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Early Learning Experiences among Children from Diverse Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Abstract: *This study examines the early childhood education and social economic status of children between 2 – 5 years of agein Emuoha Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The results provide evidence of a significant linear relationship between family income and early childhood education. However, there is no evidence of a significant relationship between mothers' employment status and early childhood education. The study recommends that government educational policies should focus on children at the grass root level and provide unlimited access to quality education regardless of their family socioeconomic conditions*

Keywords: Early childhood, Education, Income, Socio-economic Status, Family Income

I. INTRODUCTION

Expanding and enhancing comprehensive early childhood care and education, particularly for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, is the first objective of the Education for All (EFA) framework for action, which was approved by the World Education Forum in Dakar (Barry, Brun, & Baeyens, 2000; UNICEF, 2013). This implies that regardless of the child's background, every newborn must have access to a secure, nurturing, and healthy learning environment. The government should principally utilize all available resources to guarantee that everyone, particularly children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, has access to appropriate and high-quality basic and early childhood care and education.

Even while the majority of governments worldwide are making genuine and coordinated efforts to fulfill this World Education Forum objective, more work must be done since poverty and malnutrition are still major problems, particularly in emerging and less developed nations like Nigeria.

According to the Global Study, moderate or severe stunting afflicted 171 million children under the age of five in 2010 (de Onis, & Blossner, Borghi, 2011; Prendergast & Humphrey, 2014). Additionally, it projects that by 2015, one in four children under the age of five would be stunted. Stunting is a medical disorder in which a kid or adult has malformed development and size due to persistent undernutrition in early infancy; it is linked to substandard brain damage, which has a long-lasting and detrimental effect on the child's cognitive abilities. According to Kristjansson et al. (2012), P. 1, and UNICEF (2013), "57% of children in developing countries, including 83% of Sun-Saharan Africa and 78% of the Arab region, are unable to have access to preschool."

Compared to their counterparts in wealthy homes, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children from the poorest households are around ten times less likely to attend early childhood education. This is because they were born with high-risk factors like poverty, a poor health care system, malnutrition, increased environmental and family stress, exposure to infectious diseases and HIV/AIDS, violence, abuses, neglect, migration, exploitation, and inadequate educational opportunities. As a result, approximately 200 million children under five in developing nations may not develop to their full potential; at least 250 million children worldwide who are of primary school age are unable to attend the minimum learning standard due to their poor reading, writing, and counting skills, even though some of them have attended school for four years or more.

Significant strides have been achieved in Nigeria in the endeavor to raise children's standards of life. But in order to do more, more work must be done. Children under the age of five died at a rate of 124 per 1000 in 2011, down from 201 per 1000 in 2003. Since the proportion of stunted children under five has decreased from 41% in 2008 to 36% in 2011, there has also been an improvement in the nutrition of children under five.

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However, the terms undernutrition and malnutrition are used interchangeably in this research. Both undernutrition and overnutrition are referred to as malnutrition. It's a disease of nutrition. For instance, overnutrition—which results in obesity—occurs when a person eats too many calories and protein. Conversely, undernutrition occurs when a person eats too little calories and protein.

It is impossible to separate undernutrition from poverty. Undernutrition is a result of poverty. Hunger, illness, and malnutrition are all consequences of poverty. Early childhood undernutrition results in poor mental and physical development that is irreversible, which eventually lowers educational achievement, wealth, and quality of life (Hadded, 2000).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development:

Many people agree that Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development is the best way to assess a child's cognitive growth. The elements that might impact a child's cognitive capacity throughout early schooling can be explained by this idea. According to Simatwa (2010) and Ojose (2008), Piaget's theory of intellectual development posits that children go through four distinct phases of intellectual development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. This intellectual growth begins with "rudimentary reflex response" and reaches full maturity via formal deductive reasoning. Additionally, according to Piaget's view, the kid is a "active investigator" who, as a newborn, responds to his surroundings with reflexive reactions before developing more sophisticated responses later in early childhood interactions.

According to Piaget, interaction entails both accommodation and assimilation. For instance, assimilation occurs when a youngster integrates new knowledge and experiences into an established framework or system. However, accommodation refers to a scenario in which the information and experience a youngster acquires about his surroundings is altered to permit the assimilation of additional new information as needed by the environment at that moment. Ball, Bindler, and Cowen (2010) point out that Piaget's theory assumes that a child's age, upbringing, and inherent cognitive maturational aptitude all have a significant impact on how they see life. By assimilating new experiences and adapting to dwell on them via accommodation, children play a significant role in the development of their own cognitive abilities. Simatwa (2010) asserts, however, that assimilation and accommodation have a reciprocal connection and that their combination enhances cognitive function.

A sensory-motor stage, which lasts from 0 to 2 years, preoperational or intuitive stage, which lasts from 2 to 7 years, concrete operations stage, which lasts from 7 to 11 years, and formal operations stage, which lasts from 11 to 15 years, are the main phases of Piaget's cognitive development, according to Simatwa (2010, p. 2).

Accordingly, the sensory motor stage and the preoperational or intuitive stage of Piaget's cognitive development stages are linked to this research, which focuses on the effects of socioeconomic disadvantages on early childhood schooling (Simatwa, 2010).

According to the effects of these stages, families, daycare facilities, child development organizations, and governments should start intervention policies and programs that would guarantee a high-quality and efficient sensory and intuitive environment if they want children at these stages to experience quality cognitive growth. For instance, parents need to be more worried about these socioeconomically disadvantaged children's health and nutritional condition (Simatwa, 2010). In order to create suitable activities and educational programs, such as toys, storybooks, games, and drawings, caregivers need, for instance, be able to comprehend the children's cognitive patterns. This is where Piaget's theory comes into play in this research. Additionally, parental warmth and support will be important for kids who are acting out due to worry and other unfavorable socioeconomic circumstances.

Empirical Review

Acharya, Teijlingen, Murphy, and Hind (2015) used a cross-sectional mixed-methods approach that included a quantitative and qualitative survey with 524 mothers of infants who are no longer nursed to examine nutritional issues in preschool-aged children in Nepal's Kaski District. The research looks at significant obstacles, food insecurity, health-

seeking behavior, and knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding wholesome food and child feeding practices. According to the survey, 20% of the moms who participated think it is bad to eat nutrient-dense food while unwell, and 42% of them know very little or nothing about the symptoms of undernutrition. The research also reveals that nutritional issues in children aged three to five are significantly correlated with the mother's age, educational attainment, child's age and gender, family size, and type. The research also demonstrates that caste, poverty, gender inequality, and social strife are seen as secondary causes of Nepal's undernutrition problems.

Alderman, Hoddinott, and Kinsey (2003) examined the influence of preschool hunger on later human capital creation in Zimbabwe using a mother fixed effects instrumental variable with a long-term panel data set. This study examined the long-term consequences of early childhood malnutrition. Civil war and drought "shock" proxies are used to illustrate how siblings' nutritional status varies in preschool. According to the research, preschoolers' height-for-age gains are correlated with their height as young adults and the number of grades they have completed.

Amosu, Degun, Atulomah, and Olanrewju (2011) used a descriptive cross-sectional research to investigate the nutritional status of children under five who lived in a village in southwest Nigeria and had low income earners. For the research, 600 children—304 boys and 296 girls—were chosen at random. Measures of nutritional status included height, weight, and the circumferences of the arms and chest. The children's weight-for-age, height-for-age, and weight-for-height are also calculated using this method. Information on the sociodemographic and economic traits, family food purchases, and baby feeding behaviors of mothers of children was gathered using a pretested questionnaire. The study's findings indicate that there were no significant differences between the male and female youngsters who were part of the sample. 82.13% of the Under-5 children were underweight, 33.52% were stunted, and 85.15% were wasted in terms of weight-for-age. Additionally, the results show that all of the children's intake of protein, iron, calcium, and vitamin A is inadequate. This may be due to the moms' very low monthly income level of 1500–5900 Naira and high degree of illiteracy, which stands at 80.7%. In summary, compared to children who get adequate nourishment, malnutrition is very prevalent among children under the age of five.

By analyzing the significance of early childhood nutrition on child health and education, Chilton, Chyatte, and Breaux (2007) explore the detrimental impacts of poverty and food insecurity on child development. They note that in order to solve the issues of poverty, funding for early childhood education, maternal-child physical and emotional care and feeding, and successful nutritional efforts are crucial. They consider a child's poor development and malnutrition to be an injustice. Furthermore, Akindele (2012) looks at how poverty affects early childhood education in Nigeria by showing up as poor infrastructure, inaccessible schools, a shortage of qualified and trained teachers, and a lack of funding to implement effective educational policies that will support early childhood education. The research offered doable solutions to poverty, especially in the context of early life. For instance, the creation and successful execution of policies and initiatives aimed at eliminating poverty, including successful public-private collaboration.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data and Sample

Three hundred respondents, sixty from each of the five villages in Rivers State, Nigeria's Emuoha Local Government Area, make up the sample. The communities include Rundele, Ogbakiri, Ndele, Elele Alimi, and Emuoha. Regardless of whether their children are enrolled or not, the respondents are moms (or guardians) of children aged two to five.

The research design used in this study is a descriptive survey. Evidence from the literature indicates that it is the best way to learn about the education and nutrition of children. A structured questionnaire is the tool employed in this research to gather data.

Two distinct non-probability techniques were used to get the sample. In particular, purposeful and convenient sampling methods were used. The five villages will be chosen by convenience sampling based on how close they are to the researcher. However, given the target persons (mothers of children aged 2 to 5) have comparable (particular) characteristics, the researcher thinks that using purposive sampling to choose 60 respondents from each neighborhood would provide the intended findings.

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Research Instrument

Poverty, Malnutrition and Early Childhood Education (PMECE) is the structured questionnaire used to gather data for this research. A, B, C, and D are the four parts that make up the questionnaire. The biological data of the respondents will be gathered in Section A, the socioeconomic data of the mother will be gathered in Section B, the nutritional data of the child will be gathered in Section C, and the education and enrollment data of the child will be gathered in Section D.

Method of data analysis

Several statistical techniques will be used to examine how poverty and hunger affect early childhood schooling. These consist of correlation analysis, percentages, and frequencies. While the chi-square test of linear association will be employed for inferential analysis and hypothesis testing, frequencies and percentages will be utilized for descriptive analysis. A body of empirical data indicates that these approaches can be utilized to capture the relationships of interest, which is why they will be used.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Mother's Employment Status

The job status of the mothers of the children in the study is shown in Figure 1. moms who are now working or self-employed are far more numerous than moms who are currently jobless, as this chart shows. Of the moms, 105 (35%) are now jobless, while 195 (65%) are employed.

Family Income

The estimated income levels of mothers of the children under investigation are shown in Figure 2. As we can see, 128 (42.7%) of the moms make between ₦18,000 and ₦24,999 per month, 118 (39.3%) make between ₦25,000 and ₦31,999 per month, 25 (8.3%), 13 (4.3%), and 16 (5.3%) make between ₦32,000 and ₦38,999, ₦39,000 and ₦45,999, and ₦46,000 or more per month. Table 4.1 shows that almost all (93.8%) of the women in the highest income group (₦46,000 or more) are teachers or government workers, whereas the majority (60.2%) of the mothers in the lowest income category (₦18,000 to ₦24,999) are farmers, hunters, or fisherman.

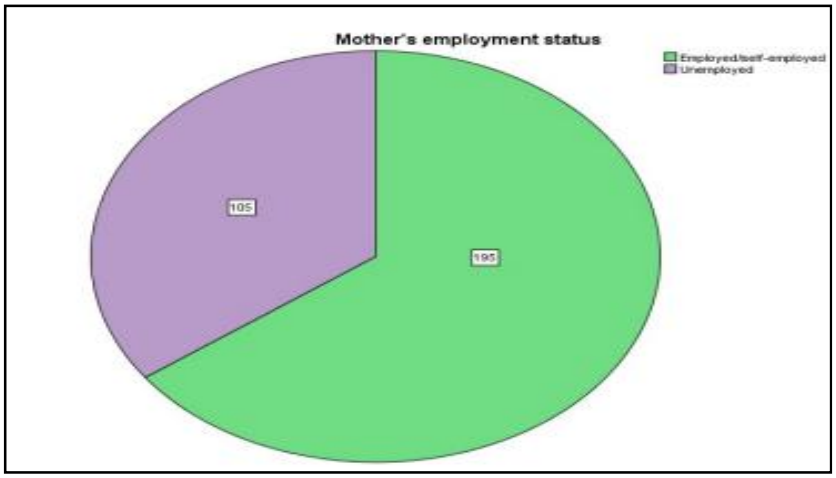

Figure 1: Mother's employment status; source: Author's Field Report 2015

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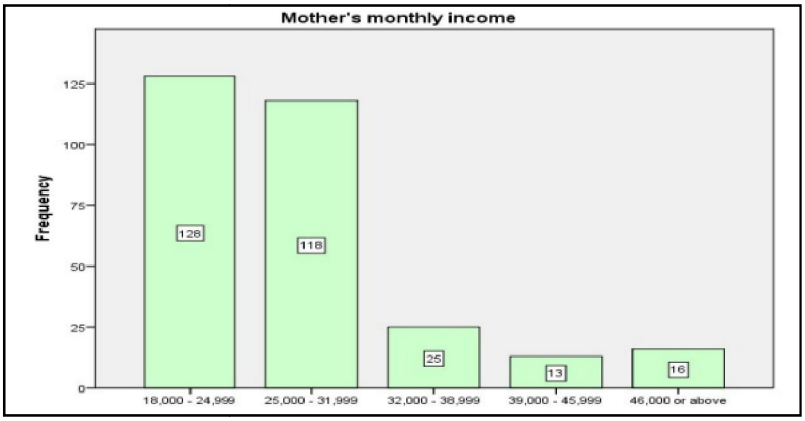

Figure 2: Mother's Income Level

Source: Author's Field Report 2015

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF MOTHER'S OCCUPATION BY INCOME LEVEL

Mother's Income Level	Farmer/Fisherman/Hunter	Trader/ Businessman	Artist/ Craftsman	Agent/ Contractor	Pastor/ Clergy	Teacher/Civil Servant
₦18,000 - ₦24,999	77 (60.2%)	36 (28.1%)	3 (2.3%)	8 (6.2%)	3 (2.3%)	1 (0.8%)
₦25,000 - ₦31,999	41 (34.7%)	44 (37.3%)	6 (5.1%)	23 (19.5%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (3.4%)
₦32,000 - ₦38,999	6 (24.0%)	4 (16.0%)	2 (8.0%)	12 (48.0%)	1 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)
₦39,000 - ₦45,999	1 (7.7%)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.7%)	8 (61.5%)	2 (15.4%)
₦46,000 or above	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (6.2%)	15 (93.8%)
Total	125 (41.7%)	85 (28.3%)	11 (3.7%)	44 (14.7%)	13 (4.3%)	22 (7.3%)

Figure 3 indicates that 121 (40.3%) of the mothers do not have other source of income apart from their regular work while 179 (59.7%) of them have. Thus, there is substantial difference between mothers who have supplementary income source and those who do not have.

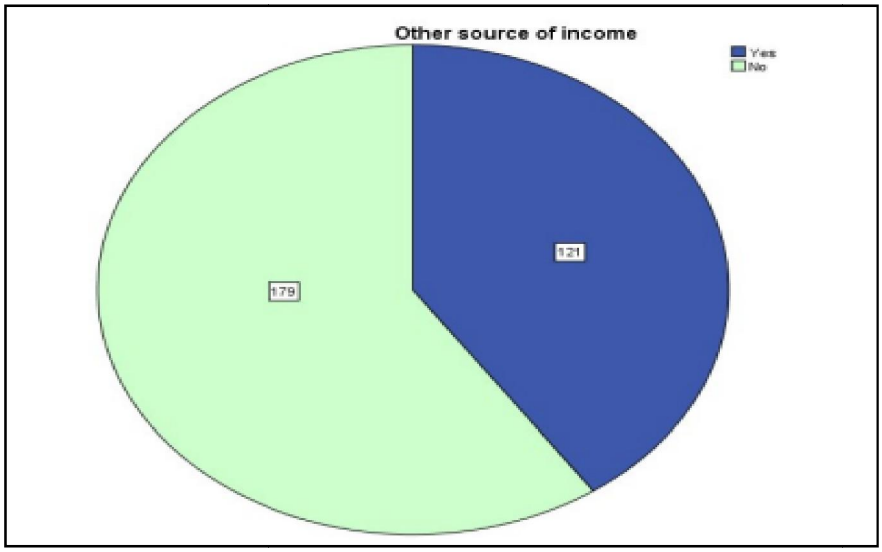

Figure 3: Other source of income; source: Author's Field Report 2015

Child's Enrolment Information

Table 2 shows the number of children of school age who have ever attended school. As we can see, 54.7% of the children have ever attended school while 45.3% are yet to attend school.

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TABLE 2: HAS YOUR CHILD EVER ATTENDED SCHOOL?

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	164	54.7%
No	136	45.3%
Total	300	100%

Table 3 shows the number of children of school age who are currently enrolled in school. As we can see, 54.7% of the children are currently enrolled in school while 45.3% are not currently enrolled in school.

TABLE 3. IS HE/SHE CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN SCHOOL?

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	164	54.7%
No	136	45.3%
Total	300	100%

Table 4 shows the number of children of school age who are currently at school this year. As we can see, 54.7% of the children are currently at school this year while 45.3% are not currently at school.

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	164	54.7%
No	136	45.3%
Total	300	100%

Table 5 shows the type of school the children under study are currently enrolled or planned to be enrolled. As we can see, majority of the children (214 or 71.3%) are either currently enrolled or planned to be enrolled in public schools while 86 (28.7%) of them are either currently enrolled or planned to be enrolled in mission schools. No child is currently enrolled in a private school.

TABLE 5 WHAT TYPE OF SCHOOL IS HE/SHE CURRENTLY ENROLLED OR PLANNED TO BE ENROLLED?

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Public School	214	71.3%
Private School	0	0%
Mission School	86	28.7%
Total	300	100%

Table 6 shows that the majority of the children under study are currently at Nursery school level while 71 (23.7%) of them are currently at Pre-Nursery school level. No child is currently at Primary School Level.

TABLE 6. WHAT IS HIS/HER CURRENT LEVEL OR GRADE AT SCHOOL?

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-Nursery	71	23.7%
Nursery	227	76.3%
Primary	0	0%
Total	300	100%

Table 7 shows how many times on average a child goes to school in a week. As this table reveals, only 69 (23%) of the children go to school every school day, 89 (29.7%) go to school more than three times a week and 142 (47.3%) go to school less than three times a week.

TABLE 7. HOW MANY TIMES ON AVERAGE DOES HE/SHE GO TO SCHOOL IN A WEEK?

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Every school day	69	23%
Not every school day but more than three times a week	89	29.7%

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Less than three times a week	142	47.3%
Total	300	100%

Inferential Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

While the hypothesis testing is based on the Chi-Square test of Linear by Linear Association (LLA), the inferential analysis is based on cross-tabulation of the correlations of interest.

The Relationship between Family Income and Early Childhood Education:

Early childhood education and family income do not significantly correlate.

The data in table 9, which displays a cross tabulation of the number of days a woman attends school each week and her monthly income, serves as the basis for the examination of the association between family income and early childhood education. Since the respondents are mothers of the children being studied, we believe that the number of mothers' monthly incomes is a good indicator of family income. Once again, we utilize a child's weekly attendance as a surrogate for early childhood education. Table 9 shows that 51.7% of the children whose mothers or heads of households earn between ₦25,000 − ₦31,999 in a month (the second largest category of children) and more than half (60.6%) of the 128 children whose mothers or head of households earn between ₦18,000 − ₦24,999 in a month (the largest category of children) attend school fewer than three days a week. This might imply a linear relationship between early childhood schooling and the mother's monthly income.

Since the examination of the link between the mother's monthly income and early childhood education is based on counts and percentages of categorical nominal data, the third hypothesis is tested using the Chi-square test of linear association. Table 4.18b shows that the LLA $\chi 2$ statistics are significant at the 5% level ($\chi 2$ = 4.007, p = 0.045), indicating a linear relationship between the mother's monthly income and the number of days she eats each week. Thus, the idea that there is no meaningful connection between early childhood education and family wealth is disproved.

TABLE 8. CROSSTABS FOR FAMILY INCOME AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Cross tabulation: Daily food expenses* How many times does your child go to school in a week?					
		How many times does he/she go to school in a week?			
		Ever school day	Not every school day but more than three days a week	Less than three days a week	Total
Family Income	₦18,000 - ₦24,999	26 (20.3%)	41 (38%)	61 (60.6%)	128 (42.7%)
	₦25,000 - ₦31,999	25 (21.2%)	32 (27.1%)	61 (51.7%)	118 (39.3%)
	₦32,000 - ₦38,999	6 (24%)	7 (28%)	12 (48%)	25 (8.3%)
	₦39,000 - ₦45,999	7 (53.8%)	3 (23.1%)	3 (23.1%)	13 (4.3%)
	₦46,000 or above	5 (31.2%)	6 (37.5%)	5 (31.2%)	16 (5.3%)
Total		69 (23%)	89 (29.7%)	142 (47.3%)	300 (100%)

TABLE 9 TEST OF LINEAR BY LINEAR ASSOCIATION (LLA)

Chi-square tests	Value	Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided)
LLA ^{2} statistic	4.007	0.045

The Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Early Childhood Education:

Early childhood education and socioeconomic level do not significantly correlate.

The information in table 10, which displays the cross tabulation of the number of mothers' work status and the number of days they attend school each week, serves as the basis for the examination of the link between socioeconomic status and early childhood education. Since we believe that a kid whose mother is jobless is more likely to suffer from malnutrition than a child whose mother is working or self-employed, we utilized the mother's employment status as a stand-in for socioeconomic position in this case. As usual, our surrogate for early childhood education is the number of days a kid attends school each week. Table 10 shows that 56 (28.7%) of the 195 children whose mothers are now

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working or self-employed attend school more than three days a week but not every school day, 44 (22.6%) attend school every school day, and 95 (48.7%) attend school less than three days a week. Twenty-five (23.8%) of the 105 children whose moms are now jobless attend school every day, while 47 (44.8%) attend fewer than three days a week, and 33 (31.4%) attend more than three days a week but not every school day. This may also imply a linear relationship between a child's weekly attendance at school and the mother's job position.

Since the examination of the link between a mother's job position and her early childhood education is based on counts and percentages of categorical nominal data, the fourth hypothesis is tested using the Chi-square test of linear association. The LLA $\chi 2$ statistics, as shown in table 12, are not significant at conventional levels ($\chi 2 = 0.286$, $p = 0.593$), indicating that there is no proof of a linear relationship between the mother's job status and the number of days she eats each week. Therefore, the hypothesis that there is no meaningful correlation between early childhood schooling and family socioeconomic position is not disproved.

TABLE 10 CROSSTABS FOR FAMILY INCOME AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Cross tabulation: Daily food expenses* How many times does your child go to school in a week?					
		How many times does he/she go to school in a week?			
		Every school day	Not every school day but more than three days a week	Less than three days a week	Total
Socio-Economic Status	Employed/Self-employed	44 (22.6%)	56 (28.7%)	95 (48.7%)	195 (65%)
	Unemployed	25 (23.8%)	33 (31.4%)	47 (44.8%)	105 (35%)
Total		69 (23%)	89 (29.7%)	142 (47.3%)	300 (100%)

TABLE 11 TEST OF LINEAR BY LINEAR ASSOCIATION (LLA)

Chi-square tests	Value	Asymptotic Sig. (2- sided)
LLA ^{2} statistic	0.286	0.593

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

First, table 4.18a's analysis of the relationship between family income and early childhood education shows that roughly 43% of all the children in the study are children whose mothers fall into the lowest income category, and roughly 61% of them attend school fewer than three days a week. Additionally, 39.3% of all the children in the survey are children whose moms earn between ₦25,000 and ₦31,999 per month, and more than half of them (51.7%) attend school less than three times each week. This suggests that early childhood education and the mother's monthly income are directly related. The hypothesis test findings in table 4.18b, which provide unambiguous proof of a linear relationship between a mother's monthly income and her children's early schooling, further confirm this. The null hypothesis, according to which family wealth and early childhood education do not significantly correlate, was therefore disproved. This result supports the claim that impoverished children and their parents dream of a brighter future but are unsure on how to get there (Treanor, 2012). According to Nicklas and Hayes (2008), this gives their peers from wealthy households a competitive advantage over them.

Second, table 4.19a's analysis of the relationship between early childhood education and family socioeconomic status shows that 65% of the children in the study have mothers who work or are self-employed, and 48.7% of them attend school fewer than three days a week, while only 22.6% attend every day. However, 35% of the children in the survey had moms who are jobless at the moment, and 44.8% of them attend school fewer than three days a week. This does not explicitly imply that early childhood education and the mother's socioeconomic level are directly related.

Nevertheless, table 4.19b's hypothesis testing results indicate that there is no proof of a linear relationship between socioeconomic level and early childhood education. Therefore, the null hypothesis—that socioeconomic status and early childhood education do not significantly correlate—was not disproved.

However, this research suggests that government educational programs should prioritize children at the local level and provide them unrestricted access to high-quality education, irrespective of the socioeconomic status of their families. Thus, the results demonstrate that, in Rivers State, Nigeria, early childhood education and socioeconomic level are related.

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