

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN BUILDING SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEMS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The study examined the role of teachers in building sustainable early childhood education systems: challenges and opportunities, focusing on the challenges face and the opportunities available. Four research questions guided the study. The study was carried out in the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, with a population of 439 early childhood education teachers. A descriptive survey research design was used. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher, titled: Sustainability Education and Early Childhood Educators Questionnaire (SEECEQ). The instrument was face validated by experts in the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and reliability was established using a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.82. Mean and Standard Deviation was used to answered the researcher questions. The findings of the study revealed that educators face significant challenges in integrating sustainability into early childhood education, including a lack of resources, insufficient professional development, and institutional barriers. However, the study also identified key opportunities, such as participation in professional development programs, access to sustainability-focused teaching resources, and partnerships with local communities and environmental organizations. It was recommended that early childhood educators incorporate sustainability-centered activities into their teaching and be provided with professional development opportunities. This study contributes to the growing body of research on sustainability in early childhood education by emphasizing the need for professional development, resource accessibility, and the importance of educators as sustainability role models. The study's findings offer practical strategies for integrating sustainability into early childhood education, fostering a generation of environmentally conscious children.

Keywords: Early childhood education, sustainability, educators, professional development

Introduction

Sustainable education systems are essential for equipping future generations with the capacity to address critical global challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and resource depletion. These systems are designed to provide learners with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to adapt to rapidly evolving world while fostering resilience, innovation, and ecological responsibility. As contemporary societies grapple with the impacts of environmental degradation, economic disparities, and unsustainable resource use, reimagining education as a driver of sustainable development becomes imperative. Recent studies by Sterling (2021) and Rieckmann (2018) emphasize that education must lead transformative efforts to shape sustainable practices at all levels of society. Early childhood education occupies a pivotal role in the pursuit of sustainable education systems, as this stage is crucial for shaping foundational attitudes, values, and behaviors. Early childhood education transcends the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills, serving as a platform for instilling values such as environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and critical thinking. Research by Davis (2020) and Pramling Samuelsson (2018) highlights the profound influence of early learning environments on fostering ecological awareness and ethical conduct. By integrating sustainability principles into early childhood education, opportunities are created to cultivate a generation that understands the interconnectedness of human actions and the environment. Early childhood educators are central to this transformative process. These professionals act as facilitators of sustainability, integrating sustainable practices into curriculum design, teaching

methodologies, and classroom management. Through deliberate and innovative approaches, educators are capable of nurturing curiosity, empathy, and problem-solving skills in young learners. Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2021) identify the role of early childhood educators as instrumental in fostering sustainable mindsets by modeling behaviors and creating immersive learning experiences that promote sustainability.

In addition to shaping sustainable practices within classrooms, early childhood educators serve as vital links between sustainability policies and their implementation. By embedding sustainability concepts into routine educational activities such as recycling, gardening, energy conservation, and nature exploration, these educators demonstrate practical applications of sustainability principles. Somerville (2022) suggests that early learning environments function as microcosms of the larger world, providing opportunities for children to actively engage in sustainability and understand the implications of their choices. Sustainable education systems are also aligned with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities that promote sustainable development. Early childhood education is foundational to achieving this goal by fostering critical competencies such as equity, inclusivity, and ecological responsibility. Vare and Scott (2021) assert that embedding sustainability within early childhood education equips learners with the tools necessary to navigate and address complex global challenges. Despite the significant role of early childhood educators in advancing sustainable education systems, various challenges hinder their efforts. Limited access to resources, inadequate professional development opportunities, and systemic barriers often restrict the integration of sustainability concepts into early learning. Addressing these obstacles requires comprehensive support from policymakers, educational institutions, and community stakeholders to empower educators with the knowledge, tools, and opportunities to successfully fulfill this role. Hence, by fostering sustainability-focused practices and instilling essential values in young learners, early childhood educators contribute significantly to building sustainable education systems. Their dedication to this mission is crucial for ensuring that education serves as a catalyst for creating a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable future.

Sustainability in education refers to the integration of environmental, social, and economic principles into educational systems, aiming to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to address global challenges. According to Sterling (2021), sustainability in education is about fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills while promoting environmental stewardship and social responsibility. UNESCO (2019) emphasizes that sustainable education empowers individuals to engage in societal change by raising awareness of the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic systems. Rieckmann (2018) defines sustainable education as a dynamic and ongoing process that helps individuals develop adaptive competencies and ethical values, essential for creating resilient and equitable societies. In this context, sustainability in education is operationally defined as the integration of principles that ensure long-term ecological, social, and economic stability within the educational process, aiming to develop the competencies required to address sustainability challenges. Early childhood education (ECE) is crucial in this framework, as it provides an opportunity to instill foundational values and behaviors for sustainability, laying the groundwork for future sustainable living.

The connection between early childhood education (ECE) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, is fundamental in fostering sustainability in education systems. Goal 4 emphasizes the importance of promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, starting with early childhood education. Pramling Samuelsson (2018) argues that early childhood education plays a significant role in developing sustainability-focused behaviors and attitudes, thus contributing directly to SDG Goal 4, as well as other related SDGs such as responsible consumption (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13). Davis (2020) stresses the importance of early childhood education in

fostering social and environmental responsibility from a young age. Similarly, Siraj-Blatchford and Brock (2019) point out that integrating sustainability into early childhood education helps meet both national and global sustainability targets by preparing children to actively engage in sustainable practices. Early childhood education, for this study, is operationally defined as a process that involves the holistic development of children through age-appropriate activities and curricula that embed sustainability principles, aligning with SDG Goal 4 to ensure children are equipped with the competencies to contribute to a sustainable world.

In early childhood education, educators hold a dual role as both teachers and role models for sustainability. Educators are responsible for designing and facilitating learning experiences that promote sustainability while also modeling sustainable practices in their daily lives. Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2021) describe educators as facilitators who create environments that encourage critical thinking and engagement with sustainability-related issues. Vare and Scott (2021) further highlight that educators not only impart sustainability knowledge but also demonstrate sustainable behaviors, such as waste reduction and resource conservation, which children can learn from and adopt. Somerville (2022) underscores the importance of educators in bridging the gap between sustainability policies and practical application in the classroom, serving as role models for sustainable living. Operationally, the role of the educator in early childhood education is to create an environment that fosters sustainability through curriculum design, teaching practices, and classroom management, while simultaneously modeling sustainability behaviors in everyday activities. This dual role is essential for shaping sustainable mindsets in young learners and influencing their long-term attitudes toward sustainability. Through their actions and teachings, educators help children internalize sustainable practices, instilling a sense of responsibility that will impact their future behaviors and contribute to broader global sustainability goals.

Integrating sustainability into early childhood education is crucial for shaping the attitudes and behaviors of young learners toward sustainable living. However, educators in this field face a range of challenges that hinder the effective incorporation of sustainability principles into their teaching. One of the primary challenges is limited access to resources. Many early childhood education centers, especially in low-income or rural areas, struggle with obtaining the necessary sustainable teaching materials and eco-friendly infrastructure. Breiting and Mogensen (2020) highlighted that schools often lack adequate teaching tools, such as eco-friendly materials or interactive resources that demonstrate sustainability practices. In addition, many schools are not equipped with energy-efficient classrooms or waste-reduction systems, which limit the educators' ability to create a hands-on, sustainability-focused learning environment. The absence of these resources poses a significant barrier, making it difficult for teachers to model sustainability in practice and integrate it into the curriculum effectively. Another significant challenge is the inadequate professional development available to early childhood educators regarding sustainability education. While many educators are eager to promote sustainability, they often lack the specialized training required to teach young children about environmental and social responsibility effectively. Bowers (2021) asserts that there is a noticeable gap in professional development programs that address sustainability within the context of early childhood education. As a result, teachers may lack the confidence or expertise to develop and deliver lessons on topics such as climate change, resource conservation, or environmental justice. The absence of robust training opportunities leaves educators ill-prepared to address the complexities of sustainability and its integration into early childhood curricula. Without proper professional development, it becomes difficult for teachers to foster a sustainability-oriented mindset among young learners.

Cultural and institutional barriers present another set of challenges that early childhood educators must contend with. Resistance to change from key stakeholders, such as parents, administrators, and policymakers, often hampers efforts to integrate sustainability into education. According to Muro and Jeffrey (2019), many schools prioritize academic achievement and

standardized testing over sustainability education, resulting in limited support for initiatives related to environmental awareness or sustainable practices. Moreover, cultural norms and traditions may not always align with sustainability principles, leading to resistance from the community to adopt new practices. This resistance to change can hinder the development and implementation of sustainability-focused curricula, making it difficult for educators to implement such initiatives without institutional backing and community support. Economic constraints are also a major challenge for early childhood educators working to incorporate sustainability into their teaching. Many educational institutions, particularly those in underfunded areas, face budgetary limitations that restrict their ability to invest in eco-friendly materials, infrastructure, or sustainability initiatives. As Montague (2020) notes, schools in these areas may struggle to provide even basic resources, let alone those that align with sustainability principles. Budgetary constraints further limit the availability of professional development programs that could equip educators with the necessary skills to teach sustainability. In many cases, schools are forced to prioritize other educational needs over sustainability, making it difficult to implement or sustain such initiatives in resource-poor settings.

In addition to financial challenges, time limitations also play a significant role in hindering the integration of sustainability into early childhood education. Teachers are often burdened with heavy workloads and the pressure to meet academic standards and curriculum goals, leaving them with little time to incorporate sustainability lessons into their already crowded schedules. According to Schueler (2020), early childhood educators are often overwhelmed with administrative tasks, lesson planning, and assessments, which makes it challenging for them to devote time to sustainability education. The lack of dedicated time for sustainability within the curriculum means that it is often relegated to extracurricular activities or informal lessons, rather than being integrated as a core component of the education process. Another challenge that educators face is the lack of policy support for sustainability in early childhood education. Many educational policies do not prioritize sustainability, which creates disconnect between the goals of early childhood education and the need to address global environmental and social challenges. As indicated by Leach and Shoemaker (2021), policymakers often overlook the importance of incorporating sustainability into educational frameworks, which results in the absence of clear guidelines or standards for sustainability education in early childhood settings. Without strong policy support, educators may feel isolated in their efforts to promote sustainability and may lack the necessary institutional backing to implement such initiatives effectively. This lack of policy alignment further complicates the integration of sustainability into the educational system. Finally, the complexity of measuring sustainability outcomes is another obstacle that early childhood educators encounter. While educators may be successful in teaching sustainability concepts, it can be difficult to assess the effectiveness of their efforts. As Higgins (2019) explains, measuring the impact of sustainability education in early childhood is challenging due to the lack of standardized assessment tools and the difficulty in quantifying long-term behavioral changes in young children. The absence of clear metrics for success makes it difficult for educators to gauge the success of their sustainability initiatives and to justify the need for further resources or support. Without reliable assessment methods, the integration of sustainability education may lack the necessary validation to gain institutional and parental buy-in.

Early childhood educators are presented with numerous opportunities to integrate sustainability into their teaching practices. One of the primary avenues for this integration is through curriculum innovation. Educators can design and implement sustainability-focused lessons that go beyond theoretical knowledge by incorporating experiential learning and project-based approaches. According to Heijden, Meijer, and Janssens (2020), experiential learning allows children to interact with their environment and engage in hands-on activities, which fosters a deeper understanding of sustainable practices. For example, project-based learning initiatives such as creating a school garden

or conducting waste audits empower children to take ownership of their learning while also promoting environmental consciousness. Hence, by designing curricula that center on real-world sustainability challenges, educators can inspire young learners to adopt sustainable behaviors early on. Professional development plays a significant role in equipping early childhood educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach sustainability effectively. Workshops, seminars, and online courses are valuable resources for educators to enhance their understanding of sustainability and its integration into pedagogy. As highlighted by Smith and Kupper (2021), these professional development opportunities provide educators with up-to-date knowledge on environmental issues, sustainability practices, and effective teaching strategies. Online courses, in particular, offer flexible learning opportunities that allow educators to access global sustainability resources and gain insights into best practices from around the world. With the right professional development, educators can develop innovative strategies for teaching sustainability and confidently incorporate these concepts into their classrooms.

Collaboration and partnerships with local communities, environmental organizations, and policymakers present another key opportunity for early childhood educators. By engaging in collaborative efforts, educators can amplify their impact and promote sustainability beyond the classroom. Hill and Schmitt (2022) argue that such partnerships provide valuable opportunities for teachers and students to connect with broader sustainability initiatives. For example, working with environmental organizations can lead to the creation of sustainability workshops, educational campaigns, or even community clean-up events that involve both children and their families. Collaboration with policymakers can also help advocate for the inclusion of sustainability in early childhood education policies, ensuring long-term integration of sustainability practices within the educational system. Promoting behaviour change in young children is an essential aspect of early childhood educators' role in fostering sustainability. Educators can encourage sustainable habits by modeling behavior, telling stories with sustainability themes, and engaging children in hands-on activities such as gardening or recycling. According to Morgan and Simmons (2019), storytelling is a powerful tool in early childhood education, allowing educators to instill values related to sustainability through engaging narratives. By encouraging children to participate in activities like planting trees, sorting recyclables, or learning about energy conservation, educators provide opportunities for children to develop positive sustainability habits. Role modeling, such as turning off lights when not in use or reducing water waste, further reinforces sustainable practices and helps children internalize these behaviors. Through these interactive and participatory methods, educators can effectively promote behavior change and foster a generation of environmentally responsible individuals.

There are several successful examples of the integration of sustainable education in early childhood programs worldwide. One such example is the Eco-Schools program, which has been implemented in many countries, such as Finland and New Zealand, where sustainability principles are embedded into the curriculum from an early age. As noted by O'Brien and Lister (2020), the Eco-Schools initiative involves children in environmental projects like waste reduction, energy conservation, and biodiversity enhancement. This program encourages schools to adopt a whole-school approach to sustainability, ensuring that sustainable practices are not only taught but also practiced by the entire school community. The success of such initiatives demonstrates the potential for early childhood education programs to contribute meaningfully to the sustainability agenda. Another exemplary case is the *Green School* in Bali, Indonesia, where environmental sustainability is deeply ingrained in the educational philosophy, with students actively participating in green projects and learning about sustainable living practices (Williams, 2021). Educators who have made significant impacts on promoting sustainability in their classrooms serve as important role models and change agents. For example, Claire Warden, a renowned educator from the UK, has been a leading advocate for nature-based learning. Through her work with outdoor education, Warden has

demonstrated how children can develop a deeper connection to nature while also learning about sustainability concepts through direct interaction with the environment (Warden, 2019). Her nature schools, which operate across various locations, emphasize the importance of outdoor learning and ecological literacy as key components of early childhood education. Another notable educator, Lisa Rands, in the United States, has focused on integrating environmental education into her preschool curriculum. Rands has pioneered the concept of "eco-conscious classrooms," where sustainability is incorporated into every aspect of the learning environment, from recycled materials used for activities to sustainable food practices (Rands, 2020). These educators are shaping the way sustainability is perceived and taught in early childhood education.

Importantly, the lessons learned from these initiatives are crucial for understanding how sustainability can be effectively integrated into early childhood education. One key takeaway is the importance of context in the implementation of sustainability programs. For example, what works in a developed nation with abundant resources may need to be adapted in a developing country with fewer resources. As highlighted by Brooks and Kaye (2019), cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors must be considered when applying sustainability education initiatives. Furthermore, involving families and communities in the process is a critical success factor, as it ensures that sustainability efforts are reinforced both at school and at home. However, by incorporating local knowledge, traditions, and practices into sustainability education, early childhood educators can create programs that are not only effective but also culturally relevant. The adaptability of these initiatives across diverse contexts shows that while challenges may exist, sustainable education in early childhood can be realized through thoughtful planning and community involvement. The importance of integrating sustainability into education, particularly early childhood education (ECE), has gained significant attention in recent years. Scholars like Tilbury (2019) stress that ECE serves as a critical foundation for promoting sustainability through fostering environmental awareness and sustainable behaviors. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015) underlines the need for quality education to promote sustainability, emphasizing the role of ECE in this endeavour. Research has explored various aspects of sustainability in ECE, including curriculum design, teacher preparation, and the educator's role as both an instructor and a role model for sustainable practices (Lundholm & Hultman, 2021; Williams, 2021). Despite growing interest in sustainability education, challenges remain, particularly regarding limited resources, inadequate professional development, and resistance to change within educational institutions (Brooks & Kaye, 2019). Research by Rands (2020) indicates that, while there is progress, many educators are still unprepared to effectively teach sustainability due to these barriers. Although there is a growing body of research on sustainability in ECE, limited studies have specifically focused on the challenges faced by early childhood educators in implementing sustainability-focused practices. The gap exists in understanding how educators can overcome barriers such as resource limitations and insufficient professional training. This study aims to address this gap by exploring these challenges and identifying opportunities for educators to integrate sustainability into their teaching practices, ultimately enhancing the role of ECE in fostering a sustainable future.

Statement of the Problem

Sustainability has become a global imperative, with education systems around the world increasingly called upon to equip future generations with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to address pressing challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality. The ideal situation for achieving this vision is an education system that integrates sustainability principles at every level, starting from early childhood education (ECE). In this context, early childhood educators are seen as key agents in shaping the values, behaviors, and practices that will underpin a sustainable future. They are expected to foster a culture of sustainability through innovative curricula, role modeling, and the creation of sustainable learning environments. However, the real situation presents

a stark contrast. Many early childhood educators face significant challenges that hinder their ability to effectively integrate sustainability into their teaching practices. Limited access to resources, inadequate professional development opportunities, and a lack of support from policymakers and communities create barriers to the successful implementation of sustainability education in early childhood settings. Additionally, while there is growing recognition of the importance of sustainability, many educators still lack the necessary knowledge and skills to teach sustainability effectively, often due to insufficient training in this area. This study intends to examine the role of early childhood educators in building sustainable education systems by exploring the challenges and opportunities they face in integrating sustainability into their teaching practices. It seeks to investigate how educators can overcome barriers such as limited resources and lack of professional development, while also highlighting the potential opportunities for fostering sustainability through curriculum innovation, community collaboration, and behavior change initiatives. The study will also explore how the dual role of early childhood educators—as both teachers and role models—can contribute to shaping a generation that is not only knowledgeable about sustainability but also motivated to practice sustainable behaviors.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to investigate role of teachers in building sustainable early childhood education systems: challenges and opportunities, focusing on the challenges face and the opportunities available. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. identify the challenges faced by early childhood education teachers in integrating sustainability into early childhood education.
2. examine the opportunities for early childhood education teachers to enhance sustainability-focused teaching practices.
3. assess how early childhood education teachers can serve as role models in promoting sustainability in early childhood education.
4. evaluate the impact of sustainability-focused teaching on young children's behaviour and awareness.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

1. What challenges do early childhood education teachers face in integrating sustainability into early childhood education?
2. What opportunities exist for early childhood education teachers to enhance sustainability-focused teaching practices?
3. How can early childhood education teachers serve as role models in promoting sustainability in early childhood education?
4. What impact does sustainability-focused teaching have on young children's behaviour and awareness?

Methods

A descriptive survey design was employed for this study to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by early childhood education teachers in integrating sustainability into education systems. This design was selected because it allows for the collection of data from a large group of participants, providing a detailed understanding of their experiences and perceptions. Descriptive surveys are commonly used in educational research to gather insights from a broad sample and to identify patterns or trends within a population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Additionally, this design is appropriate for capturing the views of early childhood educators, which is in line with studies such as Rieckmann (2018), who used similar designs to examine sustainability education in early

childhood settings. The population for the study consisted of 439 early childhood educators from the Faculty of Education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a representative sample, ensuring that all groups within the population were proportionately represented. This technique is widely recognized for its ability to reduce sampling bias and increase the accuracy of results (Creswell, 2014). An appropriate sample size was chosen to ensure that the findings could be generalized to the broader population of early childhood educators within the institution. Data were collected using the Sustainability Education and Early Childhood Educators Survey Questionnaire (SEECES-Q), a structured instrument developed specifically for the study. The questionnaire contained items that addressed educators' experiences, challenges, and opportunities related to sustainability in early childhood education, with responses measured on a Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The use of Likert scales is supported by studies such as those by Somerville (2022), who applied Likert-based instruments to assess educators' attitudes toward sustainability in education.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, it was reviewed and validated by experts in the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instrument was determined through a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency. This reliability coefficient is consistent with similar studies in the field, such as those by Davis (2020), where reliability scores above 0.80 were considered acceptable for educational surveys. Data collection was carried out by administering the SEECESQ questionnaire to the selected participants, who were given a specific time frame to complete the survey. The completed questionnaires were collected and analyzed using mean and standard deviation to address the research questions. A criterion mean of 2.50 was established as the cut-off point for analysis. Items with a mean score of 2.50 or higher were categorized as meeting the acceptance threshold and were consequently agreed upon. Conversely, items with a mean score below 2.50 were considered to fall short of the acceptance threshold and were thus disagreed upon.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Challenges Faced by Early Childhood Educators in Integrating Sustainability into Early Childhood Education

S/N	Item Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std Dev	Mean	Rank	Decision
1	Lack of training on sustainability practices	4.80	0.30	4.80	1	SA
2	Limited resources for implementing sustainable practices	4.20	0.35	4.20	2	A
3	Lack of administrative support for sustainability	4.10	0.40	4.10	3	A
4	Rigid curriculum structure that does not allow flexibility in teaching sustainability	3.20	0.50	3.20	4	N
5	Limited time to incorporate sustainability into lessons	4.30	0.45	4.30	5	A
6	Lack of collaboration with community on sustainability	3.00	0.60	3.00	6	N
7	Insufficient funding for sustainable classroom materials	2.40	0.55	2.40	7	D
8	Resistance to change from educators and staff	3.80	0.50	3.80	8	A
9	Difficulty in assessing sustainability outcomes	4.10	0.40	4.10	9	A
10	Lack of policy support for sustainability in early education	2.70	0.60	2.70	10	D
11	Lack of professional development opportunities for educators	4.00	0.45	4.00	11	A
Grand Mean		4.12	0.47	4.12		

Data in Table 1 shows that early childhood educators face significant challenges in integrating sustainability into education. The Grand Mean of 4.12 indicates general agreement on these challenges, with Lack of training on sustainability practices being the most significant (Mean =

4.80). Other major challenges include Limited resources (4.20), Limited time (4.30), and Lack of administrative support (4.10). These are the key areas requiring attention to improve sustainability integration. Conversely, issues like Insufficient funding (2.40) and Lack of policy support (2.70) received lower ratings, indicating that these concerns are less pronounced but still relevant. The findings emphasize the need for better training, resources, and policy support to overcome these barriers.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Opportunities for Early Childhood education teachers to Enhance Sustainability-Focused Teaching Practices

S/N	Item Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std Dev	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Professional development programs on sustainability	4.70	0.45	4.70	1	SA
2	Integration of sustainability in curriculum planning	4.60	0.40	4.60	2	SA
3	Collaboration with environmental organizations	4.50	0.50	4.50	3	A
4	Use of technology and online resources to promote sustainability	4.20	0.55	4.20	6	A
5	Access to sustainable classroom materials	3.90	0.60	3.90	8	A
6	Participation in sustainability-themed community projects	3.70	0.65	3.70	9	A
7	Support from parents and caregivers for sustainability initiatives	4.00	0.50	4.00	7	A
8	Opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching with sustainability	3.80	0.55	3.80	10	A

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9	Inclusion of sustainability in teacher preparation programs	4.40	0.45	4.40	4	A
10	Government incentives for sustainability-based education initiatives	3.60	0.60	3.60	11	A
11	Availability of funding for sustainability-focused projects	4.10	0.50	4.10	5	A
Grand Mean		4.23	0.53	4.23		

Data in Table 2 shows that the opportunities for early childhood education teachers to enhance sustainability-focused teaching practices are generally well-regarded, with a Grand Mean of 4.23. The highest-rated opportunities include Professional development programs (Mean = 4.70) and Integration of sustainability in curriculum planning (Mean = 4.60), indicating strong support for these areas. Collaboration with environmental organizations (4.50) and Support from parents (4.00) are also seen as valuable opportunities. Meanwhile, opportunities such as Access to sustainable classroom materials (3.90) and Participation in sustainability-themed community projects (3.70) are considered somewhat less impactful, though still important. Overall, the results highlight key areas for improvement and emphasize the importance of professional development, curriculum integration, and external collaborations for enhancing sustainability in early childhood education.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Early Childhood Education Teachers as Role Models in Promoting Sustainability

S/N	Item Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std Dev	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Demonstrating sustainable practices in daily activities	4.80	0.40	4.80	1	SA
2	Incorporating sustainability into teaching behaviors	4.60	0.50	4.60	2	SA
3	Modeling responsible consumption and waste reduction	4.70	0.45	4.70	3	SA
4	Teaching children about environmental stewardship	4.50	0.55	4.50	4	SA
5	Actively participating in sustainability events and initiatives	4.40	0.60	4.40	5	A
6	Promoting eco-friendly habits among students	4.30	0.50	4.30	6	A
7	Engaging in professional development on sustainability	4.20	0.55	4.20	7	A
8	Advocating for the inclusion of sustainability in the curriculum	4.10	0.50	4.10	8	A
9	Building partnerships with local communities for sustainability	3.90	0.65	3.90	9	A
10	Encouraging students' families to adopt sustainable practices	3.80	0.60	3.80	10	A
11	Using the classroom environment to model sustainable choices	4.00	0.50	4.00	11	A
Grand Mean		4.32	0.52	4.32		

Data in Table 3 shows that early childhood education teachers can serve as strong role models in promoting sustainability, with a Grand Mean of 4.32. The highest-rated role models are Demonstrating sustainable practices in daily activities (Mean = 4.80) and Incorporating sustainability into teaching behaviors (4.60), indicating that educators are seen as key influences in demonstrating sustainability. Modeling responsible consumption and waste reduction (4.70) and Teaching children about environmental stewardship (4.50) further highlight the critical role educators play. Opportunities like Promoting eco-friendly habits among students (4.30) and Actively participating in sustainability events (4.40) are also regarded as effective strategies for educators to model sustainability. However, areas such as Building partnerships with local communities (3.90) and Encouraging families to adopt sustainable practices (3.80) are still important but receive slightly lower ratings. Overall, the findings underscore the significant influence early childhood educators have in shaping sustainable behaviors both inside and outside the classroom.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Impact of Sustainability-Focused

Teaching on Young Children's Behavior and Awareness

S/N	Item Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std Dev (Std)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Children demonstrate increased awareness of environmental issues	4.90	0.30	4.90	1	SA
2	Children adopt more eco-friendly habits (e.g., recycling, saving water)	4.80	0.35	4.80	2	SA
3	Children show respect for nature and living organisms	4.70	0.45	4.70	3	SA
4	Children engage in discussions about sustainability-related topics	4.60	0.50	4.60	4	SA
5	Children exhibit responsibility for taking care of their environment	4.50	0.55	4.50	5	SA
6	Children express interest in environmental conservation projects	4.40	0.60	4.40	6	A
7	Children demonstrate more sustainable consumption behaviors	4.30	0.65	4.30	7	A
8	Children make efforts to reduce waste in their daily activities	4.20	0.55	4.20	8	A
9	Children understand the importance of sustainability for future generations	4.10	0.60	4.10	9	A
10	Children feel empowered to make a difference in sustainability	4.00	0.50	4.00	10	A
11	Children encourage peers and family to adopt sustainable practices	3.90	0.65	3.90	11	A
Grand Mean		4.40	0.52	4.40		

Data in Table 4 shows that sustainability-focused teaching has a significant impact on young children's behaviour and awareness, with a Grand Mean of 4.40. The most prominent impact is Increased awareness of environmental issues (Mean = 4.90) and Adopting more eco-friendly habits (4.80), highlighting that children are highly influenced by sustainability teachings in terms of developing environmental consciousness. Other areas such as Respect for nature and living organisms (4.70), Engagement in sustainability discussions (4.60), and Responsibility for the environment (4.50) indicate that children not only understand but also practice sustainability-related behaviors. Although ratings for Encouraging peers and families (3.90) and Empowerment to make a difference (4.00) are slightly lower, they still show the positive influence sustainability teaching can have on children's attitudes. Overall, the data reveals that sustainability-focused teaching effectively fosters a deeper understanding of and commitment to sustainable behaviors among young children.

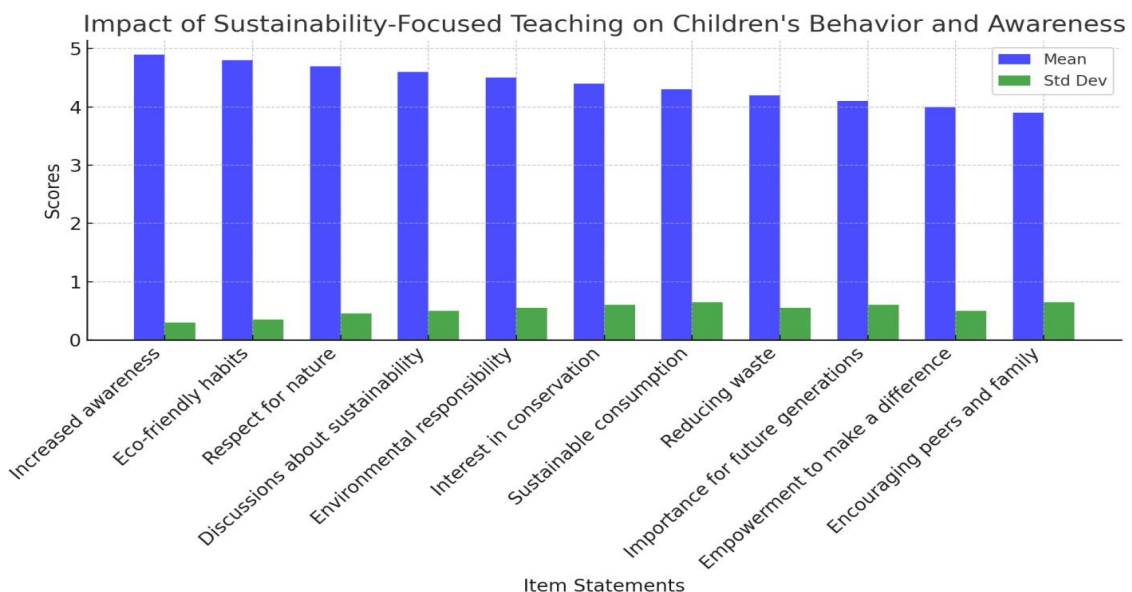


Figure 1: Impact of Sustainability-Focused Teaching on Young Children's Behavior and Awareness

The combo bar chart above illustrates the mean and standard deviation for each statement related to the impact of sustainability-focused teaching on young children's behavior and awareness. The mean scores consistently show a high level of positive impact, with the highest scores indicating greater effects. The standard deviation values reflect a moderate level of variation across responses, suggesting some differences in how respondents perceive these impacts. The chart highlights areas where sustainability-focused teaching is particularly effective in shaping children's awareness and behavior toward environmental responsibility.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that early childhood education teachers face several significant challenges in integrating sustainability into early childhood education. Among the primary challenges identified were a lack of resources, insufficient professional development opportunities, and institutional barriers, including limited support from educational policies. Educators often experience difficulty accessing eco-friendly materials and sustainable infrastructure, which hinders their ability to deliver effective sustainability-focused lessons. Additionally, a lack of formal training in sustainability concepts and pedagogies often leaves educators unprepared to integrate sustainability effectively into their teaching practices. These challenges align with the findings of Rieckmann (2018), who noted that institutional constraints and inadequate teacher training are major barriers to successful sustainability integration. Similarly, Davis (2020) emphasized that early childhood educators often feel unsupported due to the lack of sustainability-focused professional development opportunities. Moreover, Muro and Jeffrey (2019) discussed how cultural and institutional barriers to sustainability education in early childhood settings persist, further complicating efforts to integrate sustainability into everyday teaching.

The study identified various opportunities for early childhood education teachers to enhance sustainability-focused teaching practices. Key opportunities included participation in specialized professional development programs, access to sustainability-focused teaching resources, and fostering partnerships with local communities and environmental organizations. These opportunities provide educators with the knowledge and tools to integrate sustainability principles into their curriculum effectively. Furthermore, incorporating project-based learning and outdoor education approaches was also seen as an effective way to teach sustainability to young children. These findings are supported by Pramling Samuelsson (2018), who stressed the importance of professional development and curriculum reforms aimed at embedding sustainability in early childhood education. Additionally, Somerville (2022) highlighted the role of external collaborations in fostering sustainability in education, noting that partnerships with environmental organizations offer valuable resources and expertise. Similarly, Heijden, Meijer, and Janssens (2020) emphasized the role of experiential learning, suggesting that project-based approaches could enhance children's understanding of environmental sustainability.

The findings suggest that early childhood education teachers can effectively serve as role models in promoting sustainability by adopting sustainable practices both in and out of the classroom. These practices include simple actions such as reducing waste, using environmentally friendly materials, and demonstrating energy conservation efforts. Hence, by modeling sustainable behaviors, educators influence the development of children's environmental attitudes and behaviors, reinforcing the principles of sustainability in their everyday lives. These findings align with the work of Siraj-Blatchford and Brock (2019), who emphasized the importance of educators as environmental role models, noting that teachers' actions play a pivotal role in shaping children's environmental

consciousness. Somerville (2022) similarly highlighted the significance of educators as role models, suggesting that their actions help establish an eco-conscious classroom culture that reinforces sustainability values. Furthermore, Brooks and Kaye (2019) noted that teachers who actively engage in sustainability practices set powerful examples, showing children how sustainability can be embedded into daily routines. The findings revealed that sustainability-focused teaching has a profound impact on young children's behavior and environmental awareness. Exposure to sustainability-centered curricula and activities fosters a greater sense of responsibility toward the environment and encourages children to adopt pro-environmental behaviors such as recycling, conserving water, and reducing waste. The study found that children who engage in sustainability-focused activities demonstrate a heightened awareness of ecological issues, such as climate change and pollution, and develop a strong sense of responsibility for protecting the planet. These findings are consistent with the study by Rands (2020), which demonstrated that early childhood sustainability education results in positive changes in children's attitudes and behaviors towards environmental issues. Additionally, Vare and Scott (2021) found that children who participated in sustainability-focused education programs exhibited greater environmental consciousness and an increased willingness to engage in sustainability practices both at school and at home. Moreover, Williams (2021) noted that sustainability education can lead to long-term behavioral changes, as children develop an intrinsic understanding of environmental stewardship, which influences their future decision-making.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the growing body of research on sustainability in early childhood education by highlighting both the challenges and opportunities faced by educators. It underscores the importance of professional development, resource accessibility, and the educator's role as a sustainability role model. Additionally, the study provides insight into the impact of sustainability-focused teaching on young children's behavior and awareness. These findings contribute to the development of strategies for effectively integrating sustainability into early childhood education, ultimately fostering a more environmentally conscious generation.

Educational Implementations for Early Childhood Education Teachers

Incorporating sustainability into early childhood education requires practical strategies and educational implementations. Childhood Education Teachers should prioritize integrating sustainability themes into the curriculum, designing lessons that encourage environmental awareness, such as project-based learning, nature exploration, and eco-friendly activities. Experiential learning methods, where children engage in hands-on activities like gardening, recycling, and waste reduction, foster a deeper understanding of sustainable practices. Professional development opportunities, such as workshops and training, are essential for equipping educators with the knowledge and skills to effectively integrate sustainability into their teaching. Collaborative efforts with local communities, environmental organizations, and policymakers offer additional resources, support, and guidance to strengthen sustainability initiatives within early childhood education settings. The role of educators as sustainability role models is vital. Demonstrating eco-conscious behaviors, such as reducing waste, promoting energy conservation, and encouraging sustainable consumption, sets powerful examples for young children. These efforts should be supported by creating environments that promote sustainable practices within the classroom, including the use of eco-friendly materials, energy-efficient lighting, and waste management systems. Ultimately, integrating sustainability into early childhood education involves a multifaceted approach that

requires intentional curriculum design, ongoing professional development, and a commitment to fostering a culture of sustainability within educational settings. Through these efforts, educators can empower children to become environmental stewards, contributing to the achievement of global sustainability goals.

Conclusion

Conclusively, integrating sustainability into early childhood education presents both significant challenges and valuable opportunities. While barriers such as limited resources, insufficient professional development, and institutional resistance persist, there are meaningful avenues for enhancing sustainability in educational practices. These include leveraging eco-friendly materials, engaging in specialized professional development, and fostering collaboration with local communities to create sustainable learning environments. Early childhood educators also serve as vital role models for sustainable behaviors, influencing young learners' perceptions and actions regarding environmental responsibility. Consequently, by incorporating practices like recycling, nature-based learning, and project-based teaching, educators can instill a sense of environmental stewardship in children. Hence, despite existing challenges, the potential for transformative change in early childhood education through sustainability-focused teaching is substantial. With appropriate resources and support, early childhood education can effectively contribute to nurturing environmentally conscious future generations.

Recommendations

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

1. Early childhood education teachers should incorporate sustainability-centered activities, including project-based learning, nature exploration, and eco-friendly initiatives, into their teaching to foster environmental consciousness from an early age.
2. Professional development opportunities should be offered to educators, equipping them with essential knowledge and skills to implement sustainability-focused teaching practices effectively in early childhood settings.
3. Stronger collaboration among early childhood educators, local communities, environmental organizations, and policymakers should be encouraged to create more avenues for resources and support for sustainability education.
4. Early Childhood Education Teachers should model sustainable behaviors, such as waste reduction, energy conservation, and sustainable consumption, helping children understand and adopt these values in their everyday lives.
5. Educational institutions should design environments that promote sustainability by using eco-friendly materials, encouraging recycling, and implementing energy-efficient practices to reinforce sustainability principles in the classroom.

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