International Journal of Education, Culture, and Society

e-ISSN : 3024-8973
p-ISSN : 3024-8981

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/IJECS.v4i3.10149

Educational Social Contract and Curriculum Reform: A Systematic Review of Epistemic, Pedagogical, and Language Gaps in Early Childhood Education

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Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Jun 1, 2026	Aug 29, 2026	Sep 10, 2026	Sep 15, 2026

Abstract

Curriculum design is often treated as a technical or administrative undertaking, although it also expresses the state's commitments under the educational social contract. This systematic review examines whether curriculum design in Nigeria fulfils the state's foundational educational obligations, with particular attention to early childhood education from birth to age eight. Drawing on social contract theory, the review considers how curriculum and language choices shape young learners' cognitive development, ownership of knowledge, and sense of belonging within the education system. A systematic search of seven academic databases identified 61 sources. Following PRISMA-guided screening, 40 sources were included in the analytical synthesis, while 21 informed the theoretical and foundational framework. Five themes emerged: the gap between policy declarations and classroom practice; the enduring influence of colonial hierarchies on the recognition of legitimate knowledge; the enabling or constraining effects of language choices on early learning; tensions between pedagogies that promote independent thinking and those centred on memorisation; and the interdependence of curriculum reform, assessment, teacher preparation, and language policy. The synthesis indicates

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that Nigeria's curriculum challenges are not merely administrative but are also philosophical and epistemic. Meaningful reform therefore requires reconsideration of which knowledge systems, languages, and pedagogical practices are legitimised within education rather than policy revision alone. Early childhood settings constitute critical sites for this transformation because the epistemic dispositions and learning practices established during this period influence subsequent educational experiences. By connecting curriculum reform with the educational social contract, the review contributes an integrated framework for advancing epistemic justice, pedagogical coherence, and more inclusive early childhood education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Curriculum Reform; Early Childhood Education; Educational Social Contract; Epistemic Justice; Nigeria

Introduction

The relationship between a state and its citizens is nowhere more consequential and nowhere more philosophically revealing than in the domain of education. Education is not merely a service delivered by governments alongside health care or infrastructure, it is a foundational moral commitment to the formation of human beings and, by extension, to the kind of society a nation intends to become. This commitment is especially consequential during the early years of life. What children encounter, how they are taught, and which knowledge is placed before them in the earliest stages of schooling shape their lifelong relationship to learning, their sense of intellectual worth, and their capacity to think independently. In Nigeria, as in every modern state, this fundamental commitment is made concrete through curriculum design the deliberate selection, sequencing, and legitimation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed worthy of transmission to successive generations of learners.

The concept of a social contract, classically elaborated by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, describes an implicit or explicit agreement underpinning legitimate political authority. Scholars in educational philosophy have extended this concept to the domain of education, arguing that the relationship between the state and learners constitutes an educational social contract (Toukan, & Tawil, 2024; Desjardins, Torres, & Wiksten, 2023; Ashwin, 2022), a framework of reciprocal obligations in which the state commits to equipping citizens with the knowledge, skills, values, and

opportunities necessary for meaningful participation in social, economic, and civic life. In turn, learners are not merely passive beneficiaries; they bear a concrete civic responsibility to apply their learning toward the advancement of society, contribute productively to national development, uphold democratic and ethical values, and actively participate in the social, economic, and political growth of the nation (Sardoc, 2025; Tan, 2024; Locatelli, 2024; Toukan, & Tawil, 2024). This commitment is especially critical in early childhood education, where the first experiences of schooling establish patterns in how children understand themselves as learners and whether they see their own thinking as valued.

In Nigeria, the content and fulfillment of this educational social contract have been shaped by colonial inheritance, post-independence nation-building ambitions, persistent economic pressures, and the tensions between globally circulating educational practices and locally rooted epistemological traditions (Jacob, Amiara, Omeje, & Mbam, 2024; Ignatius, 2022; Oluwalola, Olaoluwa, & Ojo, 2022). Despite successive revisions of the National Policy on Education, most recently in 2013, the deeper philosophical commitments embedded in Nigerian curriculum design remain under-examined in explicit terms. This review argues that such an examination is not merely academically desirable but politically urgent: the gap between what Nigeria's educational policies promise and what its curriculum delivers particularly in the formative years of early childhood education constitutes a systemic and ongoing breach of the educational social contract. When young children encounter curricula built on colonial knowledge hierarchies, taught in languages disconnected from their home lives, and structured around memorization rather than thinking, the state fails in its most fundamental obligation to these youngest citizens.

The significance of this review extends beyond Nigeria. As countries across sub-Saharan Africa and the wider Global South grapple with inherited colonial educational architectures, the Nigerian case offers important lessons about the possibilities and challenges of philosophical curriculum reform in post-colonial environments (Ofori, Frempong, Olateju, & Ifenatuora, 2024; Sapto, et al. 2022), particularly in the early years where children's foundational relationships to learning are established.

Literature Review

Social Contract Theory and Its Educational Extensions

The classical social contract tradition provides the foundational philosophical vocabulary for this review. Thomas Hobbes conceived of the social contract as a rational agreement to surrender certain freedoms to a sovereign authority in exchange for security. John Locke extended this to include the protection of natural rights, while Jean Jacque Rousseau emphasized the democratic legitimacy conferred by the general will. These formulations share a common structure: the relationship between individuals and political institutions is understood as reciprocally obligatory, not merely hierarchically authoritative.

The extension of social contract theory to education was systematically developed by Amy Gutmann in the 1980s (Sardoc, 2025), who argued that democratic education requires the state to distribute educational opportunity in ways that enable future citizens to participate meaningfully in collective self-governance. John Rawls provided further theoretical infrastructure, his difference principle states that social and economic inequalities are only justified if they benefit the least advantaged members of society, has been widely applied to educational distribution (Locatelli, 2024; Heckman, Letkiewicz, & Kim, 2023; D'Olimpio, 2019; Essuman, 2019).

The concept of an educational social contract draws directly on the social contract tradition, but this work adds a critical dimension, epistemic obligation. This is the duty owed by the state to its citizens to ensure that education does not simply transfer information, but engages critically with the nature, sources, and limits of the knowledge it transmits. On this view, the state owes its citizens not just access to education, but education that is inclusive and genuinely reflective of the diverse knowledge systems that shape society. It is important to be clear about what this contract entails and what it does not. The educational social contract is not a bare transaction in which the state provides schooling and citizens become productive members of society. It is, more fundamentally, a commitment by the state to take seriously the epistemic conditions of its citizens, to ensure that learners are equipped not only with knowledge and skills, but with critically engaged understanding of the world they inhabit and the society they are called to shape. The distinction matters. A transactional model produces functional participants in an existing order; a genuinely contractual model produces something more demanding and more valuable: citizens who are not only skilled and informed, but critically aware and ethically

engaged, individuals who can think independently, act responsibly, question assumptions, and participate thoughtfully in shaping the world around them. This is the educational ideal to which the social contract, properly understood, commits the state. The consequences of failing this commitment extend well beyond the classroom. It undermines the very conditions necessary for a healthy, functioning, and just society. These consequences are especially profound when failures occur during the early years, when children's intellectual foundations and sense of agency are being formed.

Curriculum is the institutional mechanism (Savage, 2017) through which the state's epistemic obligation is fulfilled. In other words, if the state owes citizens a critically engaged education, the curriculum is where that obligation becomes concrete. The implications of this educational social contract are most visible in the design of curriculum. Curriculum therefore becomes the primary institutional mechanism through which the state fulfills, or fails to fulfill, its epistemic responsibilities. What is included, excluded, emphasized, or marginalized in the curriculum determines whether learners encounter knowledge as fixed information to be absorbed or as a body of ideas that can be examined, questioned, and understood in relation to the society they inhabit.

When curriculum is framed as a social contract mechanism, it moves beyond seeing it as a delivery mechanism for skills and information (Tan, 2024). Instead, curriculum becomes a formal agreement between the state and its citizens; the state promises to prepare individuals not just for employment or examination, but for independent life itself. The goal is to produce citizens who are skilled and informed, but also critically aware and ethically engaged, making a person a citizen rather than merely a subject. Critical awareness means the ability to interrogate the world, to ask not just what is true but why it is presented as true, and who benefits from that presentation. Ethical engagement means the capacity to care about one's society and to act within it from a sense of responsibility rather than mere compliance. Both form the basis of what political theorists call active citizenship. A curriculum fulfilling its social contract obligation actively cultivates these capacities, rather than accidentally producing them in some learners and suppressing them in others. In early childhood education specifically, curriculum shapes the first intellectual habits and the first experiences of belonging or not belonging in a learning setting. The philosophical orientation of early childhood curriculum is therefore foundational to the entire educational contract.

Nigerian Curriculum: Historical Foundations and Colonial Legacies

Prior to colonial intervention, education in Nigerian societies was not the absence of formal knowledge transmission but a different form of it, organized through apprenticeship systems, oral traditions, and community institutions that integrated moral development, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity into coherent epistemological frameworks. Colonial disruption was therefore not simply an administrative reorganization of schooling but an epistemic displacement: the systematic delegitimization of indigenous knowledge traditions in favour of a Western framework presented as universal. As Ukeje and Aisiku (2022) document, British colonial education, formalized from the 1880s onwards, was designed not to cultivate autonomous citizens but to produce literate clerks capable of supporting colonial governance. Fafunwa (1974) identifies with precision what this substitution entailed: a curriculum organized around standardized subjects, formal examinations, and Western intellectual traditions that structured knowledge itself as a hierarchy, Western knowledge as scientific and universal, African knowledge as cultural and supplementary. This hierarchy was not incidental to the colonial curriculum, it was its epistemological core, and it is precisely this hierarchy that constitutes the deepest structural violation of the epistemic obligation the social contract framework demands.

What makes the post-independence period significant is not that it failed to produce change, but that the change it produced was largely symbolic rather than structural. Ofobuike (2025) argues that although Nigerian governments after independence embraced the rhetoric of national development and cultural identity, post-independence reforms focused on administrative expansion and the symbolic localization of educational materials, replacing colonial imagery with national imagery while leaving the underlying epistemological hierarchy intact. A curriculum that substitutes Nigerian historical figures for British ones but continues to organize knowledge within the same Western epistemological framework has not fulfilled the state's epistemic obligation; it has performed its fulfillment while deferring its substance. The social contract, in this review, was not reformed at independence; it was restated in new language.

The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), with its stated goals of democratic society, social equality, and the cultivation of critically engaged citizens, is philosophically consonant with the educational social contract as defined in this review. Yet, as Jacob and Samuel (2020) and Joel, Ogi, and Ikpe (2019) demonstrate, these

commitments exist primarily at the level of formal declaration. Assessment systems continue to privilege standardized knowledge reproduction (Au, 2022); curriculum structures continue to reflect the examination-oriented, decontextualized model inherited from colonial schooling, and the epistemological hierarchy that colonial education installed remains largely operative. The consequence is not simply educational underperformance but a sustained failure of the epistemic social contract: the Nigerian state has repeatedly declared its commitment to producing critically engaged citizens while the curriculum through which that commitment must be fulfilled has not been structurally reformed to meet it. This failure is most consequential in early childhood settings, where children's earliest encounters with formal schooling establish lifelong patterns in how they experience their own thinking and their place in educational institutions.

Decolonial Framework for Curriculum Reform

The limitations of post-independence curriculum reform in Nigeria must be situated within broader scholarly debates on the decolonization of knowledge systems in education. Decolonial scholars argue that the end of formal colonial rule did not necessarily dismantle the epistemological hierarchies established during colonialism. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) observes, colonial power often persists through the continued privileging of Western epistemic frameworks in curriculum design, assessment structures, and pedagogical practices long after political independence. Within this perspective, the persistence of colonial logics in Nigerian education is not anomalous but structurally predictable. Constitutional independence altered the political status of the state, but it did not automatically reconfigure the epistemic foundations upon which formal education had been constructed. Consequently, many post-independence reforms have operated within curricular structures whose underlying assumptions about legitimate knowledge remain largely inherited from colonial educational models (Spindelman, & Crouch, 2025).

Within the literature on curriculum decolonization, scholars emphasize that meaningful reform involves more than the incorporation of indigenous or African content into existing curricular frameworks (Ntloedibe, 2025; Sefa Dei, & Cacciavillani, 2024; Dlamini, 2023). Rather, decolonization requires a critical interrogation of the epistemic criteria through which knowledge is classified, validated, and transmitted within educational institutions. This involves questioning what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose intellectual traditions are recognized as authoritative, and which historical experiences

shape curricular narratives. Importantly, this line of scholarship does not advocate the rejection of non-local or Western knowledge systems. Instead, it calls for the development of epistemically plural or multi-perspectival curricula in which diverse knowledge traditions coexist within a more balanced intellectual framework. Applied to the Nigerian situation, this perspective suggests that curriculum reform must address not only issues of representation but also the deeper epistemological assumptions that structure knowledge production and validation within the educational system. In other words, curriculum reform should not only include more diverse content, but also rethink the fundamental ideas about what knowledge is and who gets to define it.

The significance of this debate becomes clearer when curriculum is understood as a central mechanism through which the state fulfills its educational responsibilities to citizens. Curriculum is not a neutral assemblage of subjects and content; it is a structured representation of the knowledge that a society considers valuable and worthy of transmission to future generations (Zajda, 2024; Deng, 2022). As such, it encodes normative assumptions about intellectual authority, social priorities, and the kinds of citizens that the education system seeks to cultivate. When interpreted through the framework of the educational social contract, the evaluation of a curriculum therefore extends beyond questions of access or institutional provision. The central issue becomes whether the knowledge structures embedded within the curriculum equip learners with the intellectual resources necessary for critical engagement with their social, political, and cultural environments. In this sense, curriculum design functions as a key site where the epistemic obligations of the state are either realized or undermined. This function is particularly urgent in early childhood education, where the foundations of children's intellectual agency are established.

Viewed against this conceptual background, the historical persistence of colonial curricular structures in Nigeria raises significant concerns. The colonial foundations of Nigerian schooling established epistemological hierarchies that privileged Western intellectual traditions while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems (Ajayi, & Ashir, 2024). Although successive educational reforms have acknowledged these historical legacies, much of the response has remained at the level of rhetorical commitment rather than structural transformation. As a result, scholars argue that colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary education systems. According to Nageri (2025) and Noutchie, (2025), educational structures still reflect colonial knowledge systems, noting that the organization

of curriculum content, assessment systems, and pedagogical priorities continues to reflect many of the epistemic assumptions inherited from colonial education. The consequence is a persistent tension between the normative aspirations articulated in educational policy and the institutional realities of curriculum practice. From the perspective of the educational social contract, this gap suggests that the epistemic commitments associated with democratic citizenship and inclusive knowledge production remain only partially realized within the contemporary Nigerian curriculum, particularly in early childhood education where foundational intellectual patterns are being formed.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review design guided by the PRISMA framework (Agrawal et al., 2024) and incorporates thematic synthesis following Naeem et al. (2023), allowing inductive generation of analytical themes across disciplinary traditions encompassing social contract theory, decolonial philosophy, critical pedagogy, and epistemic justice. No primary data were collected or presented.

Search Strategy and Screening

A systematic search was conducted across JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, African Journals Online, Scopus, PhilPapers, and SABINET African Journals for peer-reviewed literature published between 2017 and 2026. Search terms were constructed in three clusters combining subject descriptors (curriculum design, decolonization, epistemic justice, indigenous knowledge, critical pedagogy, early childhood education), yielding 61 sources meeting inclusion criteria.

Source Classification

Of the 61 retained sources, 40 constitute the core analytical body directly addressing curriculum design, educational policy, and epistemic frameworks in Nigerian and analogous post-colonial Nigerian situations, and were subjected to full thematic synthesis. The remaining 21 sources serve a theoretical and contextual framing function, providing the social contract foundations, decolonial infrastructure, and broader curriculum theory necessary for situating the analytical findings. One pre-2017 source was retained by

exception, Fafunwa (1974), whose account of colonial curriculum displacement in Nigeria remains the definitive primary source on the subject.

Thematic Synthesis

Data from the 40 core analytical sources were extracted using a structured framework capturing theoretical orientation, geographical location, primary argument, and epistemological stance. Analysis followed the three-stage thematic synthesis process of Naeem et al. (2023): line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes, and interpretive generation of analytical themes. Five themes emerged: the policy-curriculum gap in Nigerian education; the persistence of colonial epistemological hierarchies; the epistemic consequences of language policy; tensions between pedagogical ideals and transmission-oriented practice; and the interdependence of curriculum, assessment, teacher education, and language reform.

Discussion

Implications for Nigerian Education and Early Childhood Curriculum

The current Nigerian curriculum design across different levels of education does not fulfill the epistemic obligations that the educational social contract places on the state (Harper & Saltmarsh, 2024; Heckman et al., 2023; Levine & Stevens, 2022). This finding has implications that extend beyond curriculum content to the philosophical foundations upon which educational reform in Nigeria has repeatedly been attempted and consistently fallen short. The implications are especially significant for early childhood education (birth–8 years), the foundational period in which children's intellectual habits, sense of belonging in learning settings, and relationship to their own thinking are established. What occurs in early childhood curriculum is not incidental to the educational social contract; it is foundational to it.

The most significant implication concerns the distinction between symbolic and structural reform in curriculum design, which this review identifies as the defining characteristic of Nigeria's curriculum problem and the primary mechanism through which the educational social contract has been repeatedly breached. Post-independence curriculum revisions have operated predominantly at the symbolic level, revising policy language, expanding institutional provision, and localizing surface content without

interrogating the epistemological framework that organizes what is taught, how knowledge is validated, whose intellectual traditions are accorded authority within the curriculum, and the type of individuals it wants to produce (Luckett & Shay, 2020; Luckett, 2019; Maine & Wagner, 2021). This pattern produces a paradox the literature has noted: Nigerian educational policy has grown progressively more ambitious in its democratic and citizenship commitments while the curriculum epistemology through which those commitments must be realized has remained structurally static (Peurach et al., 2019; Mukminin et al., 2019). The social contract framework developed in this review renders that paradox clear. A state fulfills its epistemic obligation not by declaring its commitment to producing critically engaged, democratically capable citizens but by constructing the epistemological conditions under which such citizens can actually be formed (Harper & Saltmarsh, 2024; Levine & Stevens, 2022). Symbolic reform satisfies the declarative dimension of the contract while leaving its substantive dimension unfulfilled (Kiraz & Yılmaz-Yıldız, 2025; Choirunnisa & Ibrahim, 2025). It is precisely this gap between declaration and epistemological substance that constitutes the systemic breach this review has identified, and it is precisely this gap that no amount of policy revision, without accompanying epistemological restructuring, can close. In early childhood classrooms, where children are learning to be students and forming first impressions of their own intellectual capacity, symbolic reform is particularly damaging because it allows the deep hierarchies to continue operating in the spaces where young children form their foundational beliefs about learning.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) theorization of coloniality as a structural rather than merely historical condition locates the problem with precision: the epistemological hierarchies embedded in Nigerian curriculum are not residual colonial content removable through textbook revision; they are organizing principles of the knowledge framework itself (Mbah & Ezegwu, 2024; Okeke & Ramaila, 2025; Ajani, 2020). Meaningful reform therefore requires genuine and deliberate reconstruction rather than the continued supplementation of a Western epistemological core with African content at its margins (Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025; Teasley & Butler, 2020; Brissett, 2020). In early childhood education specifically, this reconstruction is urgent because the first years of schooling shape whether children will come to see their own thinking as valuable, whether they will trust their own intellectual agency, and whether they will understand school as a place where their own ways of knowing belong.

The fulfillment of Nigeria's educational social contract requires simultaneous action at three interdependent levels. First, the epistemological reconstruction of the curriculum framework through an epistemically inclusive review process that interrogates foundational assumptions about legitimate knowledge, rather than merely adding indigenous content to an unreformed epistemological structure (Druker-Ibanez & Caceres-Jensen, 2022; Shabalala, 2025; Seleke & Teis, 2025). This involves curriculum reform that rethinks the whole knowledge system behind education, not just adds indigenous topics to a curriculum that still treats Western knowledge as the main authority (Eboreime et al., 2026; Ewuoso & Ogundiran, 2025). In early childhood settings, this means establishing curricula that position children's home languages, community knowledge, and local ways of solving problems as intellectually legitimate from the beginning of schooling. Second, the radical reform of assessment systems to reward critical engagement and independent intellectual judgment rather than the reproduction of authorized knowledge (Marabini, 2022; Ongesa, 2020). Third, the transformation of teacher education to develop teachers who question and understand the knowledge they teach as a core professional competency rather than a peripheral concern (Kiraz & Yılmaz-Yıldız, 2025; Choirunnisa & Ibrahim, 2025). These are not sequential priorities or optional interventions. They are interdependent conditions, because a reconstructed curriculum without reformed assessment will be taught to the examination, reformed assessment without transformed teacher education will produce resistance rather than engagement, and all three will remain structurally inaccessible to the majority of Nigerian learners (Nwigwe, 2026; Peurach et al., 2019), particularly in early childhood settings where language policy and teacher preparation directly shape whether young children can fully participate in their own learning.

Language policy represents one of the most consequential dimensions of curriculum as a social contract in Nigeria, especially in early childhood education. It appears as ambitious declaration at the policy level but with structural inadequacy at the level of implementation and epistemological foundation (Ojose, 2019; Kazeem & Suleiman, 2020). Nigeria's National Language Policy stipulates that early education should use the mother tongue or local language where possible, with a gradual transition to English as a medium of instruction in later years. On its face, this appears to represent a meaningful concession to Nigeria's extraordinary linguistic diversity, acknowledging that learning proceeds most effectively when conducted in a language the learner commands with fluency and conceptual depth (Benson et al., 2021; Gupta, 2023). In practice, however, the policy

functions at a surface level that does not discharge the epistemic obligation it implicitly invokes.

The problem is not simply the timing of the transition to English. It is that the policy's underlying assumption treats language as a medium of delivery rather than as a medium of thought, a distinction that is philosophically critical (Benson et al., 2021; Chikwaka-Mpezeni & Chigwedere, 2025). Language is not a neutral vehicle through which pre-formed knowledge is transmitted; it is the cognitive infrastructure through which knowledge is constructed, interrogated, and related to lived experience (Gupta, 2023; Ojose, 2019). When the language of instruction is structurally disconnected from the language in which learners think, reason, and make meaning of their social world, the curriculum does not merely become harder to access; it becomes epistemically alienating (Chikwaka-Mpezeni & Chigwedere, 2025; Ewuoso & Ogundiran, 2025). Learners are required to encounter, process, and reproduce knowledge in a linguistic framework that bears limited relation to the conceptual world they inhabit outside the classroom. This is not a pedagogical inconvenience; it is a structural form of epistemic exclusion that compounds the epistemological marginalization already produced by colonial knowledge hierarchies (Ajani, 2020; Mbah & Ezegwu, 2024; Eboreime et al., 2026). The result is what this review characterizes as a doubly stratified breach of the social contract: learners are simultaneously denied epistemically inclusive curriculum content and the linguistic conditions necessary for genuine intellectual engagement with whatever content the curriculum does provide (Nwigwe, 2026; Seleke & Teis, 2025). In early childhood, when children's foundational relationship to language and learning is being formed, the linguistic disconnection between home and school represents a breach of the social contract at its most foundational point.

The question of how language policy can be instrumentalized to actually achieve the social contract of curriculum, rather than merely gesturing toward it, requires moving beyond the surface framework of the current policy in three interconnected directions. First, the policy must reconceptualize language not as a transitional medium to be phased out in favour of English but as a permanent cognitive resource to be developed and sustained throughout the educational process (Benson et al., 2021; Kazeem & Suleiman, 2020). This does not require the elimination of English from the curriculum; English proficiency remains a legitimate and important educational goal in the Nigerian setting (Gupta, 2023; Ojose, 2019). It requires, rather, the construction of an additive multilingual

framework in which Nigerian languages are developed as full academic languages capable of sustaining rigorous intellectual inquiry, rather than being treated as temporary scaffolding to be removed once English instruction begins (Benson et al., 2021; Chikwaka-Mpezeni & Chigwedere, 2025). An additive multilingual curriculum is one in which learners develop genuine cognitive fluency in multiple languages simultaneously, with each language accorded equal pedagogical legitimacy and used for substantive intellectual work rather than merely for communicative transition (Kazeem & Suleiman, 2020; Gupta, 2023). This approach is especially important in early childhood, where the use of home language conveys to young children that their linguistic and cultural inheritances are intellectually worthy.

Pedagogical practice must be understood as a dimension of curriculum reform rather than a separate concern, because the mode of knowledge transmission is inseparable from the epistemic obligations the social contract places on the state (Kiraz & Yılmaz-Yıldız, 2025; Teasley & Butler, 2020). A curriculum cannot fulfill its contractual commitment to producing critically engaged, intellectually autonomous citizens if the pedagogical practices through which it is enacted are organized around opposite principles (Marabini, 2022; Ongesa, 2020). The current dominant mode in which the teacher transmits authorized knowledge, the learner receives and reproduces it, and the examination measures the outcome of that reproduction is not a neutral delivery mechanism; it is the pedagogical expression of the same colonial epistemological hierarchy this review has identified as the structural root of Nigeria's curriculum problem (Brissett, 2020; Ajani, 2020; Okeke & Ramaila, 2025). Colonial education was designed to produce compliant auxiliaries, not critical citizens, and the pedagogical practices it institutionalized transmission, memorization, and examination compliance are epistemologically consistent with that original purpose (Mbah & Ezegwu, 2024; Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025). When those practices persist within a curriculum that now declares democratic and citizenship goals, they do not simply create an implementation gap; they create a philosophical contradiction at the heart of Nigeria's educational social contract: the simultaneous declaration of epistemic obligation and the institutional reproduction of its negation (Luckett & Shay, 2020; Luckett, 2019; Maine & Wagner, 2021). In early childhood classrooms, where children are learning to be students and forming first impressions of their own intellectual capacity, transmission-based pedagogy conveys the message that thinking is something done by others, not by them.

Resolving this contradiction requires recognizing that pedagogical transformation and curriculum decolonization are not sequential reforms but dimensions of a single philosophical reorientation (Druker-Ibanez & Caceres-Jensen, 2022; Shabalala, 2025). The epistemic obligation of the social contract is discharged not when a reformed curriculum is written into policy but when learners encounter knowledge as something to be interrogated and related to their own social realities, and that encounter is only possible when the pedagogy through which curriculum is enacted positions learners as active epistemic agents rather than passive recipients (Marabini, 2022; Ongesa, 2020; Brissett, 2020). This means that teacher education, classroom practice, and assessment design must be reconceived in direct alignment with the epistemically plural, critically oriented curriculum that the social contract demands (Choirunnisa & Ibrahim, 2025; Kiraz & Yılmaz-Yıldız, 2025; Nwigwe, 2026). The fulfillment of Nigeria's educational social contract therefore requires that the philosophical reorientation this review calls for penetrates not only the content and organization of the curriculum but the epistemic relationship between teacher, learner, and knowledge that pedagogical practice enacts every day in every classroom (Teasley & Butler, 2020; Ewuoso & Ogundiran, 2025; Eboreime et al., 2026). This is particularly true in early childhood education, where the habits of intellectual engagement including whether children learn to trust their own thinking or to wait passively for authoritative answers are being formed.

Conclusion

This review examined Nigerian curriculum design as an expression of the educational social contract, evaluating whether it fulfills the epistemic obligations the contract places on the state. The central finding is that it does not. This failure is structural, rooted in colonial epistemological hierarchies that successive reforms have acknowledged rhetorically but transformed only superficially. From the colonial displacement and through the symbolic post-independence reforms, to the persistent policy-practice gap, the evidence is consistent: the Nigerian state has repeatedly declared its commitment to producing critically engaged citizens while maintaining curriculum structures that systematically undermine the conditions necessary for that commitment to be realized. This failure is most consequential in early childhood education, where curriculum choices shape children's foundational relationship to learning and their sense of intellectual agency.

The review introduces epistemic obligation as a distinct and evaluable dimension of the state's educational responsibilities and demonstrates that the policy-curriculum gap is philosophical rather than administrative. Meaningful reform requires epistemically plural curricula, aligned language policy, and transformed pedagogical practice. Until the epistemological foundations of the curriculum are subjected to the same reform ambition applied to its surface content, fulfillment of Nigeria's educational social contract particularly its commitment to young learners will remain deferred.

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