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Research Article

Traditional Rulers, Families, and Waqf: Their Roles in Promoting Early Childhood Literacy and Numeracy Skills in Gombe and Adamawa States, Nigeria

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Abstract:

Background: Early childhood literacy and numeracy are essential foundations for social cohesion, lifelong learning, and sustainable development. In Northern Nigeria, these skills are shaped not only by formal education systems but also by families, traditional leaders, and religious-based support institutions such as waqf. However, empirical evidence on the specific roles and interactions of these actors remains limited.

Objective: This study examines the contributions of families, traditional leaders, and waqf institutions to early childhood literacy and numeracy development in Gombe and Adamawa States, Nigeria, and identifies key challenges affecting their effectiveness.

Methods: A mixed-methods design was employed, integrating survey data, structured interviews, and documentary analysis to explore institutional, cultural, and religious influences on early childhood education.

Results: The findings indicate that families are the primary source of early cognitive development and value formation. Traditional leaders act as cultural custodians and intermediaries who mobilize community support for educational initiatives. Waqf institutions provide sustained financial support for community learning centres and Qur'anic schools. Nevertheless, these contributions are constrained by poverty, weak waqf institutionalization, and declining family involvement.

Conclusion: The study concludes that early childhood literacy and numeracy outcomes in Northern Nigeria can be improved through a coordinated approach that strengthens collaboration among families, traditional leaders, and waqf institutions to ensure sustainable early childhood education initiatives.

Keywords: Adamawa, Early childhood, Families, Gombe, Literacy, Numeracy, Traditional rulers, Waqf

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that early childhood education is essential to attaining sustained human capital development (Shahid et al., 2023). The fourth Sustainable Development Goal of the UN places a strong emphasis on inclusive, fair, high-quality education, starting with the foundational learning of literacy and numeracy. However, there are still issues with early childhood education in sub-Saharan Africa, such as inadequate funding, restricted access, and cultural barriers (Intan et al., 2025).

These issues are made worse in Northern Nigeria, especially in states like Gombe and Adamawa, by sociocultural factors, poverty, and insecurity (Dirie et al., 2023). However, strong institutions that have traditionally impacted education are woven into the cultural and religious fabric of these communities which include families, the Islamic endowment system (waqf), and traditional rulers (Muhammad, Yakub, Mikail, et al., 2025).

While families continue to be children's primary teachers through the informal transmission of literacy and numeracy in the home setting, traditional rulers serve as stewards of norms and values (Zafar & Jafar, 2025).

Almighty Allah says in Qur'ān 66:6:

"O you who believe, protect yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is people and stones…"

Al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273 CE) comments that protection of families includes teaching them ʿilm (knowledge) and proper upbringing. Parents are the first educators. Qur'anic schools, libraries, and public learning facilities have long been financed by the waqf system, which has its roots in Islamic history (Sulaiman & Muhammad, 2023). These players work together to create an indigenous ecosystem for promoting reading and numeracy that existed before colonial interventions (Musyafa & Fatchurrohman, 2025).

Northern Nigerian children continue to have some of the lowest reading and numeracy rates in the nation, despite both

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governmental and non-governmental initiatives. The potential contributions of families, waqf institutions, and traditional rulers in influencing educational attainment are frequently ignored by formal educational policies (Nwaokugha & Smith-ogizeh, 2025). Traditional rulers' power is underutilized when it comes to rallying support for early childhood initiatives. Families are becoming less able to provide quality early childhood education as a result of poverty and changing social systems (Lessy, 2022). Despite its historical vibrancy, waqf is still a relatively undeveloped modern method of funding education (Kim et al., 2025).

Assessing the role of traditional rulers in advancing early childhood literacy and numeracy in Gombe and Adamawa, looking at the role of families in early childhood literacy and numeracy development, looking into the role of waqf in supporting early childhood education both historically and currently, and analyzing how these three institutions can be incorporated into policy and practice for sustainable educational development are the specific goals (Muhammad, Yakub, Fahmi, et al., 2025). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate how families, waqf, and traditional rulers may all work together to improve early learners' reading and numeracy in Gombe and Adamawa States (Nwaokugha & Odinka, 2025).

By emphasizing local strategies for improving literacy and numeracy, the study advances Islamic studies scholarship and educational policy (Najib, 2024). It gives decision-makers ways to incorporate religious and traditional institutions into official plans. It enhances scholarly conversations about family responsibilities, Islamic social finance, and cultural governance in education. It places a strong emphasis on local actors' ability to influence the destiny of their children (Darmanto et al., 2024).

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

A descriptive survey strategy that included quantitative and qualitative methods was used in this study. Because it allowed the researcher to get information directly from participants and record their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding the role that families, waqf institutions, and traditional rulers play in fostering early childhood literacy and numeracy, the descriptive survey design was deemed appropriate (Zakia et al., 2024). Creswell claims that because descriptive surveys enable methodical data collection, comparison, and interpretation, they are useful for comprehending social phenomena in their natural settings (Sa'ari et al., 2025). In line with the mixed-methods paradigm, which improves the validity and depth of findings, the integration of quantitative and qualitative methodologies offered a more comprehensive knowledge of the study problem (Nabilah & Amalia, 2024).

In order to provide quantifiable insights into household behaviours, literacy levels, and community support systems, the quantitative component of the study centred on organized questionnaires that were given to teachers and families (Abubakar & Rahman, 2021). Conversely, the qualitative component made use of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, enabling a more thorough examination of historical, theological, and cultural viewpoints (Alazemi et al., 2024). This two-pronged approach strengthened the research's dependability and thoroughness by guaranteeing that the study addressed both the numerical patterns and the contextual factors that underlie those trends.

In Gombe and Adamawa States, the study focused on four main groups: families with young children enrolled in early childhood education, early childhood centre teachers, traditional leaders, and Islamic scholars involved in waqf management and education. These organizations were chosen because they are important players in determining how young children in Northern Nigeria learn.

Although the target population as a whole was large, a sample size of 200 respondents 100 from each state was chosen for practical reasons. Because stratified random sampling was used for the sampling, groupings including families, teachers, and local leaders may be represented proportionately. In order to capture differences in literacy and numeracy development driven by geography, socioeconomic position, and access to educational resources, we made sure the sample included both urban and rural settings (Elmahgop et al., 2025).

In particular, the sample included 40 teachers (20 per state), 120 families (60 per state), and 40 key informants, such as Islamic scholars and traditional rulers (20 per state). In addition to taking into account the opinions of educators and cultural leaders, this distribution was made to give families greater weight because they are the main context of early childhood development. Thus, the sampling approach reduced bias and improved representativeness.

Three essential tools were used to collect relevant data in this study, namely structured questionnaires, interview guides, and documentary analysis (Parlina & Avdukic, 2020). Structured questionnaires containing both closed-ended and open-ended items were administered to teachers and families to generate quantitative data on home reading practices, waqf donations, and teacher involvement in literacy and numeracy instruction, while also capturing qualitative insights into the challenges faced by households and educators (Maulana et al., 2025). Semi-structured interview guides were employed to gather in-depth information from Islamic scholars and traditional rulers regarding their roles in early childhood education advocacy, waqf management, and community mobilization, as interviews are particularly effective for exploring perspectives that are difficult to quantify (Najaf & Najafov, 2025). In addition, documentary analysis was conducted using local government education statistics, educational policy reports, and waqf records to provide secondary data that supported and triangulated the primary findings, while also revealing historical patterns of community-based educational support rooted in religious and cultural institutions. To ensure validity, all instruments underwent content validation by experts in Islamic Studies, Education, and Sociology (Ali et al., 2020). A pilot study involving twenty participants outside the main sample was conducted to test the reliability of the questionnaire, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.81, which indicates high internal consistency.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

Table 1: Family Contributions to Early Childhood Literacy (N=200)

Contribution Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)

Storytelling / reading	60	30
Qur'anic recitation	90	45
Home-based number games	25	12.5
Limited or none	25	12.5

The findings indicate that families play an important role in early literacy, but their contributions are largely skewed towards Qur'anic recitation (45%). This is consistent with the Islamic emphasis on early memorization of the Qur'an (taḥfiẓ al-Qur'ān) as a foundation of literacy. Storytelling and reading activities (30%) also reflect indigenous African educational traditions, where folktales, proverbs, and oral narratives serve as vehicles for transmitting moral lessons, language, and cultural identity.

However, structured numeracy activities are underrepresented. Only 12.5% of families engage in home-based number games, while another 12.5% provide little or no contribution. This suggests that while religious literacy is strong, numerical literacy is neglected in many households. Given the importance of numeracy for school readiness, this gap highlights a challenge for policymakers and educators in both states.

From an Islamic perspective, literacy and numeracy should not be separated. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes calculation, measurement, and record keeping:

"…and establish weight in justice and do not make deficient the balance." (Qur'an 55:9)

"…and calculate their number…" (Qur'an 72:28).

Thus, integrating numeracy with Qur'anic literacy could promote balanced early childhood development.

Table 2: Role of Traditional Rulers in Education (N=200)

Role	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Mobilizing community support for schools	70	35
Advocacy for literacy campaigns	50	25
Conflict mediation (school attendance)	40	20
Limited involvement	40	20

The data underscores that traditional rulers are most effective in mobilizing community support for schools (35%), confirming their enduring influence as custodians of cultural authority. In Gombe and Adamawa, emirate councils and traditional chiefs remain important actors in community development, and their involvement legitimizes education initiatives.

A quarter of respondents (25%) highlight their role in advocating for literacy campaigns, suggesting rulers' ability to raise awareness during community gatherings, Friday sermons, and festivals. Their involvement in conflict mediation (20%) shows that traditional rulers also help resolve disputes over school attendance, such as tensions between parents who prioritize Qur'anic schooling versus formal schooling.

Yet, 20% of respondents indicate limited involvement, pointing to gaps in how rulers engage with structured educational reforms. This aligns with findings in Nigerian educational studies that while traditional leaders are symbolic custodians of learning, they rarely engage in curriculum planning, teacher training, or systemic policy design.

From an Islamic viewpoint, leadership is entrusted with ensuring both religious and worldly education. The Qur'an states:

"And We made them leaders guiding by Our command. And We inspired them to do good deeds, establish prayer, and give zakat…" (Qur'an 21:73).

This implies that rulers are duty-bound to promote holistic knowledge religious, moral, and practical.

Table 3: Awareness of Waqf for Education (N=200)

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High (understand concept and practice)	30	15
Moderate	70	35
Low (basic awareness only)	60	30
None	40	20

Awareness of waqf (Islamic endowment) for education is relatively weak in both Gombe and Adamawa. Only 15% of respondents demonstrate high awareness, while 35% show moderate knowledge, meaning they have some familiarity with waqf but limited understanding of its potential application to education. A worrying 50% (low + none) have minimal or no awareness, highlighting a major missed opportunity.

Historically, waqf has been one of the most effective instruments for financing education in Muslim societies from the Nizamiyyah schools of Baghdad to the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, all sustained through waqf endowments. In West Africa, Islamic endowments supported Qur'anic schools, mosques, and scholars.

The decline of waqf awareness today may be linked to colonial disruptions, modernization policies, and weak institutional frameworks in Nigeria. This calls for revitalization through:

- Public campaigns by Islamic scholars and traditional rulers.
- Legal recognition and regulation of waqf in state policies.
- Integration of waqf management into community-based education financing.

The Qur'an repeatedly encourages charitable endowments:

"You will never achieve righteousness until you spend from that which you love." (Qur'an 3:92).

"The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] that sprouts seven ears; in every ear is a hundred grains…" (Qur'an 2:261).

Therefore, reviving waqf for education is not only an economic necessity but also a religious duty.

Synthesis of All Three Tables

The tables collectively reveal a triangular gap:

1. Families are active in Qur'anic literacy but weak in structured numeracy.
2. Traditional rulers mobilize communities but lack direct pedagogical involvement.
3. Waqf awareness is low, undermining financial sustainability for education.

Bridging these gaps requires an integrated framework where families reinforce both literacy and numeracy at home, traditional rulers act as education advocates beyond mobilization, and waqf institutions provide resources to sustain quality early childhood programs.

In keeping with the research concept, a mixed-methods approach was used for the data analysis process.

- Quantitative Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were used to code, tabulate, and analyze the data gathered from questionnaires. For ease of interpretation, the results were displayed in tables. For instance, the percentage of households participating in literacy-related activities at home or funding waqf-based educational programs was calculated using percentages. By emphasizing regional similarities and differences, this method made it easier to compare the Gombe and Adamawa States.
- Qualitative Data Analysis: The information gathered from open-ended questionnaire items and interviews was subjected to thematic analysis. The responses were processed, categorized, and transcribed into topics including "waqf as a financing mechanism for education," "family support in literacy development," and "role of traditional rulers in advocacy." The researcher used Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework to uncover patterns in the narratives, which were then cross-checked with quantitative results to make sure they were reliable and strong (Braun & Clarke, 2021).
- Data Triangulation: The study improved the validity and reliability of the findings by integrating survey data, interview insights, and documentary evidence. Cross-verification of results was made possible using triangulation, which also made sure that cultural narratives and numerical patterns were taken into account when interpreting the data.

The study's conclusions were both broadly applicable and contextually rich due to the combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses, which offered both breadth and depth.

3.2 Discussion

The findings presented in Tables 1–3 provide comprehensive evidence that early childhood literacy and numeracy development in Gombe and Adamawa States is shaped by the interrelated, yet unevenly coordinated, roles of families, traditional rulers, and waqf institutions. Families emerge as the most immediate and influential agents of early learning, particularly through Qur'anic recitation, oral storytelling, and the transmission of moral and religious values within the household. These practices contribute significantly to early literacy development; however, the relatively low level of engagement in structured numeracy activities suggests that numerical competencies receive less attention during the formative years. This imbalance may have long-term implications for children's school readiness and subsequent academic performance, especially in formal education settings where numeracy skills are foundational.

Traditional rulers continue to hold considerable sociocultural authority and legitimacy within their communities, enabling them to mobilize collective support for educational initiatives, advocate for literacy campaigns, and mediate conflicts related to school participation. Their influence positions them as strategic intermediaries between local communities and government institutions. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that their involvement in early childhood education remains largely informal and symbolic, with limited participation in curriculum development, teacher training, or systematic policy implementation. This underutilization of traditional leadership structures represents a missed opportunity to strengthen community-based educational governance.

In contrast, waqf institutions, despite their historically central role in financing education across Muslim societies, currently exhibit limited visibility and effectiveness in supporting early childhood education in the study areas. The low level of public awareness and weak institutional frameworks surrounding waqf constrain its potential to serve as a sustainable source of educational funding. When considered collectively, the results reveal a fragmented support system in which families, traditional rulers, and waqf institutions operate in parallel rather than through coordinated collaboration. Such fragmentation limits the overall impact of early childhood literacy and numeracy initiatives. Therefore, the findings underscore the importance of developing an integrated framework that aligns family-based learning practices, leverages the sociocultural authority of traditional rulers, and revitalizes waqf as a sustainable financing mechanism to enhance early childhood education outcomes in Northern Nigeria.

3.2.1 Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for early childhood education policy and practice in Northern Nigeria. First, the strong involvement of families in early literacy activities, particularly through Qur'anic recitation and oral traditions, indicates that home-based learning environments already provide a culturally grounded foundation for literacy development. However, the limited attention given to structured numeracy activities suggests a critical need to broaden family engagement beyond religious literacy to include basic numerical skills that are essential for school readiness. This implies that early childhood education

interventions should be designed to integrate numeracy concepts into existing religious and cultural practices, thereby ensuring continuity between home-based learning and formal schooling. Second, the continued sociocultural authority of traditional rulers highlights their potential role as strategic partners in early childhood education governance. Their capacity to mobilize communities, legitimize educational initiatives, and mediate social barriers to school participation suggests that policy frameworks which formally incorporate traditional leadership structures could enhance community ownership and sustainability of early childhood programs. Third, the low level of awareness and weak institutionalization of waqf for educational purposes underscores the need for systematic reforms in Islamic social finance mechanisms. Strengthening waqf governance, legal recognition, and public awareness could provide a sustainable funding base for early childhood education, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Collectively, these implications point to the necessity of an integrated, context-sensitive approach that aligns family practices, traditional leadership, and waqf-based financing within broader national and subnational early childhood education strategies.

3.2.2 Research Contribution

This study makes several important contributions to the existing literature on early childhood education, Islamic social finance, and community-based educational governance. Conceptually, the study advances a locally grounded framework that positions families, traditional rulers, and waqf institutions as an interconnected ecosystem supporting early childhood literacy and numeracy development. By integrating sociocultural authority, religious philanthropy, and household-level learning practices, the study extends prevailing early childhood education models that often prioritize formal schooling while overlooking indigenous and faith-based actors. Empirically, the research provides context-specific evidence from Gombe and Adamawa States, offering rare data on how traditional leadership structures and waqf institutions influence early learning outcomes in Northern Nigeria. This empirical focus fills a significant gap in the literature, where studies on early childhood education in sub-Saharan Africa have largely underrepresented the role of Islamic institutions and traditional governance systems. Practically, the findings contribute to policy and program design by demonstrating how community-based and faith-informed mechanisms can complement state-led education initiatives. The study therefore offers a transferable analytical lens for scholars and policymakers seeking to design culturally responsive, financially sustainable, and socially legitimate early childhood education interventions in similar socio-religious contexts.

3.2.3 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted in only two states—Gombe and Adamawa—which may limit the generalizability of the results to other regions of Northern Nigeria with different socio-cultural, economic, and educational contexts. Second, although a mixed-methods approach was employed, the quantitative data relied primarily on self-reported responses from families and educators, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or recall limitations. Third, the analysis of waqf institutions was constrained by limited availability and accessibility of formal records, reflecting the broader challenge of weak institutionalization of waqf in the study area. In addition, the involvement of traditional rulers was examined mainly from a community and advocacy perspective, without direct measurement of their impact on learning outcomes or pedagogical processes. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution and highlight the need for further research employing broader geographical coverage, longitudinal designs, and more robust institutional data to deepen understanding the integrated roles of families, traditional rulers, and waqf in early childhood education.

3.2.4 Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen early childhood literacy and numeracy development in Northern Nigeria. First, family-based early learning programs should be reinforced by promoting balanced literacy and numeracy activities at home, including storytelling, reading practices, and age-appropriate numeracy games that can be integrated with religious and cultural routines. Second, traditional rulers should be more formally involved in early childhood education governance by incorporating them into local education monitoring structures and community-based literacy initiatives, thereby leveraging their sociocultural authority to enhance participation and compliance. Third, waqf institutions require revitalization through clearer legal frameworks, improved governance mechanisms, and increased public awareness to enable their effective use as sustainable financing instruments for early childhood education. In addition, stronger policy synergy between government agencies, religious institutions, and community actors is essential to ensure coordinated implementation of early childhood education programs. Future initiatives should also prioritize awareness campaigns that highlight the strategic role of waqf and traditional institutions in supporting inclusive and sustainable early childhood education.

4. CONCLUSION

The study leads to the conclusion that reviving the old ecosystem of families, rulers, and waqf can greatly improve early childhood reading and numeracy outcomes in Gombe and Adamawa States. Families serve as the cornerstone of early education, while waqf provides long-term funding and rulers exercise authority and mobilization. Long-term educational and developmental benefits will result from policies that integrate these players with formal education.

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CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

This study contributes to the field of early childhood education by providing an integrated analysis of the roles of families, traditional rulers, and waqf institutions in promoting early literacy and numeracy in Northern Nigeria. Conceptually, the study advances a community-based and faith-informed framework that extends conventional early childhood education models by incorporating indigenous governance structures and Islamic social finance mechanisms. Empirically, it offers context-specific evidence from Gombe and Adamawa States, addressing a significant gap in the literature on early childhood education in sub-Saharan Africa where the contributions of traditional leadership and waqf institutions remain underexplored. Methodologically, the use of a mixed-methods approach enhances the robustness of the findings by triangulating survey data, interview insights, and documentary analysis. Practically, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and

community leaders by demonstrating how family-based learning practices, traditional authority, and waqf-based financing can be strategically aligned to improve the sustainability and effectiveness of early childhood education initiatives.

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