



## Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Community Development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

The study examined the influence of early childhood education on sustainable community development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Two objectives and two research questions, respectively, guided the study. The population of the study was 291, comprising 124 male and 167 female teachers in early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government of Rivers State. The study used simple random sampling to select a sample of 178 respondents. The instrument for data collection was a researcher-made questionnaire with a reliability index of 0.86. The study used mean and standard deviation for data analysis. The findings revealed that the number of early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government Area is somewhat sufficient, but more centres would be appreciated, especially for more sustainable community development, as more students will likely be admitted. It was concluded that more centres would be appreciated for better sustainable community development; more students will be admitted if there are more early childhood education centres, as most students complain that the early childhood centres available in their community are very far from their residences. It was therefore recommended, among others, that emphasis on the establishment of more early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government Area should be de-emphasised; books and practical activities materials should be made available to various education centres.

**Keywords:** Early, Childhood Education, Sustainable, Community Development, Rivers State

### Introduction

Early childhood education as an organized learning and care provided centers for children from birth to around eight years of age and above is gradually gaining global recognition and also increasingly recognized as a foundation for lifelong learning and social equity. Beyond its direct benefits for children, early childhood education has significant implications for women particularly mothers, caregivers, and educators by enabling greater economic participation, educational advancement, and leadership opportunities. In early childhood, education is an essential tool to get access to and move society towards sustainability (McKeown et al., 2002), significant experiments on one's possibilities for participation, and social education (Reunamo & Suomela, 2013).

Early childhood education serves as a start point of lifelong learning, gender identification, learning for change and establishing community networks and arenas as it intersects with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), by laying social and cognitive foundations for lifelong learning and community participation, (Mardomi & Mardomi, 2023). Children are potential agents for positive change affecting their parents' thinking and practices to be more sustainable through inter-generational learning (Daries et al. 2009).

In recent decades, studies have shown that early childhood education is critical in preparing children to enter and succeed in the (grade school) classroom, reducing their risk of social-emotional and mental health problems and increasing their self-sufficiency later in life (Connecticut Office of Early Childhood Planning, 2013). Early childhood education needs to be taught to rationalise everything and to be open to interpretations and critical thinking, and in so doing, there is no subject to be considered taboo, starting with the most basic knowledge of the world that they live in, and ending with deeper areas, such as morality, religion and so on.

The theoretical foundation of this study was based on Froebel's play theory, which holds that children learn through play (Friedrich, 2022). Specifically, Froebel held that play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul. He also believed that teachers should act as facilitators and supporters for the student's play, rather than as an authoritative, disciplinary figure (Merrick, 2021). Thus, this theory emphasises the importance of early childhood education for sustainable community development.

To this end, Emeh, et al. (2012) defined community development as the involvement of the community in activities that are aimed towards the improvement of the community in terms of early childhood education, morally, socially, economically, as well as the environment, which needs to make the community more vital economically and in its functionality. Also, Ezimah in Wami (2022) posited that community development is a process of special action in which people of the community organise themselves for planning, define their own common and individual needs and problems, make group and individual plans to meet their needs and solve problems, and execute their plans with maximum reliance on the community resources.

International Association for Community Development (IACD, 2016) opined that community development is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes early childhood education, participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings. Oni in Owede (2022) asserted that community development is the totality of efforts made which results in the aggregate improvement of the community with observable better living conditions among members of the community.

Sustainable community development focuses on meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Education, particularly early childhood education, serves as the cornerstone of sustainable development as early childhood defines and shapes a child's life from the period of birth to eight years, which is the crucial stage of human development when learning capacity is at its peak (UNICEF, 2019). Investing in early childhood education would yield high economic returns by improving human capital and workforce productivity (Heckman, 2006). Communities with strong early childhood education systems benefit from a more skilled population and increased labour participation, leading to local economic growth. Applying these frameworks, this research examines the impact of early childhood education on sustainable community development in the Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

In spite of the fact that the policy on education has been modified a number of times to accommodate changing trends in the global education system, many communities in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State still have limited access to quality early childhood education, and this has become a disproportionate burden on sustainable community development, on the parents and guardians of these little children. Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State is a rural area of the state with few instructional facilities, of which the learning environment is one, and attending school at an early stage for children in these communities has always been difficult for them as a result of distance. Sustainable community development is more than taking care of the environment, as most people think. It is about being socially, economically and politically aware, which will culminate in a desire for positive change and in transforming awareness of those social-cultural realities into that positive change, of which early childhood education cannot be over-emphasised. In the light of the above facts, the researchers consider it imperative to examine the impact of early childhood education on sustainable community development in Rivers State.

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of early childhood education on sustainable community development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

1. Determine the teachers' perception of the adequacy of early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State
2. Examine the role early childhood education played in promoting sustainable community development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How might we describe the adequacy of early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?
2. What role have early childhood education played in promoting sustainable community development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?

### Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study population comprised 124 male and 167 female school teachers, for a total of 291 respondents drawn from education centres in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State (Rivers State Universal Basic Education Board, 2025). From the population, a sample of 178, representing 61% of the population, was selected. The sample was obtained through a simple random sampling technique. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire with a 4-point Likert scale. The instrument was validated, and reliability was established at 0.86 using the test-retest method. The study used mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The study used a criterion mean of 2.50 as the decision-making benchmark.

### Results

**Table 1: Mean rating of Teachers on their perception of the adequacy of the number of Early Childhood Education Centers in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State**

| S/N | Items                                                                                                        | Teachers (N =178) |             |          |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|----------|
|     |                                                                                                              | Mean              | SD          | Remark   |
| 1   | There are a few early childhood education centres in the entire Emohua Local Government Area.                | 1.90              | 0.88        |          |
| 2   | The available early childhood education centres are not enough to support sustainable community development. | 3.10              | 1.00        | *        |
| 3   | More early childhood education centres will be required if more students are admitted.                       | 3.08              | 0.92        | *        |
| 4   | The early childhood education centres are very far from the houses of students                               | 2.98              | 0.86        | *        |
| 5   | The number of early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government Area is sufficient                | 1.85              | 0.88        | *        |
|     | <b>Grand Mean &amp; SD</b>                                                                                   | <b>2.58</b>       | <b>0.91</b> | <b>*</b> |

**Source:** Field Survey Data, 2026 \*Mean  $\geq 2.5$

Table 1 presents the teachers' perception of the adequacy of the number of Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State, based on responses from 178 teachers. The results show that the grand mean of 2.58 with a standard deviation of 0.91 indicates a generally high extent of concern regarding the adequacy and distribution of ECE centres in the study area, based on the study's decision criterion.

Specifically, Item 1 had a mean of 1.90 and standard deviation of 0.88, indicating that teachers generally did not strongly agree that there are few ECE centres in Emohua Local Government Area. Similarly, Item 5, which states that the number of ECE centres is sufficient, recorded a low mean of 1.85 and standard deviation of 0.88, suggesting that teachers did not perceive the existing number of centres as sufficient.

On the other hand, Item 2 recorded a mean of 3.10 and standard deviation of 1.00, indicating that teachers perceived the available ECE centres as inadequate to adequately support sustainable community development. Item 3 also had a high mean of 3.08 and standard deviation of 0.92, showing that teachers agreed that additional ECE centres would

be required if enrolment increases. Furthermore, Item 4 had a mean of 2.98 and standard deviation of 0.86, suggesting that teachers perceived some ECE centres as being relatively far from pupils' homes, which may affect accessibility.

The grand mean of 2.58 suggests that teachers generally perceive the number and accessibility of ECE centres in the Emohua Local Government Area as not fully adequate, particularly given potential increases in pupil enrolment and the need to support sustainable community development. The relatively low standard deviations across the items (0.86–1.00) indicate a fairly consistent pattern of responses among the teachers. Thus, the findings imply a need for increased provision and better geographical distribution of Early Childhood Education centres in the study area.

**Table 2: Mean rating on Teachers' perception of the role of Early Childhood Education in Promoting Sustainable Community Development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.**

| SN                         | Items                                                                                                                                               | Teachers (N=178) |             |          |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------|
|                            |                                                                                                                                                     | Mean             | SD          | Remark   |
| 1                          | Early childhood education promotes sustainable development practice in my community                                                                 | 2.93             | 0.88        | *        |
| 2                          | Early childhood education is of no use in my community as it does not address the needs of special students.                                        | 2.20             | 0.96        |          |
| 3                          | Early childhood education promotes the health and well-being of children in my community                                                            | 3.00             | 0.86        | *        |
| 4                          | Early childhood education promotes local and cultural values in my community                                                                        | 2.85             | 0.98        | *        |
| 5                          | Early childhood education at times involves parents and community members in promoting sustainable community development programmes in my community | 3.08             | 0.84        | *        |
| <b>Grand Mean &amp; SD</b> |                                                                                                                                                     | <b>2.81</b>      | <b>0.91</b> | <b>*</b> |

**Source:** Field Survey Data, 2026 \*Mean  $\geq 2.5$

Table 2 presents the mean ratings of 178 teachers on the role Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays in promoting sustainable community development in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. The table has a grand mean of 2.81 and a standard deviation of 0.91. Since the decision benchmark is 2.50, the grand mean indicates that teachers generally agreed that Early Childhood Education plays a significant role in promoting sustainable community development in the study area.

For Item 1, the mean score of 2.93 and standard deviation of 0.88 indicate that teachers agreed that ECE promotes sustainable development practices in their communities. This suggests that ECE is perceived as contributing to the development of attitudes, behaviours, and values that support sustainable community living. Item 2 recorded a mean of 2.20 and a standard deviation of 0.96, which is below the 2.50 benchmark. This indicates disagreement with the statement that ECE is of no use in the community because it does not address the needs of special students. The finding suggests that teachers generally recognise the usefulness and importance of ECE despite concerns about its provision for children with special needs.

For Item 3, the mean of 3.00 and standard deviation of 0.86 show that teachers agreed that ECE promotes the health and well-being of children in their communities. This indicates that ECE is viewed as contributing to children's physical, emotional, and social development. Item 4 obtained a mean of 2.85 and a standard deviation of 0.98, indicating that teachers agreed that ECE promotes local and cultural values in the community. This implies that early childhood programmes can help children develop an understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage and community values.

Similarly, Item 5 recorded the highest mean of 3.08 with a standard deviation of 0.84. This indicates that teachers agreed that ECE sometimes involves parents and community members in sustainable community development programmes. It further suggests that collaboration among schools, families, and the wider community is an important way ECE contributes to sustainable development.

The grand mean of 2.81 indicates that teachers generally perceive Early Childhood Education as having a positive and important role in promoting sustainable community development in Emohua Local Government Area. The findings particularly highlight its contributions to sustainable development practices, children's health and well-being, preservation of local and cultural values, and community participation. The standard deviation values, ranging from 0.84 to 0.98, indicate relatively moderate variability in the teachers' responses. Therefore, the result suggests that strengthening Early Childhood Education could further contribute to sustainable community development in the study area.

## Discussion

### Teachers' perception of the adequacy of the number of Early Childhood

Table 1 of this study revealed that the number of early childhood education centres in Emohua Local Government Area is somewhat sufficient, but more would be appreciated, especially for better sustainable community development, as more students will likely be admitted, with a mean of 2.58. This shows that early childhood education centres support sustainable development in the Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. This discovery is in tandem with the assertion of the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood Planning (2013), as studies have shown that early childhood education is critical in preparing children to enter and succeed in the (grade school) classroom, diminishing their risk of social-emotional mental health problems and increasing their self-sufficiency later in their lives. Also, the findings support Friedrich (2022) as he is of the opinion that play is the highest expression of human development in childhood and for it alone, is the free expression of what is in the child's soul and as he believed that teachers should act as facilitators and supporters for the student's play, rather than an authoritative, disciplinary figure.

### Teachers' Perception of the Role of Early Childhood Education in Promoting Sustainable Community Development

The findings in Table 2 revealed that early childhood education is of great use and help in the community as it addressed the needs of special students, promoted local and cultural values in the students of the communities and equally involved parents and community members in terms of promoting sustainable community development programmes in the communities of Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State with an aggregate mean of 2.81. In agreement with this finding, International Association for Community Development (IACD, 2016) asserted that community development is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes early childhood education, participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organization, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings. The findings support Heckman (2006) as he opined that investing in early childhood education would yield high economic returns by improving human capital and workforce productivity and as Oni in Owede (2022) opined that community development is the totality of efforts made which result in the aggregate improvement of the community with observable better living conditions among members of the community.

## Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, the researchers conclude that, in the Emohua Local Government Area, more early childhood education centres are needed to support better, more sustainable community development. More centres would also enable more pupils to be admitted, as most students complain that the early childhood centres available in their communities are very far from their residences. Furthermore, local and cultural values in these communities are preserved, as the approach involves parents and community members in promoting sustainable community development programmes.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Emphasis on the establishment of more early child education centres in Emohua Local Government Area should be de-emphasised; books and practical activity materials should be emphasised and made available to various education centres.
2. Qualified and capable teachers should be employed in the early child education centres to meet global demands; in so doing, there will be an avenue for the development of leaders of tomorrow.

3. Sustainable development programmes should be conducted on a regular basis in order to preserve the community's local and cultural values, involving parents and community members in terms of promoting the community's cultural heritage.

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