

INTEGRATING THE CORE IDEAS OF SOCIAL STUDIES INTO THE CURRICULUM OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE & EDUCATION (ECCE) TOWARDS ENCOURAGING CHILDREN'S MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the integrating the core ideas of Social Studies into the Curriculum of Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) towards encouraging Nigerian children's moral development. The growing influence of digital media and global cultural shifts has intensified concerns about the moral and social development of young children in Nigeria. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) represent a foundational stage where moral reasoning, social values, and civic awareness can be effectively nurtured. This paper highlights how Social Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, can promote ethical reasoning, cooperation, tolerance, and responsible citizenship among preschool learners. The paper further underscores the importance of curriculum reform and teacher competence in achieving these goals. It concludes by advocating for a holistic ECCE framework that embeds moral education and civic learning through social studies-based content. Recommendations include curriculum restructuring, teacher capacity development and the inclusion of value-oriented pedagogies.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Care and Education, Social Studies Integration, Moral Development, Curriculum Innovation, Civic Education*

Introduction

For any nation genuinely dedicated to sustainable development, the provision of quality education beginning from early childhood remains a critical foundation. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) serves as the bedrock for lifelong learning, shaping children's physical, emotional, social and moral capacities that later influence national progress (Okafor & Nnamani, 2024). Education, broadly defined, is a process through which individuals acquire the intellectual, physical, and social competencies necessary for effective participation in society (Ede & Musa, 2021). Within this context, Social Studies education occupies a unique position in promoting civic awareness, moral reasoning and the development of social responsibility in young learners.

Globally, Social Studies aim to produce responsible and morally conscious citizens capable of contributing positively to their communities. Its objectives emphasize socio-civic competence, value orientation and ethical conduct (Yusuf & Ogunleye, 2020). In recognition of its critical role in achieving national education goals, Social Studies has been designated as a core subject within Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).

Early childhood education, typically serving children from birth to five years, emerged as a distinct discipline after research demonstrated that the preschool period is crucial for cognitive growth, social interaction, and value formation (Adewale &

Danjuma, 2023). The increasing emphasis on the early years underscores the need to provide quality learning environments that foster holistic development. In Nigeria, the 1969 National Curriculum Conference formalized the inclusion of Social Studies in the school system as a means of addressing moral decay and strengthening social cohesion (Eze, 2023).

Today, the moral and civic education of children faces serious challenges due to the pervasive influence of social media, family disintegration, and a general erosion of societal values (Oluwaseun, 2022). Social problems such as indiscipline, dishonesty, intolerance and moral apathy have become increasingly visible among Nigerian youth. Therefore, integrating core ideas from Social Studies such as cooperation, empathy, respect for diversity and civic engagement into ECCE curricula is imperative for rebuilding the moral foundation of society. Social Studies' is interdisciplinary in nature, which draws from sociology, geography, ethics, and history, makes it an effective tool for cultivating civic and moral virtues among preschoolers.

Hence, this study seeks to explore the integration of Social Studies concepts into ECCE as a strategy for moral development and citizenship education. By emphasizing character formation, ethical understanding, and social participation, the paper advocates for a holistic ECCE model that nurtures not only academic readiness but also moral responsibility and civic consciousness.

Conceptual Framework

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2022), ECCE encompasses the education, and care of children aged 0–5 years in formal or non-formal settings such as nurseries, crèches and kindergartens. The primary aim of ECCE is to ensure the optimal development of children's cognitive, emotional, physical and social abilities before they enter primary school. Recent research emphasizes that quality ECCE lays the groundwork for later academic achievement and responsible citizenship (Abiola & Alabi, 2021). Effective ECCE programmes therefore integrate play-based learning, moral instruction, and social interaction to foster holistic development.

Social Studies Education

Social Studies is an interdisciplinary field that synthesizes concepts from the social sciences and humanities to develop civic competence and promote social cohesion. It equips learners with the skills, values, and attitudes necessary for peaceful coexistence and democratic participation (Adeyemi & Afolayan, 2023). Social Studies encourage learners to analyze issues from historical, cultural, political, and economic perspectives, enabling them to develop reflective judgment and problem-solving skills (Eze, 2023). At the ECCE level, it serves as a foundation for moral awareness, and empathy, helping children understand human relationships and their responsibilities within the community.

Moral Development

Moral development refers to the progressive understanding of ethical behavior, societal norms, and value systems that guide individual conduct (Okeke & Danladi, 2022). During early childhood, children learn right from wrong primarily

through imitation, reinforcement, and social interaction. Social Studies education reinforces this process by providing structured opportunities for children to practice fairness, respect, honesty and cooperation through experiential learning (Adewale & Danjuma, 2023). The moral development of children is thus intertwined with their exposure to value-oriented education that reflects community norms and promotes empathy.

Curriculum Development

A curriculum is more than a list of subjects, it encompasses all planned learning experiences designed to develop learners' knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ibrahim, 2021). In modern education, curriculum development is viewed as a dynamic process that integrates societal needs, learner interests, and national goals (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). For ECCE, the curriculum must balance play-based learning with moral and civic education to produce well-rounded individuals. Social Studies content should therefore be embedded into ECCE curricula to instill positive values and problem-solving abilities at an early age.

Objectives of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Nigeria

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is recognized as a cornerstone for sustainable national development. It prepares children for formal education, and lifelong learning by fostering moral, cognitive and socio-emotional growth. According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2022), the government's responsibility for ECCE includes training qualified teachers, developing suitable curricula, ensuring quality control and integrating early childhood sections into public schools.

The major objectives of ECCE, as outlined in the National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022), are to:

- Ensure a smooth transition from home to school;
- Prepare children for entry into primary education;
- Provide adequate care and supervision while parents engage in economic activities;
- Inculcate social and moral norms;
- Stimulate curiosity and creativity through play, music, art, and environmental exploration;
- Develop a sense of cooperation, teamwork, and tolerance;
- Instill good health habits and hygiene practices; and
- Introduce foundational literacy and numeracy skills through play-based learning.

Recent research supports these goals, emphasizing that ECCE lays the groundwork for social cohesion, and national identity when properly aligned with moral and civic education (Adewale & Danjuma, 2023; Okafor & Nnamani, 2024). ECCE is thus not merely a preparatory stage for schooling but a strategic national investment in human capital formation and ethical nation-building.

General Objectives of Social Studies Education in Nigeria

Social Studies education serves as a vital instrument for national development, with its central goal being the cultivation of informed, responsible and value-driven citizens. It integrates knowledge, and practices from history, geography, economics

and sociology to enable learners to understand and improve their environments (Eze, 2023).

The contemporary objectives of Social Studies education, as updated in Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC, 2023) and supported by current scholarship (Adeyemi & Afolayan, 2023; Yusuf & Ogunleye, 2020), include:

- Developing awareness and understanding of social, cultural, and environmental interdependence;
- Promoting civic competence, moral integrity, and ethical decision-making;
- Cultivating analytical, communicative, and reflective thinking skills necessary for active citizenship;
- Encouraging cooperation, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among diverse groups;
- Instilling values such as honesty, diligence, equity, and social justice;
- Encouraging critical examination of societal challenges and exploring practical solutions; and
- Developing flexibility and adaptability in responding to changes in political, economic, and social systems.

Through these objectives, Social Studies promotes civic literacy, and equips learners with the social, and emotional intelligence needed to sustain democracy and social harmony (Ede & Musa, 2021; Okeke & Danladi, 2022).

How Social Studies Education Fosters Moral Development of Children under ECCE Programmes

The role of Social Studies in fostering moral development during early childhood cannot be overstated. As societies evolve and cultural values shift, the moral upbringing of children has become increasingly vital in preparing them for ethical participation in civic life. Social Studies education offers a holistic platform through which children learn the principles of fairness, empathy, cooperation, and social justice values that are foundational to moral reasoning and responsible citizenship (Okafor & Nnamani, 2024).

Social Studies as a Foundation for Value Formation

Social Studies education helps children internalize desirable social behaviors by exposing them to concepts such as tolerance, honesty, respect, and communal responsibility. Through storytelling, dramatization, songs, and interactive discussions, teachers can help children recognize and model socially acceptable conduct (Adewale & Danjuma, 2023). By integrating moral concepts into everyday classroom activities, educators provide learners with consistent opportunities to practice ethical decision-making and understand the consequences of their actions (Yusuf & Ogunleye, 2020).

Relationship Between the Objectives of ECCE and Social Studies Education

There exists a strong symbiotic relationship between the objectives of ECCE and those of Social Studies education. Both aim to nurture morally upright, socially responsible and intellectually curious citizens. Approximately half of the ECCE objectives particularly those related to social norms, cooperation, creativity and health habits directly overlap with social studies goals (Abiola & Alabi, 2021).

Social Studies education reinforces the values central to ECCE by introducing young learners to essential life skills such as empathy, teamwork, cultural awareness

and civic responsibility. These are indispensable in the early formation of character and citizenship (Adewale & Danjuma, 2023). For instance, the fourth ECCE objective “to inculcate social norms” mirrors the primary aim of social studies, which is to instill in learners the right attitudes, values, and moral standards for harmonious living (Eze, 2023).

Moreover, both domains emphasize experiential learning and value-based education. While ECCE focuses on foundational behavior and curiosity through play and interaction, Social Studies deepen this through contextual understanding of societal systems, cooperation, and nationhood. In essence, Social Studies strengthens ECCE’s purpose by expanding the child’s worldview from immediate family and school settings to community, nation and global contexts (Okafor & Nnamani, 2024).

Integrating Social Studies concepts into ECCE ensures a more holistic educational experience where intellectual development is balanced with moral and civic formation. Such alignment supports the vision of producing citizens who are not only literate but also socially conscious and ethically grounded.

The Role of the Teacher in Moral Development of Children

Teachers play a critical role as facilitators and moral exemplars in the ECCE environment. Because children at this stage learn primarily through imitation and observation, the teacher’s character, empathy and approach to classroom management directly shape students’ moral perceptions (Abiola & Alabi, 2021). Social Studies teachers are therefore expected to demonstrate values such as patience, respect, and integrity, serving as living examples of moral conduct. Their guidance helps children understand moral dilemmas, appreciate diversity and develop respect for others’ perspectives (Ede & Musa, 2021).

Social Studies Pedagogies that Promote Moral Growth

Social studies encourages experiential and participatory pedagogies that actively involve children in moral learning. Strategies such as role-play, cooperative learning, storytelling, debates, and dramatization enhance empathy and moral sensitivity (Adeyemi & Afolayan, 2023). These child-centered methods provide opportunities for learners to experience and reflect upon moral situations rather than simply memorizing ethical rules. Moreover, group-based activities encourage collaboration, communication and conflict resolution skills essential for harmonious social living (Oluwaseun, 2022).

When appropriately adapted to the ECCE level, these pedagogies make learning enjoyable and morally enriching. They help children to appreciate virtues such as patience, teamwork, truthfulness, and respect for authority, while also reducing tendencies toward aggression and selfishness (Okeke & Danladi, 2022).

Social Studies as a Vehicle for National Integration

Beyond individual moral formation, Social Studies at the early childhood level serves as an instrument of national integration. By introducing children to Nigeria’s cultural diversity, national symbols, and collective heritage, social studies promotes patriotism, unity and intercultural understanding (Eze, 2023). Early exposure to these ideas helps learners develop positive attitudes toward people of different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Such moral inclusivity is indispensable in

multiethnic societies like Nigeria, where social harmony is key to national stability and development.

Addressing the Moral Gaps in Current ECCE Practice

Current practices in many Nigerian Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres continue to overemphasize rote learning recitation, phonics, and memorization at the expense of moral, emotional and social development. This narrow instructional focus stems partly from outdated pedagogical traditions and societal pressure on early educators to prioritize literacy and numeracy outcomes (Abiola & Alabi, 2021). While foundational literacy is essential, it is insufficient to prepare children for holistic life challenges. The neglect of moral instruction and value-based learning has contributed to a worrying trend of indiscipline, disrespect and moral apathy among young learners, who often struggle to differentiate between right and wrong in social situations (Okafor & Nnamani, 2024). Thus, a critical reassessment of ECCE practices is needed to realign them with the broader objectives of character formation and national development.

Social Studies education offers a transformative solution to these moral and pedagogical gaps. By emphasizing experiential learning and social participation, it nurtures essential virtues such as honesty, cooperation, empathy and respect for others (Ede & Musa, 2021). Through role play, storytelling, group projects, and reflective discussions, children can internalize moral lessons in an engaging and practical way. Unlike rote methods that prioritize memorization, social studies encourages critical thinking and self-reflection skills necessary for developing ethical judgment and responsible citizenship. When integrated into ECCE curricula, these strategies ensure that children do not merely absorb academic content but also understand how their actions impact others, thereby strengthening their moral compass from an early age (Adeyemi & Afolayan, 2023).

Furthermore, the early years represent the most sensitive and formative period of human development, during which children's personalities and value systems are shaped. As Ashimolowo (2021) observes, academic competencies such as reading and counting can be mastered at later stages, but foundational moral values like empathy, kindness, and integrity must be cultivated early, when children's minds are still flexible and receptive. This view aligns with contemporary developmental psychology, which underscores that moral cognition, and prosocial behavior are best instilled through consistent modeling, reinforcement and dialogue within nurturing environments (Okeke & Danladi, 2022). Thus, integrating moral instruction through social studies within ECCE ensures that young learners build emotional intelligence and interpersonal sensitivity—attributes that underpin peaceful coexistence and civic responsibility.

Lastly, addressing the moral void in ECCE requires systemic reform that goes beyond curriculum revision. Teachers must be retrained to adopt interactive, child-centered pedagogies that balance academic rigor with value-based instruction (Adewale & Danjuma, 2023). Administrators should also ensure that ECCE centres create environments conducive to moral learning—spaces where cooperation, respect and cultural diversity are visibly practiced. Moreover, families and communities should collaborate with schools to reinforce moral values taught in classrooms, ensuring continuity between home and educational settings. Only through such a coordinated effort can Nigeria's ECCE system evolve from a predominantly cognitive

framework to one that genuinely nurtures the moral, emotional and civic growth of every child

Proposed Social Studies Content for Integration into ECCE Curriculum

To ensure that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) contributes meaningfully to children's holistic and moral development, selected Social Studies themes should be incorporated into the ECCE curriculum. These elements must be developmentally appropriate, value-centered, and culturally responsive. The following key areas are proposed:

- i. **Peace and Conflict Resolution:** Introducing concepts of friendship, sharing, and peaceful coexistence through role play and cooperative games.
- ii. **Cooperation and Teamwork:** Encouraging group activities that promote unity and problem-solving within classroom and home settings.
- iii. **Respect for Others' Opinions:** Teaching children to listen, take turns and express their views respectfully.
- iv. **Patriotism and National Identity:** Using songs, symbols, and stories to instill pride in Nigeria's heritage and appreciation of cultural diversity.
- v. **Diversity and Inclusion:** Promoting tolerance, fairness, gender equality, and respect for differences in ethnicity, religion and ability (Okeke & Danladi, 2022).
- vi. **Moral and Ethical Values:** Instilling honesty, hard work, politeness, and truthfulness through experiential activities and storytelling (Adewale & Danjuma, 2023).
- vii. **Leadership and Followership:** Encouraging participation in simple classroom leadership roles to develop responsibility and fairness.
- viii. **Family and Community Roles:** Teaching children about family responsibilities, respect for elders, and cooperation at home.
- ix. **Environmental Awareness:** Introducing children to the local environment and fostering appreciation for nature and sustainability (Eze, 2023).
- x. **National Symbols and Civic Learning:** Using pictures and songs to familiarize children with national symbols such as the flag, coat of arms, and anthem (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).

These contents should be taught using play-based and interactive methods, such as storytelling, dramatization, songs, picture books, and educational technology. Digital tools like animated videos and educational apps can also be used to reinforce values and make moral lessons engaging (Oluwaseun, 2022).

The Broader Implication for ECCE in Nigeria

Integrating Social Studies into Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) carries implications that go beyond moral instruction it redefines the entire purpose and orientation of early education in Nigeria. A curriculum enriched with social studies concepts nurtures children's emotional intelligence, empathy and civic responsibility from their formative years. By engaging in value-oriented lessons, children learn to recognize emotions, manage interpersonal conflicts and relate positively with peers and adults. This early exposure to moral and social learning forms the foundation of emotional stability, self-control and social adaptability (Okafor & Nnamani, 2024). Children who experience such integrated learning are better equipped to navigate social complexities and contribute meaningfully to their communities. As Adewale and Danjuma (2023) emphasize, the inclusion of social studies principles helps build

socially competent and self-disciplined individuals who demonstrate respect, cooperation, and compassion qualities indispensable to sustainable nation-building and peaceful coexistence.

Furthermore, social studies within ECCE serves as a moral compass that guides the holistic development of the child, shaping attitudes, perceptions and ethical consciousness. When children understand civic norms and moral expectations early on, they are more likely to exhibit responsible behavior, engage in community service and embrace diversity later in life (Ede & Musa, 2021). This integration also aligns with Nigeria's broader educational objectives of promoting unity in diversity, patriotism and democratic participation (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). Therefore, incorporating Social Studies into ECCE is not merely an academic enhancement but a strategic investment in human capital development. It ensures that education at the preschool level transcends rote learning to instill in every child the capacity for empathy, ethical judgment, and civic engagement traits essential for building a morally stable and progressive Nigerian society.

Conclusion

This study affirms that integrating Social Studies into ECCE is essential for the moral and civic development of Nigerian children. Social Studies provide the intellectual, and affective tools needed for children to internalize social norms, build empathy, and understand their roles as future citizens. Inculcating moral values at the preschool stage promotes lifelong habits of honesty, cooperation, and civic responsibility. The paper emphasizes that achieving the goals of ECCE depends largely on qualified, value-driven and dynamic teachers who can translate curriculum objectives into practical moral experiences. Effective ECCE should thus go beyond literacy and numeracy to embrace a more holistic approach that addresses emotional, ethical, and social dimensions of learning. Ultimately, the success of Nigeria's educational transformation hinges on a moral foundation laid in early childhood. Quality ECCE is not a privilege but a right and national necessity. Therefore, integrating Social Studies concepts is not optional it is a strategic investment in nurturing a new generation of socially conscious, empathetic, and responsible citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and arguments presented, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Curriculum Reform:** Curriculum planners and the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should review and integrate Social Studies-based moral and civic content into the ECCE framework to reflect current social realities.
- ii. **Teacher Capacity Development:** Ministries of Education should organize regular training workshops and seminars to update ECCE teachers' knowledge and equip them with modern, participatory pedagogical skills
- iii. **Incentives for ECCE Trainees:** Government and institutions should provide financial support or stipends to encourage the enrollment of talented teacher trainees in ECCE programs.
- iv. **Teaching Practice Integration:** ECCE trainee teachers should be required to complete teaching practice in pre-primary classrooms to ensure practical exposure and professional competence.

- v. **Instructional Materials:** Attractive pictorial, digital, and audiovisual teaching aids should be provided in ECCE centers to facilitate effective learning and moral instruction.
- vi. **Community and Stakeholder Collaboration:** Strengthen partnerships among educators, parents, and community leaders to reinforce moral lessons learned in school at home and in society.
- vii. **Technology-Enhanced Learning:** ECCE teachers should integrate educational technology (e.g., child-friendly videos, apps, and interactive media) to promote engagement in moral and civic education.
- viii. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish robust monitoring systems to assess the moral outcomes of ECCE programs and ensure alignment with national education goals.

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