ANTICIPATING THE UNFORESEEN: RISK MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SOUTH-WEST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria's early childhood education is broadly acknowledged in policy and continues to be hampered by delivery problems which pedagogy has not been able to overcome. This study reframes ECE delivery as a risk-laden operational enterprise and examines, in a rarely studied Nigerian context, the status of risk management practice in ECE schools, the operational risks most prevalent in them, and the challenges constraining their management. The study used a descriptive survey design, supported by the project risk management framework presented in PMBOK Guide (Project Management Institute, 2021) and Hillson (2017). A total of 104 responses were collected from six South-West states using purposive and snowball sampling with 2.50 as the criterion for analysis, of which 103 were analysed. Overall, risk management practice was identified as being largely reactive, with risk response being the most advanced dimension (M = 2.74), and risk identification the least (M = 2.20). The overall mean score (M = 2.47) was below criterion. The most common risks were teacher and care provider attrition (M = 2.81), infrastructural *failure (M = 2.80), and disease outbreak (M = 2.73) with funding interruption being the lowest (M = 2.35). Absence of formal training (M = 2.61), staffing shortages (M = 2.83), and time pressure (M = 2.75) were the three top implementation challenges, with time pressure having the highest median score.The study finds that anticipatory risk management is an important but lesser developed dimension of ECE delivery in Nigeria, which is more limited by structural capacity than awareness, and suggests that it be incorporated into ECE training and supervision.*

Keywords: Risk management, Early Childhood Education, Operational risk, Project management

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been generally considered the cornerstone of human capital development and the largest educational return on investment for any society by scholars (Heckman, 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2022). By its internationally accepted definition, ECE encompasses education ranging from birth to age eight (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; UNESCO, 2007), a period that covers childcare in crèches, nursery, pre-primary and lower primary in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). This recognition has been institutionalised via the Universal Basic Education framework, and via successive policy commitments to early years provision (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014; Universal Basic Education Commission, 2021). However, Nigeria's realities for ECE delivery are repleted with risks. Persistent events in the delivery space involve teachers and care provider attrition, child safety incidents, enrolment volatility, disease outbreaks, infrastructural failure, parental disengagement, funding interruptions and community-level shocks (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Obiweluozor, 2015).

This, however, has received little attention in Nigeria ECE research and the predominant analytical foci have been pedagogical, infrastructural and policy-evaluative (Amali et al., 2018; Ejieh, 2006; Viatonu & Kasali, 2020). Where risk has been discussed in ECE literature, it has been peripheral rather than systematic, with little focus on it. Mentioned, which creates a gap. Risk management is defined in the project management literature as a structured discipline which encompasses risk identification, risk assessment, risk response, and risk monitoring; and is consistently linked to the success of a project (Hillson, 2017; Project Management Institute, 2021; Zwikael & Ahn, 2011). While there is established and strong evidence of how this works in the social sector, it has not yet been developed into ECE delivery in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ika & Donnelly, 2017).

As argued in this study, delivery of ECE is not just a pedagogical activity but also a risk-laden operational enterprise whose sustainability is dependent on the quality of risk management practice. Structured risk management practice is one of the underexamined challenges of service delivery failure in Nigeria early childhood education. While previous studies have largely focused on challenges such as inadequate funding and curriculum deficiencies, limited attention has been given to the role of risk management in ECE delivery. Project management brings in a well-established body of knowledge, including risk identification, risk assessment, risk response and risk monitoring, which helps to explore this aspect of ECE practice. The study highlights the status of risk management in ECE schools in South-West Nigeria, operational risks and constraints faced in operating the schools, by presenting project management as an analytical framework and providing empirical evidence for implementation. The aim of the study was to:

i. assess the status of risk management practices in early childhood education schools in South-West Nigeria;
ii. determine the most prevalent operational risks in these schools; and
iii. investigate the challenges faced in implementing risk management practices in early childhood education schools in South-West Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the state of risk management practicesin early childhood education schools in South-West Nigeria?

2. What are the most common types of operational risk in early childhood education schools in South-West Nigeria?
3. What are the challenges early education schools in South-West Nigeria encounter in implementing risk management practice?

Methods

The study adopted descriptive survey research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population of the study comprised teachers and care providers working with children from birth to age 8, within the six south-western states of Nigeria. Respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling technique. A total of 120 respondents were targeted. A total of 104 responses were received from the six states, from which one was excluded as being substantially incomplete, leaving 103 responses for analysis.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument, the Early Childhood Education Risk Management Questionnaire (ECE-RMQ). The instrument was divided into four parts. Section A elicited respondents' demographic information, including state of work, school type, level taught, role, qualification, and years of experience. Section B comprised 20 items that measured the risk management practices across four interrelated areas: risk identification, risk assessment, risk response, and risk monitoring, adapted from the project risk management framework outlined by the PMBOK Guide (Project Management Institute, 2021) and Hillson (2017). There were twelve items included in Section C on operational risk categories experienced in ECE delivery and ten items in Section D on implementation challenges of risk management practices. Items in Sections B, C, and D were structured on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1).

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts, drawn respectively from project management, early childhood education, and measurement and evaluation. Their feedback on items clarity, coverage of construct, and contextual appropriateness was included in the final instrument. Twenty respondents were selected from ECE schools outside the study area to establish reliability of the instrument. The pilot data resulted in a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.87.The questionnaire was administered electronically through google forms. Data collected were analysed through mean and standard deviation, with criterion mean score of 2.50

Results

A total of 104 responses were received. After one substantially incomplete response was removed, 103 responses were retained for analysis.

Research Question 1: What is the state of risk management practices in early childhood education schools in South-West Nigeria?

The mean ratings for each of the four dimensions of risk management practice are shown in Table 1.

Table 1:Mean Ratings for Risk Management Practice Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD	Rank	Remark
Risk Response	2.74	0.98.	1	Practised
Risk Assessment	2.58	1.00	2	Practised
Risk Monitoring	2.36	0.97	3	Not practised
Risk Identification	2.20	1.05	4	Not practised
Grand mean	2.47	—	—	Not practised

N =103. Criterion mean = 2.50. SD = standard deviation. Practised means a mean at or above the criterion.

The overall practice mean (2.47) was slightly lower than the criterion mean (2.50), meaning that, overall, risk management practice was weakly established. The four dimensions had not been equally well developed. Based on the mean scores, risk response was the highest with a mean score of 2.74, which is above criterion, while risk monitoring was below the criterion with a mean score of 2.36, and risk identification was below the criterion with a mean score of 2.20. In the "Risk identification" section, the periodic discussion of risk at staff meetings recorded the lowest mean value of all the items (1.34), and the encouragement of staff to report risks that arise recorded the highest mean value (2.71). The pattern suggests that schools were more likely to act in response to a risk as it occurred rather than to programme for a risk or to systematically identify or monitor a risk.

Research Question 2: What are the most common types of operational risk in early childhood education schools in South-West Nigeria?

The operational risks ranked by mean prevalence are presented in table 2

Table 2:Prevalence of Operational Risks in Rank Order

Operational risk	Mean	SD	Remark
Teacher/care provider attrition	2.81	0.94	Prevalent
Infrastructural failure	2.80	0.89	Prevalent
Disease outbreaks	2.73	1.01	Prevalent
Weather-related disruptions	2.60	1.02	Prevalent
Child safety incidents	2.54	0.99	Prevalent
Conflicts in school/community	2.55	0.95	Prevalent
Inadequate/untrained replacement staff	2.53	1.04	Prevalent
Irregular child attendance	2.49	0.87	Not prevalent
Parental disengagement	2.49	1.09	Not prevalent
Insecurity in community	2.47	1.01	Not prevalent
Volatile enrolment	2.45	0.95	Not prevalent
Funding interruptions	2.35	0.97	Not prevalent

N = 103. Criterion mean = 2.50. "Prevalent" means the mean is equal to or greater than the criterion.

The operating environment was generally risk saturated with most risks at or close to criterion level. The top three risks were teacher and care provider attrition (2.81), infrastructural failure (2.80) and disease outbreaks (2.73), followed by weather-related disruption (2.60) and child safety incidents (2.55). Funding interruptions, volatile enrolment (2.45), and community insecurity (2.47) were below the criterion, with lowest mean scores being funding interruptions. Notably, funding-related risk was the lowest, indicating that human and physical risks were more prominent than fiscal risks for respondents.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges early education schools in South-West Nigeria encounter in implementing risk management practice?

Table 3 shows implementation challenges ranked by mean

Table 3: The Challenges of Risk Management Implementation

Challenge	**Mean**	**SD**	**Remark**
Shortage of teachers/care providers	2.83	0.90	Agreed
Time pressure from teaching duties	2.75	1.02	Agreed
Leaders lack formal RM training	2.61	0.96	Agreed
No written guidelines from authorities	2.52	0.93	Agreed
Incidents handled informally	2.52	0.96	Agreed
Parents/community not engaged	2.50	0.94	Agreed
No documentation system	2.50	0.93	Agreed
Supervisory visits ignore RM	2.50	0.98	Agreed
Inadequate financial resources	2.47	0.94	Not agreed
Limited staff awareness of RM	2.33	0.99	Not agreed

N = 103. Criterion mean = 2.50. RM = risk management. "Agreed" indicates a mean equal to or greater than the criterion.

The top three problems were lack of teachers and care providers (2.83), time pressure from daily teaching (2.75) and lack of formal training on risk management among school principals (2.61). Lack of written guidance from education authorities, informal incident management, low levels of parental and community involvement, lack of documentation systems and inadequate risk management during supervisory visits were also suggested as challenges. Limited staff awareness of risk management recorded the lowest mean (2.33), the only challenge clearly below the criterion. The configuration suggests that the binding constraint on risk management was not a lack of awareness, but instead a lack of capacity, in the form of staffing, time, training, and guidelines.

Discussions

The results show that risk management practices are mostly reactive than proactive in ECE schools in South-West Nigeria. It is clearly reflected across the dimensions of risk management, with risk response producing the highest level of practice, and risk identification producing the lowest. The finding is important as risk identification is considered one of the pillars of successful risk management. If risks are not identified, they cannot be assessed, managed and monitored properly, as stated by Hillson (2017) and Project Management Institute (2021). The findings therefore indicated that many ECE schools do not necessarily respond to risks after they have happened but wait for them to happen first. Such an approach may limit the effectiveness of risk management efforts and reduce organisational preparedness.

This is also seen in the operational risk factors that respondents identified. Teacher and care provider attrition, infrastructural failure, and disease outbreaks were rated as the most prevalent risks affecting ECE schools. These are recurrent issues, which can be addressed more effectively when risks are identified systematically and monitored on an ongoing basis. Conversely, funding interruption was rated relatively low despite high levels of attention given to financial constraints in the Nigerian ECE literature (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Obiweluozor, 2015). This discovery indicates that the greatest obstacles to effective ECE delivery might not just be financial, but also human resource, infrastructure, and health related.

The challenges associated with implementing risk management practices provide further insight into the situation. The key barriers were cited as inadequate staffing, time constraints, lack of formal training and absence of written guidelines. Interestingly, very limited risk management awareness was given the lowest ranking. This indicates that practitioners have a generally good understanding of the importance of risk management, but are not necessarily provided with institutional support, resources, or capacity to effectively manage risk. So, awareness-raising efforts alone might have little effect unless there is a concurrent investment in staffing, staff training and implementation of practical support systems.

The results collectively point to an important but neglected dimension of ECE services in Nigeria. The study suggests that lack of structured and anticipatory risk management is another factor that is impacting effective service delivery, although problems in the sector have often been blamed on lack of funding, pedagogical issues and limited resources. The study provides empirical evidence on risk management practices in ECE schools and illustrates the value of a project risk management approach in ECE studies, making a contribution to a research area that has drawn limited scholarly attention.

Conclusion

The study investigated the status of risk management practices in early childhood education (ECE) schools in South-West Nigeria, the most common operational risks faced by the ECE schools and the challenges that hinder the implementation of risk management practices in the ECE schools. The findings indicate that ECE schools operate in a risk-laden environment, with staffing, infrastructural, and health-related risks emerging as the most prevalent. Although risk management practices are evident within ECE schools, their implementation remains underdeveloped, with risk response emerging as the strongest dimension and risk identification as the weakest. The findings also show that the major limitations in effective risk management are structural such as inadequate staffing, lack of time, lack of formal training, and lack of institutional guidelines.

The study, therefore, emphasized that anticipatory risk management is one of the less explored facets of ECE delivery in Nigeria, which has been least highlighted when issues of educational provision and pedagogical improvement are discussed. The study is adding to the understanding of factors that impact effective delivery of ECE by highlighting this aspect of practice that may be overlooked. Future research employing larger probability-based samples and objective measures of educational delivery outcomes would provide further insight into the relationship between risk management practices and ECE performance.

Recommendations

The results of the study suggest that structured risk management training should be incorporated pre-service and in-service programmes for ECE teachers and care providers, with focus on risk identification and risk monitoring. Practical guidelines should be developed and shared because this was identified as a significant constraint within ECE environments. Strategies should be put in place to address staffing shortages, as inadequate personnel constituted the most significant challenge facing the implementation of risk practices. Additionally, systematic documentation procedures should be developed within ECE schools to document identified risks and related response measures. Supervisory visits should also include regular risk assessment reviews to ensure accountability and improvement in risk management.

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