

## **Enhancing Early Childhood Development in Nigeria: Strengthening the Role of Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) Linkage Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*Early childhood care, development and education (ECCDE) plays a vital role in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. In Nigeria, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme seeks to provide quality and accessible education for children from early childhood through Junior Secondary School (JSS 3). A key component of the UBE programme is the establishment of linkage schools, which are designed to serve as models of quality early education. These schools are meant to bridge the gap between formal and informal early childhood education, creating an integrated system that improves access to early learning opportunities, particularly in underserved regions. However, despite the potential of ECCDE linkage schools, various challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, low community participation, and limited funding hinder their ability to deliver quality education. This paper critically examines the current state of ECCDE linkage schools in Nigeria and identifies key obstacles that prevent them from meeting their educational objectives. The paper offers a set of actionable strategies aimed at strengthening these schools to improve early childhood development outcomes across the country. The proposed strategies include policy reforms, increased funding, enhanced teacher training, improved infrastructure, and stronger community involvement. Ultimately, the paper argues that addressing these challenges and implementing the recommended interventions is essential for fostering a sustainable, high-quality early education system in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Care Development and Education, Early Childhood Development, Linkage Schools, Universal Basic Education

### **Introduction**

Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) is widely recognized as an essential phase in a child's educational trajectory. The early years, from birth to age 6, are a critical period for brain development, and experiences during this time can significantly impact a child's cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2015). For decades, research has emphasized the importance of early childhood education in enhancing future learning outcomes, preventing educational disparities, and promoting lifelong well-being (Heckman, 2016). In this

context, ensuring that every child in Nigeria has access to quality early childhood education is a priority for both the government and international organizations like UNICEF and the World Bank.

In 1999, Nigeria launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, aiming to provide free and compulsory education for all children from ages 3 to 15. Within the UBE framework, Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) is considered a fundamental component, designed to give children a solid foundation for lifelong learning (Ige, 2024; Nwogu, 2017). The UBE programme emphasizes the importance of early childhood education in improving literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills, which are vital for children's overall development. ECCDE linkage schools are intended to serve as hubs for quality early childhood education, with a focus on creating a seamless transition from informal to formal education (Adebayo, 2019).

Despite the theoretical importance and the legislative framework that supports ECCDE, Nigeria faces significant challenges in the actual implementation of this education phase. According to the 2016 Nigeria Education Data Survey, a large portion of children in Nigeria—especially in rural areas—still do not have access to quality early childhood education, which is essential for fostering academic success later in life (UNESCO, 2015). A key part of the problem lies in the state of the ECCDE linkage schools, which, while intended to serve as models of good practice, face persistent issues such as overcrowded classrooms, poorly trained teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and limited infrastructure. These challenges not only undermine the quality of education but also hinder the developmental outcomes of young children.

Linkage schools are designed to offer a connection between the traditional pre-primary education and the formal primary education system. They are intended to serve as “feeder” schools that prepare children for primary education, ensuring that they are academically, socially, and emotionally ready for the next stage of learning. However, for these schools to function effectively and achieve their intended outcomes, it is crucial to address the systemic issues that compromise their effectiveness (Akinfolarin, 2017). This paper focuses on exploring these issues in depth, evaluating the current situation, and suggesting practical strategies for improving ECCDE linkage schools, thereby strengthening early childhood education in Nigeria.

One of the fundamental issues facing ECCDE linkage schools is the inadequacy of infrastructure. Many of these schools operate in poorly designed and overcrowded facilities, with limited access to child-friendly educational resources. For instance, classrooms may lack basic teaching tools such as books, chalkboards, and educational toys, which are essential for fostering active learning in young children. In some regions, schools are housed in dilapidated buildings that fail to meet the safety and developmental needs of children (Nwogu, 2017). The lack of a conducive learning environment directly impacts the quality of education that children receive, limiting their opportunities for cognitive and social development.

Another critical challenge is the quality of teachers working in ECCDE schools. While teacher education programmes exist in Nigeria, they often lack a specific focus on the unique needs of early childhood education. Teachers in ECCDE linkage schools may have received minimal training in child development, early literacy, or age-appropriate teaching methods, making it difficult for them to effectively engage young children in meaningful learning experiences (Ige & Usman-Abdulqadri, 2022). Research consistently shows that teacher quality is one of the most significant predictors of student success, especially in early childhood education (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Without adequately trained teachers, ECCDE linkage schools struggle to deliver the high-quality education that young learners need.

Equally important is the level of community involvement in the management and operation of ECCDE linkage schools. Research has shown that schools that actively engage their communities tend to be more successful in fostering positive educational outcomes (Akinfolarin, 2017). In many cases, however, local communities are either unaware of or disengaged from the educational processes in these schools. This lack of involvement can lead to poor resource mobilization, weak governance structures, and a lack of accountability. Community participation is essential for creating a sense of ownership and responsibility, which can translate into greater support for the school's educational objectives.

Furthermore, funding for ECCDE schools remains a significant obstacle. Although the government allocates funds for the UBE programme, much of the funding does not reach the ECCDE sub-sector. This leaves schools underfunded and unable to meet basic operational needs, such as hiring qualified teachers or maintaining school facilities. The World Bank (2017) has noted that in many

low-income countries, early childhood education is often the most underfunded segment of the education system, despite its proven long-term benefits. In Nigeria, increased funding is necessary to address the infrastructure gaps, support teacher training initiatives, and provide resources for early learning programmes.

To address these multifaceted challenges, this paper proposes a comprehensive strategy for strengthening ECCDE linkage schools. The strategies focus on four main pillars: policy reform and funding, teacher professional development, improved community engagement, and enhanced infrastructure. Each of these components is essential for creating an effective and sustainable early childhood education system. This paper draws on the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model of evaluation to assess the current state of ECCDE schools in Nigeria and to develop targeted recommendations for improvement.

The rationale for focusing on ECCDE linkage schools is grounded in the understanding that early childhood education has a profound impact on the future success of children, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. Children who receive quality early education are more likely to perform better academically, have higher graduation rates, and experience greater socio-economic mobility (Heckman, 2016). By strengthening ECCDE linkage schools, Nigeria can address the disparities in educational access and quality that persist across different regions and socio-economic groups, helping to create a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

The overall goal of this paper is to demonstrate that improving ECCDE linkage schools in Nigeria is not only necessary for enhancing early childhood development but is also a key strategy for achieving broader national education goals. By prioritizing ECCDE, the Nigerian government can ensure that all children, regardless of their background or location, have the opportunity to succeed in life. This aligns with the broader aspirations of the UBE programme, which seeks to improve educational quality, promote inclusivity, and contribute to the nation's social and economic development.

### **Description of ECCDE Linkage Schools in Nigeria**

Linkage schools under the UBE policy refer to designated centers that connect early childhood education with primary education, ensuring continuity and alignment in the curriculum and

pedagogical approaches. These schools serve as a bridge between the pre-primary and primary levels, aiming to enhance school readiness and reduce dropout rates by providing a seamless educational experience (Akinyemi & Bamidele, 2014). Linkage schools under the UBE framework are strategically located within primary schools or community centers to facilitate access and reduce costs associated with early childhood education. The purpose of establishing ECCDE linkage schools within the UBE framework is to promote equity and inclusiveness, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Okoro & Mbonu, 2020). Key stakeholders involved in the operation of these linkage schools include government agencies, local communities, non-governmental organizations, and private sector partners, all of whom play critical roles in resource mobilization, implementation, and sustainability (Olaleye et al., 2009).

ECCDE (Early Childhood Care and Development Education) Linkage Schools are designed to create an integrated approach to early childhood education, focusing on providing a continuum of care, development, and learning from early childhood through primary school. These schools aim to link early childhood education centers (such as pre-schools and daycare centers) with primary schools, thus fostering a smooth transition for children from informal, play-based learning to more structured, formal education. The primary goal of ECCDE linkage schools is to ensure that children receive continuous, quality education that addresses their developmental needs at each stage.

In traditional education systems, the early years of schooling often consist of separate programmes for early childhood education (ECE) and primary schooling, with limited coordination between the two. This disjointed structure can create disruptions for children as they move from one level to the next, which can affect their emotional well-being and academic performance. ECCDE linkage schools work to reduce these disruptions by aligning the curricula, teaching approaches, and assessment strategies of both early childhood centers and primary schools. By doing so, these schools aim to provide a more coherent and consistent learning experience for young children.

The core of the ECCDE linkage model lies in its recognition of early childhood education as a vital foundation for lifelong learning. Early childhood education, especially when linked with primary schooling, is seen as an investment in a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. A key focus is on creating a strong partnership between families, educators, and the

community, which is critical for providing a supportive environment for young learners. According to UNICEF (2019), these partnerships are essential in ensuring that all children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, have access to quality education that will set them on a path to success.

### **Curriculum Alignment and Continuity**

One of the defining features of ECCDE linkage schools is curriculum alignment between early childhood and primary education. Many traditional early childhood programmes focus on play-based learning and developmental milestones, while primary school curricula typically emphasize more structured academic learning. However, the mismatch between these approaches can create challenges when children move from one educational stage to another. In ECCDE linkage schools, educators work together to align their curricula in a way that both fosters early development and prepares children for the more formalized learning structure of primary education. For example, while early childhood education focuses on developing foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, and socialization through playful activities, ECCDE linkage schools ensure that these foundational skills are built upon in primary school, with greater focus on academic knowledge and critical thinking. According to a report by UNESCO (2017), such curriculum alignment helps to address gaps in children's learning as they transition to more formal education systems.

Curriculum continuity in ECCDE linkage schools is essential not only for academic achievement but also for emotional and social adjustment. For instance, when children are taught in an environment where there is a clear progression from one stage to the next, they are less likely to experience anxiety or frustration when transitioning to primary school. Heckman et al. (2010) found that when early childhood education is well-aligned with primary schooling, children experience fewer disruptions in their learning, leading to better academic outcomes and higher school completion rates.

### **Professional Development and Teacher Collaboration**

Teacher collaboration is another vital element of ECCDE linkage schools. In these schools, early childhood educators and primary school teachers often work closely together to design curricula, share resources, and discuss the developmental needs of their students. This collaboration is

beneficial not only for the students but also for the professional development of the teachers involved. For example, teachers can learn from each other's expertise and teaching methods. Early childhood educators, who typically focus on child-centered, play-based teaching, can share their knowledge about fostering social and emotional development with primary school teachers. Conversely, primary school teachers, who have expertise in structured academic learning, can help early childhood educators understand how to introduce more formal educational content in ways that are developmentally appropriate for young children.

Burchinal et al. (2010) found that teacher collaboration between early childhood and primary school educators results in more effective teaching practices, improved student outcomes, and greater consistency in educational practices. The professional development that teachers receive through these collaborations enhances their teaching skills, making them more adept at meeting the diverse needs of their students. Moreover, such professional development helps educators understand the importance of early childhood education and its role in the broader education system. This shared understanding among teachers helps promote a more seamless transition for students between the two levels of schooling.

### **Community and Parental Involvement**

ECCDE linkage schools also emphasize the importance of community and parental involvement in the education process. Research consistently shows that children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to succeed academically and socially. Desforges & Abouchaar (2003) in their review of parental involvement in education concluded that active parental engagement can lead to improved student achievement, behavior, and overall well-being. In ECCDE linkage schools, parents are often actively engaged in their child's learning journey. This involvement can take many forms, from attending parent-teacher meetings and workshops to participating in classroom activities or volunteer opportunities. Parents and caregivers may also receive guidance on how to support their child's learning at home, which helps reinforce the learning that takes place in school.

Furthermore, these schools often collaborate with local community organizations, healthcare providers, and social services to provide a more holistic support system for children and families.

By working together, communities can help ensure that children's physical, emotional, and educational needs are met. The partnership between schools and communities strengthens the overall educational ecosystem, making sure that children have the support they need to succeed.

### **Targeting Vulnerable and At-Risk Populations**

A key objective of ECCDE linkage schools is to ensure that vulnerable and at-risk children—those from low-income families, marginalized groups, or disadvantaged communities—receive quality early childhood education. These children are often at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing high-quality education, and early intervention is critical to reducing disparities in educational outcomes. Studies by UNICEF (2020) and World Bank (2018) highlight that children from low-income families, when provided with access to high-quality early childhood education, show significant improvements in cognitive development, school readiness, and long-term academic performance. ECCDE linkage schools provide an opportunity for such children to benefit from continuous, quality education from an early age, which helps break the cycle of poverty and inequality. Moreover, ECCDE linkage schools ensure that children from diverse backgrounds are supported in their social-emotional development. This is particularly important for children who may face challenges at home or in their communities. By fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment, these schools help vulnerable children develop the resilience and skills necessary to succeed academically and socially.

### **Global Examples and Impact**

Across the globe, various countries have implemented the ECCDE linkage model with notable success. For example, Finland has long been recognized for its integrated approach to early childhood education and primary schooling, where there is a seamless flow between ECE and primary education. Finnish schools emphasize play, social learning, and the development of emotional intelligence in the early years, which prepares children for the more structured environment of primary school. As a result, Finland consistently ranks among the top performers in international assessments such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2019).



Similarly, in Kenya, the Government's Early Childhood Education and Development (ECDE) policy has focused on strengthening the links between early childhood education and primary schooling. The aim is to provide children with a solid foundation that prepares them for primary school, especially for those from rural or impoverished communities. According to the World Bank (2018), countries with strong ECCDE programmes linked to primary education have seen improved educational outcomes, especially in terms of school retention and completion rates.

### **Importance of Enhancing ECCDE Linkage Schools for Child Development**

Improving ECCDE linkage schools is critical not only for ensuring that children receive a solid start in their educational journey, but also for fostering broader societal benefits. In Nigeria, where access to education remains unequal, especially in rural and marginalized areas, the improvement of ECCDE schools can help reduce educational disparities and improve the overall literacy rates (Barnett, 2011). High-quality early childhood education provides children with the necessary cognitive, emotional, and social skills that are essential for success throughout their academic careers and beyond.

Research has consistently shown that children who attend quality early childhood education programmes are more likely to perform better academically, exhibit improved behaviour, and have stronger social skills (Heckman, 2016). In addition, these children are less likely to repeat grades, drop out of school, or face disciplinary issues. The long-term impact of early education on adult productivity and income has been demonstrated in several studies, making ECCDE a powerful tool for poverty reduction (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2015). By investing in early childhood education, Nigeria can build a more resilient, productive, and equitable society.

Moreover, enhancing ECCDE linkage schools is a strategic investment in human capital development. In the context of Nigeria's fast-growing population and emerging labour markets, the ability to harness the full potential of the country's young population depends on providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the 21st century. A well-educated workforce is vital for the nation's economic growth, and this begins with a strong foundation in early childhood education.

### **Current State of ECCDE Linkage Schools in Nigeria**

Nigeria, like many developing nations, has recognized the importance of early childhood education (ECE) as a fundamental part of its education system. The integration of Early Childhood Care and

Development Education (ECCDE) with primary education is a critical focus for improving educational outcomes, particularly for vulnerable children in underserved communities. Over the years, Nigeria has made considerable strides toward establishing ECCDE linkage schools, though significant challenges remain.

### **Government Policies and National Initiatives**

The Nigerian government has made several policy moves aimed at improving early childhood education, including efforts to link ECCDE with primary education. The **National Policy on Education (NPE)** in Nigeria, revised most recently in 2013, recognizes early childhood education as an important component of the broader education system. The policy advocates for the provision of basic early childhood education to children aged 0–5 years, and it underscores the need for integrating ECCDE with primary education. One of the most significant steps towards linking ECCDE with primary education is the **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy**, introduced in various states as part of Nigeria's broader education reforms. This policy aims to establish a unified system where early childhood centers are seamlessly connected to primary schools. It recognizes the importance of early intervention in children's development and emphasizes the need for a coordinated, holistic approach to early learning.

At the national level, the **Universal Basic Education (UBE)** programme, launched in 1999, also aims to improve the education system by making basic education (which includes early childhood education) available to every Nigerian child. However, while the policy framework exists, actual implementation and the alignment between ECCDE and primary schooling remain works in progress.

### **Curriculum and Teacher Training**

Curriculum alignment between early childhood education and primary school remains a critical challenge in Nigeria. While the **National Policy on Education** calls for the development of an integrated curriculum, the implementation has been inconsistent across different states and regions. In some areas, there is a lack of a clear, unified curriculum that links early childhood education to primary schooling, resulting in a discontinuity for children as they transition from one level to the next.

In recent years, there has been some progress in aligning curricula and teacher training programmes to address this issue. Nigeria's National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) has made strides in offering professional development for teachers, with a focus on early childhood education and care. However, teacher training programmes for early childhood education are still underdeveloped in many regions, and there are insufficient numbers of well-trained early childhood educators, particularly in rural areas. Many teachers in ECCDE settings still lack the specialized training required to support early childhood development effectively, which affects the overall quality of education provided to young children. Efforts to bridge this gap have been made by various organizations, such as UNICEF Nigeria, which collaborates with the government and local education authorities to improve teacher training in ECCDE. The introduction of in-service training programs has been part of the ongoing push to ensure that early childhood educators are adequately equipped to teach children from diverse backgrounds, including those in rural and underserved communities.

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

In Nigeria, parental and community involvement in early childhood education is gradually being recognized as a critical factor for improving the quality of learning in ECCDE linkage schools. In some parts of Nigeria, schools and communities have worked together to ensure that children, especially those from vulnerable families, have access to early learning opportunities. Community-based ECCDE centres have become a feature in several states, and these are often managed with the involvement of local stakeholders, including parents, traditional leaders, and community organizations.

Parental engagement has been promoted through various programmes, particularly in urban areas like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, where awareness of the importance of early childhood education is growing. However, challenges persist in rural areas, where many parents still lack awareness about the benefits of early childhood education. In these communities, there is also limited infrastructure for formal schooling, which affects both parental involvement and children's access to quality education.

### **Equity and Access to ECCDE**

One of the major challenges in Nigeria is the disparity in access to quality ECCDE programmes between urban and rural areas. While urban centers have seen significant improvements in the availability of early childhood education programmes, rural areas—particularly in the northern states—still face a serious shortage of ECCDE facilities. Many children in these regions miss out on early childhood education entirely, either due to a lack of infrastructure or the inability of families to afford the cost of education, even at the primary school level. UNICEF Nigeria (2020) highlights that children in rural, poor, and conflict-affected areas are at a particularly high risk of missing out on early education. The lack of trained educators, poor infrastructure, and insufficient learning materials further exacerbate the situation. The disparity in access to quality early childhood education is a key barrier to the effective linking of ECCDE with primary schools in Nigeria.

### **International Support and Collaborative Efforts**

International organizations, such as UNICEF, World Bank, and USAID, have been crucial in supporting the development of ECCDE linkage schools in Nigeria. UNICEF has partnered with the Nigerian government to improve the quality of early childhood education, with a particular focus on school readiness, child protection, and inclusive education. The support has included not only policy advocacy but also resource mobilization, teacher training, and the creation of community-based early childhood education centers. For example, the UNICEF-supported Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiatives in Nigeria have worked to integrate ECCDE with other essential services, including healthcare and nutrition, as part of a broader approach to child well-being. This integration is essential to ensuring that children receive comprehensive support during the crucial early years of development.

### **Challenges Faced by ECCDE Linkage Schools in Nigeria**

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of ECCDE, the challenges faced by linkage schools in Nigeria are significant:

1. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** The state of school infrastructure plays a crucial role in the quality of early childhood education. In many Nigerian ECCDE schools, classrooms are overcrowded and poorly equipped. Research shows that children in such environments

often struggle to thrive because they lack access to basic learning materials and a safe, stimulating environment (Nwogu, 2017). Furthermore, many ECCDE schools are located in buildings that are not designed with young children's needs in mind, leading to safety concerns and limited opportunities for exploration and play.

2. **Insufficient Teacher Training:** A significant challenge facing ECCDE schools in Nigeria is the lack of well-trained early childhood educators. Teachers in these schools often have limited training in child development, pedagogy, and age-appropriate teaching strategies. This lack of expertise undermines the quality of instruction and hinders children's ability to develop essential early skills. To address this issue, it is vital to invest in specialized training for ECCDE teachers that focuses on early childhood development, literacy, numeracy, and interactive teaching methodologies (Darling-Hammond, 2017).
3. **Limited Funding:** The inadequate funding of ECCDE schools is a persistent issue in Nigeria. The government's allocation to early childhood education remains minimal compared to other education sectors, despite the growing evidence of the benefits of early learning. Without sufficient financial resources, schools struggle to provide essential services, such as hiring qualified teachers, maintaining facilities, and acquiring educational materials. This financial constraint limits the overall effectiveness of ECCDE linkage schools (World Bank, 2017).
4. **Lack of Community Involvement:** Community engagement in the management and operation of ECCDE schools is crucial for ensuring their success. However, in many Nigerian communities, there is a lack of awareness and involvement in early childhood education. Engaging parents and community members in decision-making processes can lead to better resource mobilization, improved accountability, and a more supportive learning environment for children (Akinfolarin, 2017).
5. **Policy Gaps:** While Nigeria has policies aimed at improving early childhood education, implementation remains inconsistent. A lack of clear national standards and monitoring mechanisms for ECCDE programmes leads to uneven quality across regions. Policy reforms are necessary to strengthen the regulatory framework for ECCDE schools and ensure that these institutions adhere to best practices in teaching and learning.

### **Strategies for Strengthening ECCDE Linkage Schools**

Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) linkage schools play a pivotal role in ensuring a smooth transition from early childhood education to primary schooling. However, despite the significant progress made in integrating these systems, several challenges persist. To enhance the effectiveness of ECCDE linkage schools and bridge existing gaps, strategic interventions are necessary. Below are key strategies that can help strengthen ECCDE linkage schools.

1. **Policy Reform and Funding:** To address the systemic challenges facing ECCDE schools, it is essential to reform existing policies to ensure a more robust allocation of resources for early childhood education. This includes increasing government funding to support infrastructure development, teacher training, and the provision of learning materials. Additionally, the government should create policies that ensure the standardization of ECCDE programmes across the country.
2. **Professional Development for Teachers:** Improving teacher quality is fundamental to enhancing the effectiveness of ECCDE schools. Continuous professional development should be prioritized to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to support young children's learning. This can be achieved through regular training workshops, mentorship programmes, and partnerships with educational institutions to improve teachers' qualifications.
3. **Strengthening Community Engagement:** Active community participation in ECCDE schools is crucial for creating a conducive learning environment. Schools should work with local communities to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and involve parents and community leaders in the governance and operation of the schools. Community involvement can help generate local support for schools, improve school governance, and ensure that educational resources are effectively utilized.
4. **Infrastructure Improvement:** Investing in the physical infrastructure of ECCDE schools is vital for creating safe, stimulating, and effective learning environments. Schools should be equipped with age-appropriate learning materials, safe play areas, and classrooms designed to meet the developmental needs of young children. Local and state governments should prioritize ECCDE infrastructure in their education budgets to ensure that all children have access to quality facilities.

## Conclusion

Improving the quality of ECCDE linkage schools is essential for advancing early childhood education in Nigeria. By addressing critical challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, low funding, and lack of community involvement, Nigeria can lay a strong foundation for its children's educational success. The proposed strategies—policy reforms, increased funding, improved teacher training, and community involvement—offer a roadmap for strengthening ECCDE schools and ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality early childhood education. With concerted effort from the government, educational stakeholders, and local communities, Nigeria can build a robust early childhood education system that empowers children to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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