

Challenges In The Provision Of Early Childhood Care And Education In Rural Areas In Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study's aim was to examine the challenges faced by early childhood practitioners in the provision of Early Childhood care and education in rural schools in Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed method research design. A sample of 20 respondents was selected from five (5) Early Childhood Education Centres in rural areas. Data was collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data was analysed using themes by coding and grouping similar ideas and quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate frequencies, mean, and standard deviations. Frequencies, mean, and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions, while t-test statistic was used to test the null hypotheses that guided the study at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study among others revealed that there was inadequate fund for the running of early childhood education in rural areas. It was also found that lack of qualified early childhood practitioners, lack of instructional materials, dilapidated classrooms, inadequate space for quality play and lack of motivation of staff were among the notable challenges encountered while providing early childhood care and education in rural school. In view of the research findings, it was recommended that appropriate infrastructure, teaching/learning materials and relevant equipment for play be provided in ECE Centres. Further, the proprietors should establish more ECE centres closer to communities so that preschoolers can access the schools easily. The government should highly fund ECE centres for better operations of the program in rural schools.

Keywords: Challenges, Early Childhood, Education, Provision, Rural Areas.

INTRODUCTION

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) program or pre-primary education as it is referred to in Nigeria, is designed to lay a solid foundation for children from infant to 5 years of age. This program ensures that children successfully transition from early childhood care or pre-primary to primary school. Early childhood experiences are thought to be critical for children's

well-being and lifelong learning (Neuman & Powers, 2021). Thus, Pierce (2021), citing the World Health Organization (WHO), stated that investing in ECD is one of the best methods for a country to increase its economic growth, and prosperity, eliminate social inequities, and have fair chances. ECD is the only effective strategy for improving results for children throughout their schooling and ensuring a smooth transition into adulthood.

Children benefit the most from stimulating and supportive care in early childhood, which ensures quality early childhood education with interactive teachers, safe and stimulating environments, and access to materials for children before entering primary school (Britto et al., 2017). As indicated by advancements in basic and intervention science, Britto et al. (2017) discovered that early childhood is a period of exceptional sensitivity to improve the development of children's early experiences for healthier adulthood in the future. This is only possible if early childhood development interventions are expanded.

In Nigeria and especially in Gboko local government area of Benue State, early childhood care and education (ECCE) is known to have faced so many challenges, especially in rural communities. The provision of ECCE in Nigeria still faces many difficulties that should be identified and addressed, particularly in rural communities, even though early childhood development programs for children between the ages of 0 and 4 have the potential to help close the education gap. As ECCE in Nigeria is subject to various elements that will ultimately decide its effectiveness, addressing these issues is essential to the program's successful implementation (National Policy on Education, 2014). For children to grow and develop holistically (i.e., in terms of their physical, emotional, social, and language development), high-quality provisioning in early childhood education centres is crucial as early childhood education is directly associated with assisting learners in developing essential human characteristics.

The government of Nigeria is committed to providing the foundation for all children to have access to high-quality early childhood education and care, with a focus on children in vulnerable communities, but studies have shown that the majority of the early childhood education centres in Nigeria are own and operated by private proprietors (Njoku, 2022). The right to education is, among other things, recognized in the National Policy Education, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and numerous other policy declarations around the world. The government recognised that the realisation of the goals of universal availability and equitable access to quality early childhood development services for all children in Nigeria requires enough functional early childhood development centres and programmes which are appropriately spread out to be within safe and reasonable physical reach of all children (Atmore, et al, 2012). Research findings have shown that good quality ECCE programmes provide a wide range of benefits for children, families, and communities and facilitate children's social, emotional, nutritional, and health development (Maundeni, 2013).

Despite these numerous benefits of ECCE, the provision of service is still very limited, mostly in urban areas (Mwaipopo, 2017), and usually organised on a private basis and thus benefiting children from higher-income families (Okoh, 2022). Also, despite the numerous improvements in enrolment levels in ECCE services at a global level, poor and rural children in most parts of Benue State are disadvantaged in terms of access and tend to receive services which are of lower quality than those for urban children. In many developing countries, the

education gap between urban and rural areas is still enlarging which is clear evidence that the rural communities are still lagging in terms of the provision of quality early childhood care and education for children.

In summary, an adequate and accessible physical environment and infrastructure is required to support scaled-up and effective delivery of inclusive, quality early childhood development programmes and services. Atmore et al (2012) stated that what constitutes a sufficient quantity of, and adequate early childhood development infrastructure is determined by three predominant principles:

1. Health and safety: internationally, constitutionally and in terms of domestic laws such as the Children's Act, all children have the rights to survival, dignity, and a healthy and safe environment. This requires that the environment in which they access early childhood development services ensures the protection of their rights and their caregiver's health and safety.

2. Equity of physical access: early childhood development facilities and programme infrastructure must be within physical reach and physically accessible to all children, including those living in remote and/or underserved areas and those with disabilities.

3. Quality: the environment and infrastructure supporting the delivery of early childhood development services is a key determinant of the quality of the service provided. There is a link between poor and inadequate infrastructure and the provision of poor-quality early childhood development services (Atmore, et al, 2012).

The nature of the physical environment and infrastructure required to provide equitable access to quality services in a safe and healthy environment will depend on several factors, including the early childhood development service in question; the model of provision; the age of the child; the health of the child and/or his or her caregiver; the presence or absence of a disability or developmental delay; the social and economic circumstances of the child and his or her caregiver; the language and cultural background of the child and his or her caregiver; and the geographic location of the child and his or her caregiver. Despite contextual differences, early childhood development programmes and services, as appropriate for the modality of delivery, must be delivered in safe buildings or structures protecting from the elements; provide hygienic sanitation facilities, clean potable water, access to safe energy sources, hygienic and safe food storage and preparation areas; provide indoor and outdoor spaces suited to the provision of the relevant programme activities and large enough to accommodate all children making use of the programme; and use equipment and materials necessary to deliver the programme activities (UNESCO, 2012).

The concept of rural schools is characterised by various factors that negatively influence the delivery of quality early childhood education and care. Typically rural areas are remote and relatively underdeveloped. The following features are examples of the rural profile (UNESCO, 2005):- (i) Distance to towns; (ii) Topography, (conditions of roads, bridges to school, etc); (iii) Access to information technology; (iv) Transport infrastructure (roads, buses, taxis); (v) Access to services and facilities (electricity, water, sanitation); (vi) The health,

educational and economic status of the community; (vii) Access to lifelong learning services; (viii) Social conditions in the community; (ix) Activities of political and civil society organisation, etc. As a result, many rural communities and their schools are poor and disadvantaged, lacking basic infrastructure for sanitation, water, roads etc. The socio-economic realities of rural areas put learners in rural schools at a disadvantage. In addition, many rural communities lack the professional help, and support, governance structures, books and learning materials that they need to provide the necessary support and care for learners.

The National Policy on Education (2014) and various policy documents say that all Nigerians learners should have access to the same quality of learning and teaching, similar facilities and equal educational opportunities. However, this is not yet the case. Many of these problems are linked to socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment, and also have a direct influence on the quality of education that is available to children and the role the early childhood practitioners should play under these circumstances. It is based on these benefits of early childhood education which the rural communities of Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State are still lagging that this study is carried out to investigate the challenges early childhood practitioners face in the provision of early childhood care and education in their area.

Purposes of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas in Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study is set to:

- i. determine the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas of Gboko.
- ii. determine the strategies to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas.

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed to guide the study.

- i. What are the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas of Gboko LGA?
- ii. What are the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas?

Hypotheses.

The following hypotheses are formulated to guide the study.

- i. There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas of Gboko LGA.
- ii. There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed method research approach. By using a mixed method research approach, the researchers gained an understanding of the practitioners' challenges in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas in Benue state Nigeria. The researchers' intention was to understand the phenomena from the participants' perspectives. Through this research method, the researchers were able to interact with the informative participants and gained deeper insight regarding the challenges they encounter in providing early childhood care and education in rural communities of Benue state. A sample of 20 early childhood practitioners selected from five (5) schools in rural areas was studied to understand the population from which it was drawn. The techniques employed allowed participants to give their views within the scope of the questions asked. In this way a variety of opinions were drawn from participants reflecting information driving their experiences. An indebt face-face interview was conducted with 5 key respondents and questionnaires were also administered to 20 respondents which provided data for the study. The five respondents that were interviewed also responded to the questionnaire administered. The qualitative data was analyzed primarily through thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White., & Moules, 2017), while the quantitative data collected through a questionnaire design by the researchers was analysed using Statistical package for social science (SPSS v23). Following Creswell's (2019) methods for data analysis, we obtained data from the interviews by organizing and defining the codes. We utilized open coding, which entailed examining the data and reading it multiple times in order to construct labels to establish meaning from the information gathered from the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In order to develop themes and subthemes when coding the data, we highlighted passages and categorized them based on patterns and what rural Early Childhood Education practitioners said. The study employed a thematic analysis strategy to interpret and analyse the qualitative data. The quantitative data was coded using 4, 3, 2 and 1 for strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, and strongly disagreed respectively. Frequencies, mean, and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions, while t-test statistic was used to test the null hypotheses that guided the study at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Research Question One.

What are the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas in Benue State Nigeria?

Table 1: Frequencies, Mean and Standard Deviation of respondents on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas in Benue State Nigeria

SN	Item Statements	Frequencies						
		SA	A	D	SD	\bar{X}	SD	Dec
1	Inadequate funding of early childhood education in rural areas	7	13	--	--	3.35	0.48	A
2	Inadequate infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, ICT, etc.	4	15	1	--	3.15	0.48	A

3	Lack of motivation for the early childhood practitioners	5	15	--	--	3.25	0.44	A
4	Poor working condition of early childhood practitioners in rural areas	11	9	--	--	3.55	0.51	A
5	High pupils to teacher's ratio in the classroom	--	3	14	3	2.00	0.56	D
6	Lack of adequate play-based and simulation equipment	2	13	5	--	2.85	0.58	A
7	Lack of adequate payment of practitioners' salaries	--	--	17	3	1.85	0.36	D
8	Inadequate instructional materials in early childhood education centres	--	20	--	--	3.00	0.00	A
9	Lack of trained teachers in early childhood education centres	2	17	1	--	3.05	0.39	A
10	The relative absence of males in the ECCE sector	5	15	--	--	3.25	0.44	A
11	Language barriers.	12	8	--	--	3.60	0.50	A
12	Lack of balanced meals for the children	13	7	--	--	3.65	0.48	A
13	Lack of clean water.	--	--	17	3	1.85	0.36	D
14	Poor sanitation and hygiene	2	18	--	--	3.10	0.30	A
15	Lack of parental interest in supporting children's education	5	10	5	--	3.00	0.72	A
16	Absence of minimum benchmark for the establishment of ECCE	14	6	--	--	3.70	0.47	A
17	No guidelines on how to run ECCE in rural areas.	7	13	--	--	3.35	0.48	A
18	Teaching is done without a specified and approved curriculum	11	9	--	--	3.55	0.51	A
19	Long distance of school from home	3	13	4	--	2.95	0.60	A
20	Minimal enrolment and absenteeism	3	14	3	--	3.00	0.56	A
	Cluster mean					3.05	0.13	A

The result of the study as presented in Table 1 shows the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas in Benue State Nigeria. Result shows that early childhood practitioners experience different challenges while delivering early childhood education in their centres in rural schools. This challenges according to the findings include: inadequate funding of early childhood education in rural areas ($\bar{x} = 3.35$, $SD = 0.48$), inadequate infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, ICT, etc. ($\bar{x} = 3.15$, $SD = 0.48$), lack of motivation for the early childhood practitioners ($\bar{x} = 3.25$, $SD = 0.44$), poor working condition of early childhood practitioners in rural areas ($\bar{x} = 3.55$, $SD = 0.51$), lack of adequate play-based and simulation equipment ($\bar{x} = 2.85$, $SD = 0.58$), inadequate instructional materials in early childhood education centres ($\bar{x} = 3.00$, $SD = 0.00$), among others. This decision is based on the mean ratings which is 2.50 and above set as a criterion for accepting and item. On the other hand, the respondents stated that the following are not challenges, these include: high pupils to teacher's ratio in the classroom ($\bar{x} = 2.00$, $SD = 0.56$), lack of adequate payment of practitioners' salaries ($\bar{x} = 1.85$, $SD = 0.36$) and lack of clean water ($\bar{x} = 1.85$, $SD = 0.36$). The cluster mean of 3.05 with a standard deviation of 0.13 show that early childhood practitioners

face numerous challenges in delivering quality early childhood education in rural areas of Benue State.

These results were further corroborated by the findings from the interview phase. All the key respondents interview unanimously agreed that they face so many challenges. Their responses are transcribed as shown below:

Question: What are the challenges you face as early childhood practitioner in rural community?

P1: we face a lot of challenges in trying to give these children the best preschool education, but the government is not supporting us, we raise money from the meager school fees the pupils pay to settle staff salary. We also experience low turnout rate because the villagers are poor and cannot afford to pay their children's school fees. We also have challenges of employing qualified teachers, there are no experts in early childhood education to work in our centres and the available ones demand for high salary which only the government can pay them and some of them are not willing to work in the villages and the government is not supporting us finally to employ qualified teachers. Majority of the children in rural communities don't understand English language, sometimes we use our local language to teach, so we have problem of language barrier as well and so many other challenges.

P2: We don't have enough classrooms to accommodate the pupils as you can see, there are not enough space for the children to play during play session and the even play materials are not enough, we have few of them as you can see outside. In fact, we face many difficulties here, but we are trying out best to make sure that the school continue to exist.

Do you have other challenges you face here apart from the ones mentioned?

Yes, things like clean water for the children to drink is not available, so many children have water jugs which they use to bring water from their homes. The distance of school from home is another challenge because the parents have been complaining of the distance too, most of the children are still very small to trek long distance to school.

It can be seen from the above responses that the early childhood education centers in rural communities experience a lot of challenges in the provisioning of early childhood education and care in rural communities of Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.

Research Question Two:

What are the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas?

Table 2: Frequencies, Mean and Standard Deviation of respondents on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas.

SN	Item Statements	Frequencies						
		SA	A	D	SD	\bar{X}	SD	Dec
1	Adequate funding of early childhood education in rural areas	3	17	--	--	3.15	0.36	A
2	Provision of adequate infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, ICT, etc.	14	6	--	--	3.70	0.47	A
3	Motivation for the early childhood practitioners	12	8	--	--	3.60	0.50	A
4	Improving the working condition of early childhood practitioners in rural areas	6	13	1	--	3.25	0.55	A
5	Provision of adequate play-based and simulation equipment	3	17	--	--	3.15	0.36	A
6	Payment of practitioners' salaries as at and when due	3	17	--	--	3.15	0.36	A
7	Provision of adequate instructional materials in early childhood education centres	10	10	--	--	3.50	0.51	A
8	Training and re-training of teachers in early childhood education centres	2	18	--	--	3.10	0.30	A
9	Provision of balanced meals for the children	13	7	--	--	3.65	0.48	A
10	Provision of clean water.	6	14	--	--	3.30	0.47	A
11	Provision of clean sanitation and hygiene	12	8	--	--	3.60	0.50	A
12	Provision of minimum benchmark for the establishment of ECCE	3	15	2	--	3.05	0.51	A
13	Provision of guidelines on how to run ECCE in rural areas.	7	13	--	--	3.35	0.48	A
14	Teaching with a specified and approved curriculum	13	7	--	--	3.65	0.48	A
15	Establishment of ECCE centres close to home	14	6	--	--	3.70	0.47	A
Cluster mean						3.39	0.11	A

The result in Table 2 shows the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered by practitioners in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas in Benue State Nigeria. Result shows that early childhood practitioners agreed to the following strategies: adequate funding of early childhood education in rural areas ($\bar{x} = 3.15$, $SD = 0.36$), provision of adequate infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, ICT, ($\bar{x} = 3.70$, $SD = 0.47$), motivation for the early childhood practitioners ($\bar{x} = 3.60$, $SD = 0.50$), improving the working condition of early childhood practitioners in rural areas ($\bar{x} = 3.25$, $SD = 0.55$), provision of adequate play-based and simulation equipment ($\bar{x} = 3.15$, $SD = 0.36$), among others. The cluster mean of 3.39 with a standard deviation of 0.11 show that statements on table 2 are strategies to

be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered by practitioners in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas in Benue State Nigeria.

The result from the quantitative phase was also supported by the findings in the interview phase as follows:

Question: What do you think should be done to overcome these challenges that you have mentioned?

P3: The first thing that I think is necessary is funding, if the government can fund early childhood education, these challenges can be overcome. Another thing is training of teachers in the area of pre-primary education, teachers' motivation and prompt payment of salaries is another strategy. As you can see, our classrooms are not good enough, so we need more classrooms to accommodate more pupils.

P4: We need enough materials for children's play, at the moment, we don't have enough materials for children to engage in meaningful play, we have tried to improvise some, but they are not enough, if the government can provide them, it will help us to engage the children in meaningful play activities which is capable of enhancing their cognitive abilities. Provision of clean drinking water is also necessary.

Test of Hypotheses.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas of Benue State, Nigeria.

Table 3: t-test Analysis of the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas.

SN	Gender	N	\bar{x}	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Dec.
1	Male	3	3.28	0.07	5.32	18	0.00	S
2	Female	17	3.01	0.08				

Note: S = Significant, df = degree of freedom, SD = Standard Deviation, $\alpha = 0.05$

The result in Table 3 shows the t-test analysis of the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas of Benue State, Nigeria. Result shows that a t-value of 5.32 was obtained with a degree of freedom of 18 and a probability value of 0.00. Since the probability value is less than 0.05 level of significance, it means that the null hypothesis is rejected. Inference drawn is that the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas is statistically significant. Though, both male and female respondents agreed that they face a lot of challenges, but the mean rating for male respondents is higher than their female counterparts which shows the difference.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas.

SN	Gender	N	\bar{x}	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Dec.
1	Male	3	3.48	0.03	1.84	18	0.08	NS
2	Female	17	3.37	0.10				

Note: S = Significant, df = degree of freedom, SD = Standard Deviation, $\alpha = 0.05$

The result in Table 4 shows the t-test analysis of the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas of Benue State, Nigeria. Result shows that a t-value of 1.84 was obtained with a degree of freedom of 18 and a probability value of 0.08. Since the probability value is greater than 0.05 level of significance, it means that the null hypothesis is not rejected. Inference drawn is that the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas is not statistically significant. This implies both male and female respondents shared the same opinion on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges encountered in the provision of early childhood care and education in rural areas.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of the study on the challenges encountered by early childhood providers in rural areas in Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria showed that early childhood practitioners experience different challenges while delivering early childhood education in their centres in rural schools. This challenges according to the findings include: inadequate funding of early childhood education in rural areas, inadequate infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, ICT, etc., lack of motivation for the early childhood practitioners, poor working condition of early childhood practitioners in rural areas, lack of adequate play-based and simulation equipment, inadequate instructional materials in early childhood education centres, among others. On the other hand, the respondents stated that high pupils to teacher's ratio, lack of adequate payment of practitioners' salaries and lack of clean water are not notable challenges they experience in their rural schools, The low pupils to teacher ratio may be as a result low enrollment rate in rural communities. The finding from the test of hypothesis one which is on the difference between the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the challenges encountered early childhood centres showed that the difference was statistically significant which led to the rejection of hypothesis one. The result of the study is consistent with Mwaipopo (2017) who stated that despite these numerous benefits of ECCE, the provision of service is still very limited, mostly in urban areas (and usually organised on a private basis and thus benefiting children from higher income families. This means the rural pre-primary schools are

still facing a lot of challenges in delivering quality early childhood education to children. The result is also in agreement with Okoh (2022) that despite the numerous improvements in enrolment levels in ECCE services at a global level, poor and rural children in most part of Benue State are disadvantaged in terms of access and tend to receive services which are of lower quality than those for urban children. In many developing countries, the education gap between urban and rural areas is still enlarging which is a clear evidence that the rural communities are still lagging behind in terms of provision of quality early childhood care and education for children.

The result of the study on the strategies to be adopted to overcome the challenges of delivering quality early childhood education in rural schools, the respondents unanimously agree that providing adequate funding for early childhood education in rural areas, provision of adequate infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, ICT., motivation for the early childhood practitioners, improving the working condition of early childhood practitioners in rural areas, provision of adequate play-based and simulation equipment among others are some of the notable strategies that can be adopted to overcome the challenges. On the result of hypothesis two, findings showed that the difference between the mean response of male and female respondents was not statistically significant which means hypotheses two was not rejected. The result is in agreement with UNESCO (2012) statements that despite contextual differences, early childhood development programmes and services, as appropriate for the modality of delivery, must be delivered in safe buildings or structures providing protection from the elements; provide hygienic sanitation facilities, clean potable water, access to safe energy sources, hygienic and safe food storage and preparation areas; provide indoor and outdoor spaces suited to the provision of the relevant programme activities and large enough to accommodate all children making use of the programme; and use equipment and materials necessary to deliver the programme activities.

In conclusion, it is evidenced from the result of the study that the rural based ECCE practitioners are crippled by preventable challenges. We argue, furthermore, that creating an enabling environment in which the practitioners are capacitated with skills, fund, and enabling environment would enhance their indispensable role in delivering a transformative and high-quality early learning in rural and disadvantaged communities. Based on these conclusions, we make the following recommendations in line with the findings of the study. Adequate funding of ECD centres in rural areas is necessary. This will help to improve the practitioners' skills and confidence in the cause of delivering a high-quality early childhood learning in rural areas. Once capacitated, practitioners would be able to enhance children's performance through quality delivery of lessons as suggested by the practitioners themselves.

Limitations of the study

There was no funding for this study, therefore the researchers used only few rural communities to carry out the study. It was possible that early childhood educators in other rural schools that did not participate in the study, might have had additional useful information that would have added to the quality of data obtained from the practitioners in the communities.

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