads to improvement.

Sustainable development refers to development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The United Nations (2015) presents sustainable development as a global agenda for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. In education, sustainable development includes equity, inclusion, lifelong learning, responsible citizenship, social cohesion, health and human capital. UNESCO (2020) emphasises education for sustainable development as a means of equipping learners with knowledge, values and skills for

responsible action. Although this idea is often discussed at higher levels of education, its foundation begins in the early years, where children develop habits of care, cooperation, hygiene, empathy and respect for others.

The link between ECCE and sustainable development is therefore both direct and indirect. It is direct because SDG target 4.2 specifically mentions quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education. It is indirect because children who benefit from quality ECCE are more likely to progress in school, acquire foundational skills, participate socially and contribute productively to society. The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015) emphasise that the early years are foundational for later learning and development. This makes quality assurance in ECCE a development strategy, not merely an administrative requirement.

A Systems View of ECCE Quality Assurance

System element	Examples in ECCE	Quality assurance focus	Sustainable development relevance
Inputs	Policy, caregivers, facilities, curriculum, materials, finance, family support	Adequacy, safety, qualification, availability and equity	Creates conditions for inclusive access and school readiness
Processes	Caregiver-child interaction, play, supervision, assessment, routines, health and nutrition practices	Responsiveness, developmentally appropriate practice, inclusion and child protection	Supports holistic development, learning and well-being
Outputs	School readiness, social competence, early literacy, early numeracy, health and confidence	Evidence of developmental progress rather than mere attendance	Improves human capital and reduces early learning gaps
Feedback	Inspection reports, caregiver mentoring, parent feedback, child assessment records	Use of evidence for correction, support and improvement	Strengthens accountability and sustainability of quality reforms

Discussion

Dimensions of Quality Assurance in ECCE

The first dimension of quality assurance in ECCE is governance and regulation. Government has the responsibility to set minimum standards, license centres, define caregiver-child ratios, guide curriculum implementation and monitor compliance. The National Policy on Education and related minimum standards provide a basis for this responsibility. However, regulation must be consistent across public, private, faith-based and community-owned centres. Where some centres operate without proper registration or regular monitoring, children may be exposed to avoidable risks. Governance also requires coordination among agencies that approve, inspect or support ECCE centres. Where responsibilities are fragmented, proprietors may receive conflicting instructions or avoid meaningful supervision. A stronger system should clarify who sets standards, who monitors compliance, who supports improvement and how reports are used. This is especially important for private ECCE centres, which form a large part of early childhood provision in many Nigerian cities. The second dimension is caregiver qualification and professional development. The caregiver is the most important adult within the ECCE classroom after the parent or guardian. Quality assurance should therefore examine not only whether a caregiver is present, but whether the caregiver understands child development, play-based learning, positive guidance, safety, inclusive practice, observation and communication with families. Adegbesan (2010) identified teacher input as a major concern in quality assurance. In ECCE, this concern is even more critical because young children require specialised care and teaching approaches.

The third dimension is the learning environment. A quality ECCE environment should be safe, clean, well ventilated, accessible, stimulating and organised into activity areas. It should include spaces for movement, rest, storytelling, construction, pretend play, art, music, outdoor play and early numeracy and literacy activities. Quality assurance should therefore look beyond the presence of classrooms and examine whether the environment invites exploration and supports development. A classroom that is clean but silent, rigid and worksheet-dominated may satisfy some

structural requirements but still fail to provide rich early learning experiences. The fourth dimension is curriculum and pedagogy. ECCE curriculum should be developmentally appropriate and should integrate play, language, movement, music, creativity, early science, early mathematics, social habits and moral development. The Federal Republic of Nigeria emphasises play and the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate community in early childhood education (FGN, 2013). Quality assurance officers should therefore observe whether caregivers use child-centred methods or merely force young children into formal primary-school routines. The fifth dimension is health, nutrition, safety and child protection. Young children need safe water, sanitation, handwashing facilities, clean toilets, first-aid arrangements, secure premises, safe toys, emergency procedures and protection from abuse. The Nurturing Care Framework highlights good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning as essential components of early childhood development (World Health Organization et al., 2018). Quality assurance should integrate these elements because learning cannot be separated from children's health and well-being.

The sixth dimension is documentation and assessment. ECCE centres should keep admission records, attendance registers, health records, developmental observations, incident reports, caregiver records and communication records. However, documentation should not become paperwork without purpose. Its value lies in helping caregivers understand children's progress, identify developmental concerns, communicate with parents and plan appropriate support. Assessment in ECCE should be continuous, observational and developmentally appropriate rather than examination-driven (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020). The seventh dimension is parental and community involvement. Children's development is influenced by both home and school. Quality assurance should therefore consider how centres communicate with parents, involve families in children's learning, provide parenting guidance and respond to cultural and community realities (Epstein, 2011; NAEYC, 2020). In the Nigerian context, parental involvement is especially important because many children attend private and community-based centres where government support may be limited. Families can contribute to safety, nutrition, learning materials and continuity between home and school. The eighth dimension is leadership and internal quality management. A centre owner or head teacher plays a major role in setting expectations, organising staff, ensuring safety, maintaining records, procuring materials and supporting caregivers. Ogunsaju (2006) emphasised planning, organising, staffing, motivating and evaluating as management functions for educational quality. In ECCE, leadership should not be limited to fee collection and enrolment; it should include continuous improvement of care and learning conditions.

Quality Assurance and Sustainable Development

Quality assurance in ECCE contributes to sustainable development by strengthening the foundation of human development. When children receive quality care and early learning, they are better positioned to succeed in primary education and beyond. This supports SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education. It also supports SDG 3 on health and well-being because ECCE centres can promote hygiene, nutrition, immunisation awareness, early identification of developmental concerns and safe routines. Quality ECCE also has implications for poverty reduction and inequality. Children from disadvantaged homes often enter school with fewer learning opportunities than children from wealthier homes. A strong ECCE system can reduce this gap by providing stimulation, language development, social interaction and school readiness. This is why early childhood development is often described as an equity strategy. If quality assurance ensures that poor and vulnerable children receive good early learning services, it contributes to social mobility and inclusive development. There is also a gender dimension. Affordable and reliable ECCE can support women's participation in work, training and economic activity. Where safe childcare is unavailable, many mothers and female caregivers face limitations in employment and education. Therefore, quality assurance in ECCE is not only about children; it also affects family welfare, women's empowerment and economic productivity.

At the level of citizenship, ECCE can lay foundations for cooperation, empathy, cleanliness, respect, environmental awareness and peaceful behaviour. Children learn social habits through routines, modelling and interaction. A quality assurance system that values play, inclusion, emotional support and positive discipline contributes to the development of socially responsible citizens. This connects ECCE with the wider goals of sustainable societies. However, the development benefits of ECCE depend on quality. Expanding access without ensuring quality may produce limited results. A poorly regulated centre may expose children to neglect, harsh discipline, unsafe facilities and weak learning.

Therefore, sustainable development requires not only more ECCE centres but better ECCE systems. Quality assurance is the mechanism through which expansion can be linked with standards, equity and improvement.

Analysis

Critical Issues in ECCE Quality Assurance in Nigeria

The first critical issue is the gap between policy and implementation. Nigeria has policy provisions for ECCE, but implementation differs across states, local government areas and ownership types. Some centres meet minimum standards, while others operate in unsuitable buildings with untrained personnel and weak supervision. This gap suggests that policy documents alone cannot assure quality. A functioning system requires funding, trained inspectors, reliable data, enforcement capacity and support for improvement. The second issue is overreliance on compliance-based inspection. Compliance is necessary because centres must meet safety and regulatory requirements. However, compliance alone is not enough. A centre may have a signboard, registers and furniture but still provide poor interaction and limited learning. Developmental quality assurance should therefore combine inspection with mentoring, professional support and follow-up. The aim should be to help centres improve, not merely to catch faults. The third issue is standardisation versus contextual flexibility. Minimum standards are important because all children deserve safety, care and learning opportunities. Yet ECCE settings differ in location, culture, language, resources and community needs. A rigid system may punish low-resource centres without helping them improve, while an overly flexible system may tolerate poor conditions. The challenge is to establish non-negotiable standards for safety, protection, caregiver competence and child well-being, while allowing contextual flexibility in materials, language, community participation and locally relevant learning activities.

The fourth issue is the urban-rural and public-private divide. In cities such as Port Harcourt, there are many private ECCE providers, but quality varies widely. Some private centres are well resourced, while others operate mainly as fee-collecting childcare spaces. In rural and low-income communities, access may be limited and facilities may be weak. Quality assurance systems must therefore avoid a one-size-fits-all assumption. They should collect data on different categories of centres and provide targeted support. The fifth issue is the professional status of caregivers. In many ECCE settings, caregivers are underpaid, undertrained and undervalued. This affects motivation, stability and quality of interaction. A quality assurance system that checks only centre-level facilities while ignoring caregiver welfare may not achieve sustainable improvement. Caregiver development should include training, mentoring, supervision, fair workload, adequate remuneration and recognition of ECCE as a professional field. This issue is central because process quality depends largely on what caregivers know and do with children every day. A caregiver who understands child development can turn ordinary routines such as arrival, feeding, toileting, play and storytelling into learning and care opportunities. In contrast, an untrained caregiver may rely on shouting, copying, rote recitation or prolonged sitting, even when the centre has good buildings and materials. Quality assurance should therefore treat caregiver development as a core quality indicator.

The sixth issue is the risk of paperwork quality. Some centres may prepare records only for inspection visits without using them for child support. Lesson notes, attendance registers, health records and assessment files should not be treated as ceremonial documents. Quality assurance officers should ask how records guide teaching, safety, parent communication and referral. Evidence should be connected to practice. The seventh issue is inclusion. Quality ECCE should support children with disabilities, developmental delays, language differences and social vulnerabilities. Yet many centres lack adapted materials, trained caregivers or referral pathways. Sustainable development requires that no child be left behind. Quality assurance should therefore include indicators on accessibility, inclusive materials, caregiver attitudes, child participation and referral systems. The eighth issue is data use. Quality assurance visits should generate data that help government and centre managers identify trends, allocate resources and plan improvement. If inspection reports are filed away without analysis, the system loses its feedback function. A systems approach requires that information from monitoring be used to improve training, licensing, financing, curriculum support and child protection.

Towards an Improvement-Oriented ECCE Quality Assurance Model

Based on the preceding discussion and analysis, ECCE quality assurance in Nigeria should move toward an improvement-oriented model. Such a model would have five linked stages: standard setting, centre self-assessment, external monitoring, professional support and follow-up review. Standard setting clarifies what every ECCE centre must provide. Self-assessment encourages centres to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. External

monitoring provides independent evidence. Professional support helps caregivers and managers address identified gaps. Follow-up review ensures that recommendations are implemented. An improvement-oriented model is particularly useful because it reduces the fear often associated with inspection. When centres know that monitoring will identify strengths, risks and next steps, they are more likely to cooperate honestly. This does not mean that serious safety violations should be excused. Rather, it means that ordinary weaknesses should lead to clear feedback, mentoring and follow-up, while issues that endanger children should attract immediate corrective action.

The model should combine structural and process indicators. Structural indicators should include caregiver qualification, ratio, safety, water, sanitation, space, furniture, materials, health records and registration. Process indicators should include caregiver-child interaction, play, emotional climate, language stimulation, inclusion, assessment, routines and parental communication. This combination prevents quality assurance from becoming too narrow. The model should also use graded improvement levels rather than only pass or fail judgments. For example, a centre may be rated as emerging, developing, meeting standard or exceeding standard in different quality areas. This helps centres know where they are and what to improve. It also allows regulators to identify centres that require urgent intervention. However, non-negotiable safety and child protection standards should not be compromised. Professional support should be built into the system. Monitoring without support may create fear and concealment. Support without monitoring may lead to weak accountability. A balanced quality assurance system should therefore provide both. Caregivers should receive feedback, demonstration lessons, mentoring, training modules and practical tools. Centre heads should receive guidance on records, safety routines, material provision, caregiver supervision and parent engagement. Finally, quality assurance should be child-centred. The most important question is not whether the centre looks impressive to adults, but whether children are safe, respected, engaged, learning and developing. This child-centred focus connects quality assurance with sustainable development because it places human development at the centre of education policy.

Conclusion

Quality assurance systems in early childhood care and education are essential for sustainable development in Nigeria. ECCE is the foundation of later learning, health, social competence and human capital formation. However, the benefits of ECCE depend on the quality of children's daily experiences. Access without quality may expose children to weak care, poor stimulation and unsafe environments. Therefore, quality assurance must be seen as a central instrument for protecting children and improving educational outcomes. This paper has argued that ECCE quality assurance should be understood through systems theory. A systems approach shows that quality depends on interactions among inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback. Policies, caregivers, facilities, curriculum, materials, supervision, family participation and child outcomes are interconnected. A weakness in one part of the system can affect the entire quality chain. For this reason, monitoring should not be a one-time inspection exercise but a continuous process of evidence gathering, feedback and improvement. The conclusion is that ECCE quality assurance can contribute to sustainable development only when it is child-centred, evidence-informed, inclusive and improvement-oriented. Nigeria needs quality assurance systems that not only inspect centres but also strengthen caregivers, protect children, support families, improve environments and use feedback for continuous development.

Suggestions

1. Government agencies responsible for ECCE should harmonise standards and strengthen monitoring across public, private, faith-based and community-owned centres so that every child is protected by minimum quality expectations.
2. Quality assurance instruments should include both structural indicators and process indicators. Inspectors should assess not only buildings and records but also caregiver-child interaction, play, inclusion, language stimulation, safety routines and child participation.
3. Quality assurance should be improvement-oriented. Centres that fall below standards should receive clear feedback, timelines, mentoring and follow-up visits, while serious child protection and safety violations should attract firm regulatory action.
4. Caregiver professional development should become a major component of ECCE quality assurance. Training should cover child development, play-based learning, positive discipline, inclusive practice, observation-based assessment, health and safety, and communication with families.
5. State and local education authorities should develop simple digital or paper-based data systems for recording ECCE quality assurance findings and tracking whether recommendations are implemented.

6. School heads and centre proprietors should conduct regular internal self-assessment before external inspection. This will promote ownership of quality and reduce the tendency to prepare only for inspection visits.
7. Parents and communities should be included in quality assurance through feedback channels, parent education, community monitoring and participation in safety, nutrition and learning support.
8. Quality assurance officers should be trained specifically in ECCE rather than using only general primary-school inspection approaches for young children.
9. Further empirical studies should examine how current quality assurance practices affect child outcomes, caregiver performance and centre improvement in different Nigerian states.

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