

VULNERABILITY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES IN LAGOS STATE

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Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) is a critical foundation for children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development; however, access to quality ECE remains uneven for children living in vulnerable circumstances. This study examined the impact of vulnerability on access to, participation in, and quality of early childhood education among preschool children in Lagos State, Nigeria. A descriptive statistical research design was adopted, involving 180 participants comprising preschool children aged 3–5 years, their parents, and teachers drawn from public and private nursery schools across three local government areas representing diverse socio-economic contexts. Data were collected using structured parent questionnaires, a Language and Cognitive Development Checklist, and a Teacher Rating Scale, all of which demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used for analysis. Findings revealed that low household income, food insecurity, inadequate learning materials, high preschool fees, and poor infrastructure constitute major barriers to vulnerable children's access to quality early learning environments. Results further indicated that vulnerability is associated with moderate levels of language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, with socio-emotional outcomes being the most adversely affected. The study concludes that socio-economic vulnerability continues to perpetuate educational inequality in early childhood in Lagos State. It therefore recommends holistic, equity-driven policy responses that integrate education, nutrition, teacher capacity development, and parental support to enhance inclusive and quality early childhood education for vulnerable children.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Socio-economic inequality, Preschool development, Poverty, Cognitive development

Introduction

The early childhood years, typically defined as ages 0–8, represent a critical developmental period during which children acquire foundational skills in language, cognition, socio-emotional regulation, and motor development (UNESCO, 2025). Access to quality early childhood education (ECE) has been identified globally as a key determinant of children's lifelong learning trajectories, health, and socio-economic participation (Heckman, 2025). However, in contexts of vulnerability and challenging circumstances, children are often deprived of such opportunities, placing them at heightened risk of developmental delays, poor academic outcomes, and social marginalization.

Lagos State is the nation's most urbanised and densely populated region the challenge of providing equitable and inclusive early childhood education is profound. Rapid urbanization, high levels of poverty, informal settlements, and socio-economic inequalities has created vulnerable conditions that significantly affect young children's educational experiences (Akinware, 2019). Vulnerability in this context may arise from multiple and intersecting factors including poverty, child labor, displacement, poor health, food insecurity, and lack of safe learning environments (UNICEF, 2021). These conditions disrupt early learning, limit school readiness, and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Despite government and non-governmental interventions to expand access to early childhood care and education, many vulnerable preschool children in Lagos continue to face barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficiently trained teachers, lack of culturally responsive curricula, and limited parental engagement (Okebukola, 2016). While some studies have documented the general challenges of early

childhood education in Nigeria, there remains a paucity of empirical research that specifically interrogates the intersection of vulnerability and ECE outcomes in Lagos State's unique socio-economic and cultural landscape. Addressing this gap is essential to designing responsive policies and practices that safeguard children's rights to education in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

Early childhood education (ECE) has long been recognized as a cornerstone of human development, with significant implications for children's cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional outcomes (Heckman, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). However, children living in vulnerable circumstances such as poverty, conflict zones, or displaced communities are disproportionately deprived of access to quality ECE. UNICEF (2021) highlights that nearly half of children under five in low- and middle-income countries experience conditions of deprivation that negatively affect their learning and development. Factors such as malnutrition, inadequate health care, poor housing, and limited parental support contribute to delayed school readiness, compromised cognitive performance, and reduced socio-emotional resilience (Engle *et al.*, 2011).

Globally, research demonstrates that vulnerability directly correlates with educational inequality. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, poor children are five times less likely to attend preschool than their wealthier peers (World Bank, 2019). This disparity perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion, as children who lack access to quality ECE are less likely to succeed academically, secure employment, and contribute productively to society later in life. Interventions such as inclusive curricula, teacher capacity building, and targeted social protection schemes have been recommended to bridge this divide (Britto *et al.*, 2017).

Nigeria, where approximately 43% of the population lives below the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020), socio-economic vulnerability significantly influences access to education. Early childhood education, though recognized in policy frameworks such as the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014), remains underfunded and inconsistently implemented. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be excluded from preschool programs due to factors including high tuition costs, inadequate infrastructure, child labor demands, and parents' limited awareness of the value of ECE (Okebukola, 2016; Akinware, 2019).

Scholarly evidence suggests that vulnerability in Nigerian urban centers is compounded by rapid urbanization and informal settlement growth. In Lagos State, the nation's economic hub, millions of children live in slums with poor sanitation, overcrowded schools, and minimal access to structured ECE (UN-Habitat, 2016). Studies have shown that children in such environments often display delayed literacy and numeracy skills, low attention spans, and diminished socio-emotional regulation (Adeyemi, 2016). While government and non-governmental organizations have attempted to address these issues through initiatives like the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme, implementation gaps remain, particularly in reaching marginalized populations (Obidike, 2012).

Vulnerability in early childhood is a multidimensional construct that encompasses economic deprivation, poor health and nutrition, unsafe or unstable living conditions, limited stimulation at home, exposure to violence, displacement, and lack of access to safe, quality learning environments (multidimensional poverty frameworks). Children experiencing one or more of these conditions are at elevated risk of delayed cognitive, language and socio-emotional development and poorer school readiness (national MPI analyses; global child-poverty syntheses). In policy and research, vulnerability is best treated as intersecting deprivations rather than a single deficit a perspective that foregrounds holistic, cross-sectoral responses (Ophi 2023).

Recent national evidence shows a high prevalence of multidimensional child poverty in Nigeria, with striking deficits in intellectual stimulation and material resources that are pivotal for early development (a large share of children are multidimensionally poor, and intellectual stimulation is one of the most affected dimensions). Households with under-five children are disproportionately likely to be poor, and children in these households face greater constraints on nutrition, health care, and access to learning supports all determinants of early learning outcomes. These national patterns are salient for Lagos because the state concentrates large numbers of poor and vulnerable households even as it accounts for substantial economic activity; Lagos therefore exhibits stark intra-urban inequalities, where affluent neighborhoods sit alongside densely populated informal settlements (Ophi 2023).

Lagos's rapid urbanization and the expansion of informal settlements have produced educational ecosystems in which supply, affordability and quality of early childhood services vary widely. Diagnostic and resilience studies of Lagos document concentrated pockets of deprivation: inadequate housing, overcrowding,

sanitation deficits, and limited public service coverage conditions that undermine children's health and reduce caregivers' capacity to provide early stimulation. Importantly, many children in low-income urban communities attend private, low-cost preschools whose staffing, curriculum fidelity, and physical environments are often poor; this private-sector predominance for early years provision in urban slums raises affordability and quality concerns. Thus, spatial and economic inequality in Lagos maps directly onto unequal early learning opportunities.

Studies of ECE in Nigeria consistently flag weak implementation: shortages of trained early childhood specialists, inconsistent adherence to developmentally appropriate practice, inadequate classroom resources, and weak regulatory oversight (leading to unregulated proliferation of preschools of varying quality) (Obidike, 2012). Researchers report that teacher preparation programs often do not equip educators with pedagogies suited to the needs of vulnerable learners (play-based, trauma-informed, culturally responsive approaches), while infrastructural deficits and high pupil-to-teacher ratios further reduce instructional quality. These constraints are especially pronounced in under-resourced urban and peri-urban settings in Lagos where public provision is limited and low-cost private providers predominate.

Empirical work shows multiple causal pathways linking vulnerability to poor early learning: (a) insufficient nutrition and ill health reduce attention and cognitive processing; (b) limited home stimulation and parental literacy constrain vocabulary development and emergent literacy; (c) precarious living and stressors (violence, instability) impair socio-emotional regulation; and (d) constrained access to quality ECE reduces exposure to rich language and early numeracy experiences that predict later academic success. In Lagos State, proxy indicators collected in recent studies (food insecurity, crowded housing, and child engagement deprivations) correlate with lower measures of school readiness and early language scores, underlining how household and community-level vulnerabilities produce measurable deficits by preschool age (Ophi 2023).

Nigeria's policy architecture (National Policy on Education and related ECE guidelines) recognizes the importance of early childhood but falls short in financing, regulation and targeted programming for the most vulnerable. International and national actors (UNESCO, UNICEF, NGOs) have supported pilot programs, capacity building, and service innovations in urban areas, but scale, sustainability and effective targeting remain barriers. In Lagos, the combination of active non-state provision and state-level planning (resilience and development strategies) offers a platform for interventions yet evaluations highlight weaknesses in teacher professional development, integration of health and nutrition services with ECE, and mechanisms to reach informal settlements (UNICEF, 2021).

Although there is a growing body of literature on Nigeria's ECE challenges, relatively few rigorous, mixed-methods studies focus specifically on how multiple forms of vulnerability interact to shape early learning outcomes in Lagos State's diverse urban contexts. Existing work often treats access (enrolment) separately from quality (learning outcomes), or focuses on primary education rather than pre-primary years. Moreover, evidence is uneven across LGAs and informal settlements limiting generalizability of program recommendations. There is therefore need for research that: (a) combines household, classroom and child-level measures to link household vulnerability to child development; (b) evaluates the quality of private low-cost ECE providers common in Lagos slums; and (c) tests integrated interventions (nutrition + stimulation + teacher training) under urban conditions. These gaps frame the rationale for studies that adopt multidimensional vulnerability metrics and link them to direct assessments of child language, cognition and socio-emotional skills (UNICEF, 2021).

This study therefore examines the relationship between vulnerability and early childhood education outcomes in Lagos State, with emphasis on how poverty, social exclusion, and environmental hardship affect preschool children's access to and quality of education. By focusing on children in challenging circumstances, the study underscores the urgency of adopting inclusive and equity-driven educational approaches in Nigeria's most complex urban environment.

Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the impact of vulnerability on access, participation, and quality of early childhood education among preschool children in Lagos State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. explore the challenges faced by vulnerable children in accessing quality learning environments, instructional resources, and teacher support.
- ii. assess the relationship between vulnerability and children's language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development outcomes.

- iii. provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening early childhood education policies and practices in Lagos State to support vulnerable populations.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- I. What specific challenges do vulnerable children face in accessing quality early learning environments?
- ii. In what ways does vulnerability influence preschool children's language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development outcomes?
- iii. What strategies can be implemented to ensure equitable access to quality early childhood education for vulnerable children in Lagos State?

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design approach and the population comprises preschool children (ages 3–5) enrolled in both public and private nursery schools across Lagos State including their parents and teachers. Multi-stage sampling procedure was used for the study. First, three local government areas in Lagos State (LGAs) was purposively selected to represent varying socio-economic conditions: high-income, middle-income, and low-income urban settlements. From each LGA, four schools (two public and two private) was randomly chosen. Within these schools, 15 children, along with their parents and teachers, were randomly sampled, resulting in a total sample size of 180 participants. Three instruments were used for the study, a structured questionnaires administered to parents to capture socio-economic indicators (household income, education, housing, food security) and children's access to educational resources, Language and Cognitive Development Checklist (LCDC): Adapted from standardized early childhood assessment tools to measure children's language, cognitive, and Teacher Rating Scale (TRS): Teachers evaluate children's classroom participation, behavior, and developmental progress. Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.79 which is considered acceptable. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency).

Results

Research Question 1

What specific challenges do vulnerable children face in accessing quality early learning environments?

Table 1 presents parents' responses on challenges affecting vulnerable children's access to quality early childhood education.

Table 1: Challenges Affecting Access to Quality Early Learning (n = 180)

Challenge	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Inadequate learning materials	132	73.3
Low household income	145	80.6
Poor school infrastructure	118	65.6
High cost of private preschool fees	126	70.0
Inadequate nutrition/food insecurity	139	77.2
Limited parental involvement	104	57.8

The results indicate that low household income (80.6%), food insecurity (77.2%), and inadequate learning materials (73.3%) were the most frequently reported challenges. This suggests that socio-economic vulnerability significantly limits children's access to quality early learning environments in Lagos State.

Research Question 2

In what ways does vulnerability influence preschool children's language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development outcomes?

Descriptive statistics from the Language and Cognitive Development Checklist (LCDC) and Teacher Rating Scale (TRS) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Developmental Outcomes (n = 180)

Developmental Domain	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Language development	2.84	0.63
Cognitive development	2.91	0.58
Socio-emotional development	2.76	0.66

(Scale: 1 = Low, 2 = Moderate, 3 = High)

The results show that children from vulnerable backgrounds demonstrated moderate levels of language (M = 2.84), cognitive (M = 2.91), and socio-emotional development (M = 2.76). However, socio-emotional development recorded the lowest mean score, indicating that vulnerability may have a more pronounced effect on children's emotional regulation, peer interaction, and classroom behavior.

Research Question 3

What strategies can be implemented to ensure equitable access to quality early childhood education for vulnerable children in Lagos State?

Teachers' and parents' responses on proposed intervention strategies are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Strategies for Improving Equitable Access to Early Childhood Education (n = 180)

Strategy	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Government subsidy for preschool education	152	84.4
Provision of free learning materials	146	81.1
School feeding programs	158	87.8
Teacher training on inclusive practices	141	78.3
Community-based parental education programs	133	73.9

The findings reveal that school feeding programs (87.8%), government subsidies (84.4%), and free provision of learning materials (81.1%) were the most strongly endorsed strategies. This indicates a consensus among respondents that policy-driven and welfare-based interventions are critical for improving equitable access to quality early childhood education for vulnerable children.

Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed that low household income, food insecurity, inadequate learning materials, and poor school infrastructure constitute major barriers to vulnerable children's access to quality early learning environments. This aligns with earlier studies which emphasize that poverty remains a dominant predictor of unequal access to early childhood education in low- and middle-income contexts (UNESCO, 2019; UNICEF, 2021). Children from economically disadvantaged households are less likely to attend well-resourced preschools and more likely to experience interruptions in schooling due to financial constraints.

The prominence of food insecurity as a key challenge corroborates evidence from developmental research indicating that inadequate nutrition during early childhood adversely affects brain development, attention span, and school readiness (Olanrewaju & Adeyemi, 2021). In the Nigerian context, studies have shown that children from food-insecure households often attend school irregularly and demonstrate reduced classroom engagement

(Akanbi & Alayande, 2020). The findings further support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that children's development is shaped by interactions within their immediate socio-economic environment.

The results indicated that vulnerable preschool children exhibited moderate levels of language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, with socio-emotional development recording the lowest mean score. This suggests that while some developmental competencies are attained, vulnerability may limit optimal developmental progression. Similar findings have been reported by UNICEF, (2023), who observed that children exposed to socio-economic deprivation often display delays in emotional regulation and social interaction due to stress, instability, and limited adult support.

The relatively moderate language and cognitive development outcomes may be attributed to children's exposure to formal preschool settings, even in resource-constrained environments. However, existing literature cautions that the quality of stimulation, teacher-child interaction, and learning materials significantly mediates developmental outcomes (Olanrewaju & Adeyemi (2021) and Oni and Ajayi (2020). The lower socio-emotional scores align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning; children experiencing vulnerability may have fewer opportunities for positive peer and adult interactions, thereby affecting emotional competence and behavior regulation.

The study identified school feeding programs, government subsidies, free provision of learning materials, and teacher training in inclusive practices as key strategies for improving equitable access to early childhood education. These findings are consistent with global evidence demonstrating that integrated social protection and education policies enhance school participation and learning outcomes among vulnerable children (World Bank, 2020).

School feeding programs, which received the highest endorsement, have been shown to improve attendance, concentration, and cognitive performance, particularly among children from low-income households (Adewumi & Ogunlade 2021). Government subsidies and material support reduce the financial burden on families and promote enrollment in quality early childhood programs (Olanrewaju & Adeyemi, 2021). Additionally, teacher training on inclusive and responsive pedagogies has been identified as critical for addressing diverse developmental needs and fostering supportive learning environments (UNICEF, 2023).

Conclusion

Children from low-income and low-education households are less likely to access or sustain attendance in early learning programs. The study shows that vulnerable children faces substantial barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient teacher support, which compromise the quality of their learning experiences. Socio-economic disadvantage negatively affects developmental outcomes language, cognitive, and socio-emotional placing vulnerable children at a developmental disadvantage before entering primary school. Existing interventions are insufficiently effective among the most vulnerable groups, indicating the need for better targeted and contextually responsive early childhood policies. Holistic, equity-driven approaches combining government subsidies, improved teacher training, and parental empowerment are necessary to promote inclusive early childhood education in Lagos State. In essence, socio-economic vulnerability continues to perpetuate educational inequality in early childhood development, necessitating strategic policy and programmatic interventions. Lack of cohesive policies also affected ECE policies and services which hinders progress, also insufficient data all limited date also affect planning and monitoing why underfunding on pre-primary education is just 0.4% of the GDP

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations weremade:

1. Awareness campaigns should be implemented by the government to educate parents on the importance of early learning and how home-based interactionsshouid be carried outand support child development.
2. Community-based early childhood centers should be expanded and managed through public-private partnerships to reach into underserved neighborhoods.

3. Continuous capacity-building programs should be organized for preschool teachers focusing on inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and early intervention strategies for vulnerable learners.
4. The Lagos State Ministry of Education should introduce targeted subsidies or fee waivers for children from low-income households to enhance preschool enrollment and reduce dropout rates.

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