
**EXPLORING THE COMMUNITY ROLE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT. A CASE STUDY OF LUMBADZI AREA
TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY MKUKULA DOWA DISTRICT**

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Article Received: 01 July 2026, Article Revised: 21 July 2026, Published on: 08 August 2026

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.2446>

ABSTRACT

The study examined the role of community involvement in promoting Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes in Lumbadzi, Lilongwe District, Malawi. The study was conducted because community participation was recognized as a critical factor in the establishment, implementation, and sustainability of Community-Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs), yet several challenges continued to affect effective participation. The objectives of the study were to examine community contributions to ECD, assess the role of community leaders in supporting ECD programmes, evaluate partnerships between communities, government, and non-governmental organizations, identify challenges affecting community involvement, and determine the effectiveness of community participation in improving child development outcomes.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a descriptive research design. Purposive sampling was used to select community leaders and caregivers who possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding ECD programmes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were observed throughout the study.

The findings revealed that communities made significant contributions towards the establishment and operation of CBCCs through voluntary labour, provision of locally available construction materials, food contributions, and participation in maintenance

activities. Community leaders mobilized parents, supervised CBCC management committees, and promoted children's enrolment in early learning programmes. The study also found that partnerships with government institutions and non-governmental organizations provided caregiver training and technical support, although such collaborations were often irregular. Major challenges included poverty, inadequate teaching and learning materials, limited infrastructure, cultural beliefs, and inconsistent parental participation.

The study concluded that community participation played a fundamental role in strengthening Early Childhood Development programmes and improving child outcomes. The study recommended strengthening partnerships, increasing government support, improving resource allocation, enhancing community awareness, and promoting continuous capacity building for caregivers and community leaders to ensure sustainable and effective ECD service delivery.

KEY WORDS: CBCC: Community Based Child Care Centre, ECD: Early Child Development, NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development (ECD) plays a foundational role in shaping an individual's lifelong learning, behaviour, and health. The period from birth to around eight years of age is marked by rapid brain development and significant cognitive, emotional, and social growth. During these formative years, children acquire essential skills such as language, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and social interactions, all of which influence their future academic success and overall well-being.

ECD is not only critical for individual growth but also serves as a cornerstone for societal development. Children who receive adequate support during these early years are more likely to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally, thereby reducing the risk of adverse outcomes in education, employment, and interpersonal relationships. This highlights the importance of active involvement from families, communities, and policymakers in ensuring that children receive the necessary support to maximize their developmental potential.

Background of the Study

In a study conducted by Lau & Snell (2020) on the role of communities in early childhood development in the United States, the Head Start Program, launched for low-income children, had unintended consequences. Although the program was highly effective, its title gave

parents the impression that education was a competitive race and that the earlier a child started, the better their outcomes would be. Consequently, middle-income parents also sought early education for their preschoolers. This highlighted the importance of ECD in improving children's developmental trajectories. As a result, kindergarten, once a half-day program required by only 40 percent of U.S. states, has now largely become a full-day requirement nationwide.

Empirical evidence indicates that community participation significantly impacts ECD by providing a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters children's social-emotional skills and a sense of belonging. Yoshikawa (2018) in Lesotho notes that community-driven initiatives are increasingly recognized as crucial for improving early childhood outcomes, particularly in remote areas where government services are scarce. Strong social networks within communities enhance the effectiveness of early childhood programs, especially when local participation tailors learning activities to the cultural and environmental needs of children. These initiatives often extend beyond education to address health and nutrition, tackling issues such as stunting and malnutrition. Partnerships among local communities, government bodies, and NGOs are essential for creating an environment where children can access comprehensive support systems that promote healthy development and learning from a young age.

Malawi has one of the most extensive networks of ECD centres in Africa, comprising community-based childcare centres (CBCCs), preschools, and daycare centres (Yallow et al., 2012). These centres aim to ensure that children in Malawi benefit from early interventions that help them develop foundational skills, attitudes, behaviours, and values that last a lifetime. CBCCs, which cater to children aged 3–5 years, are managed by parents, guardians, caregivers, and other community members (Messenger & Levy, 2022).

A study by Munthali et al. (2014) in Lilongwe investigated the impact of community-based early year's centres on children's learning and development. These centres, facilitated by the government and managed by the community, received support in the form of buildings, kitchen utensils, food, and play materials. The study found that such community involvement improved children's cognitive and mental development. Furthermore, Kira (2021) argued that successful early childhood programs across countries like Haiti, Uganda, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya, and Pakistan share key features, including a child-centered approach, parental involvement, and effective facilitation.

Research Objectives

Main Objective

To explore the role of the community in early childhood development: A case study of Lumbadzi area.

Specific Objectives

- 1.To identify the role of the community in providing services for early childhood development.
- 2.To identify challenges that community members face in implementing ECD programs.
3. To assess the effectiveness of community involvement in early childhood development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a detailed review of the literature on the roles of the community in early childhood development (ECD). It begins by defining key concepts used in the study, followed by critical empirical evidence that relates to the study's specific objectives. The chapter also discusses challenges faced in implementing ECD initiatives and explores the effectiveness of community engagement. Finally, theoretical perspectives are outlined to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how community involvement shapes early childhood outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, posits that children learn behaviours and skills through observation, imitation, and modeling. Children exposed to positive role models such as caregivers, parents, teachers, and peers are more likely to adopt adaptive social and emotional behaviours. This theory underscores the importance of community members serving as positive influences that reinforce learning through daily interactions and supportive feedback.

In the context of the Lumbadzi area, community leaders and caregivers provide environments where children can observe and engage in prosocial behaviour, cultural practices, and communication skills that form the basis of lifelong learning. When communities actively model constructive behaviours, children receive consistent reinforcement of positive attitudes, social norms, and problem-solving skills.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, emphasizes that multiple interconnected environmental systems influence child development. These systems include the microsystem (family and CBCCs), mesosystem (interactions between family and community services), exosystem (social and health services available within the community), and macrosystem (cultural norms and socio-economic policies). Each level interacts with the others, showing that child development is not solely a product of caregiving but is shaped by broader system interactions.

This theory highlights why community involvement matters: community structures, resources, and cultural norms determine access to education, healthcare, and nutrition—all of which influence child outcomes. By embedding ECD programs within supportive ecological contexts, communities leverage resources across systems to optimize holistic development. Ecological perspectives allow policymakers and practitioners to identify opportunities for collaboration across sectors to strengthen ECD frameworks and improve service delivery.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Method and Design

Research Design

A research design was an analytical framework that integrated the various components of the study to address the research problem systematically (Vaus, 2022). For this study, an exploratory research design was adopted, as it was particularly suitable for topics that were not well-defined or fully understood. According to George (2021), exploratory research design allowed the researcher to investigate the “how” and “why” of an issue, uncover patterns, generate hypotheses, and provide a detailed understanding of complex phenomena. In the context of this study, it helped to explore the multifaceted roles of the community in supporting ECD in Lumbadzi.

Research Methods

Research methods were the systematic techniques used to collect, process, and analyze information relevant to a study (McLeod, 2019). This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences, perceptions, and opinions. Qualitative methods were particularly effective in exploring social phenomena in their natural context and in capturing the nuanced interactions between community members, caregivers, and children (Patton, 2015). This approach ensured rich,

descriptive data that highlighted the lived experiences and challenges of community engagement in ECD.

Study Population

The study population consisted of all individuals or elements relevant to the research topic (Michalos, 2016). For this study, the target population included leaders of CBCCs, teachers, caregivers, and community members involved in ECD, as they provided direct insights into the community's contribution to child development. Children who participated in CBCC programs were also included to capture the impact of community roles from the beneficiaries' perspective. This diverse population ensured a comprehensive understanding of both service provision and developmental outcomes.

Research Instruments

A research instrument was a tool used to collect, measure, and analyze data (Carson, 2018). This study used interview guides to gather qualitative data. Interviews were chosen because they enabled direct interaction with participants, allowed for clarification of questions, and facilitated the collection of rich, contextual information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives on community roles, challenges, and effectiveness in ECD.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved systematically gathering information to address research questions and evaluate outcomes (Simplilearn, 2022). The researcher asked questions to teachers and community members involved in early childhood development. The interview guide was administered to respondents one-on-one, and responses were recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. Questions were translated into the local language to ensure full understanding by participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was the systematic process of inspecting, coding, and interpreting data to generate meaningful insights (Coursera, 2022). For this study, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships in the qualitative data. Transcripts from interviews were coded and categorized according to the study objectives: community roles, challenges, and effectiveness in ECD. This method enabled the researcher to extract insights that addressed research questions and supported evidence-based conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

This chapter presents and discusses findings from the qualitative study on exploring the community role in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Lumbadzi area. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with community leaders and caregivers. Using thematic analysis, responses were transcribed, coded, and grouped into major themes aligned with the research objectives. The findings are presented narratively with verbatim quotations to reflect participants' lived experiences.

Response Rate

In this study, a total of 10 participants were selected for in-depth interviews, comprising 5 community leaders and 5 caregivers who are actively involved in Early Childhood Development (ECD) activities in Lumbadzi area. All 10 participants agreed to take part in the study, yielding a 100% response rate.

The high response rate reflects strong willingness among both community leaders and caregivers to share their experiences and insights regarding the role of the community in supporting Early Childhood Development. This full participation enhances the credibility and reliability of the qualitative data collected.

Demographic information

This section presents the demographic profile of the study participants, including gender, age, and education level. Understanding participant demographics is essential to contextualize their perspectives on community involvement in Early Childhood Development (ECD). The participants included community leaders and caregivers who directly interact with Community-Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs).

4.3. Gender Distribution

Table 4.3.1: Gender Distribution of Participants.

Participant Group	Male	Female	Total
Community Leaders	3	2	5
Caregivers	2	3	5
Total	5	5	10

Presentation

The table shows an equal gender distribution among the participants (50% male and 50% female). Among community leaders, males were slightly more represented (3 males, 2 females), while caregivers had a majority of females (3 females, 2 males). This balance ensures that both male and female perspectives are considered in the study.

4.3.2 Age Distribution

Table 4.3.2: Age Distribution of Participants

Participant Group	10–20	20–30	30–40	40–50	50–60	Total
Community Leaders	0	1	2	2	0	5
Caregivers	0	2	2	1	0	5
Total	0	3	4	3	0	10

Presentation

Table 4.3.2 indicates that most participants were aged between 30–40 years (4 participants), followed by the 40–50 age range (3 participants). This shows that the majority of respondents were mature adults with sufficient life and community experience to provide informed insights about ECD activities. Only a few participants were aged 20–30, reflecting the involvement of younger adults in community childcare roles.

4.3.3 Education Level

Table 4.3.3: Education Level of Participants.

Participant Group	JCE	MSCE	Diploma	Degree	Other	Total
Community Leaders	0	2	2	1	0	5
Caregivers	1	3	1	0	0	5
Total	1	5	3	1	0	10

Presentation

Table 4.3.3 shows that the majority of participants (5 out of 10) had completed MSCE, indicating moderate educational attainment suitable for understanding and implementing ECD initiatives. Diploma holders (3 participants) and one degree holder reflect higher education levels among community leaders, enhancing their capacity to provide guidance and leadership in childcare activities. Only one caregiver had JCE, highlighting potential limitations in formal educational background but emphasizing practical experience in caregiving.

Summary of Findings

The study revealed that community participation in Lumbadzi significantly contributes to the initiation, management, and effectiveness of ECD programmes. Community members demonstrated strong ownership by providing voluntary labour, materials for CBCC construction, and support for feeding programmes. One community leader noted, *“When we started the CBCC, there was no donor support. We moulded bricks ourselves and built the structure as a community.”* These findings align with Epstein’s (2021) framework of school-

family-community partnerships, which emphasizes the critical role of active community involvement in enhancing educational outcomes.

Community leaders played a central role as mobilizers, coordinators, and supervisors of ECD activities. They organized village meetings to sensitize parents, supervised CBCC management committees, and followed up on children's attendance. This resonates with UNICEF (2022), which highlights the importance of leadership in fostering effective early childhood systems, and Shonkoff and Phillips (2020), who emphasize governance structures as critical for cognitive and socio-emotional development.

The study also revealed that partnerships with government institutions and NGOs existed but were inconsistent and insufficient. While training sessions and occasional material support were provided, irregularity limited programme effectiveness. This supports Britto et al. (2017), who argue that integrated multi-sectoral collaboration is vital for sustainable ECD systems.

Challenges such as poverty, limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural perceptions were reported as barriers to full community participation. Parents' economic vulnerability affected contributions to feeding programmes and consistent child attendance. This is consistent with Engle et al. (2007), who highlight poverty as a structural barrier to early childhood service delivery. Cultural beliefs also influenced participation, aligning with Woodhead (2006), who notes that traditional norms shape early enrolment decisions.

Despite these challenges, community involvement positively impacted children's cognitive, social, and behavioral development. Caregivers reported improvements in language skills, social interaction, hygiene practices, and school readiness. One leader observed, *"Teachers at primary school tell us that children from CBCC perform better than those who did not attend."* These findings support Heckman (2006) and Melhuish et al. (2015), who assert that early educational exposure yields significant long-term benefits in academic achievement and socio-economic outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of the community in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Lumbadzi. First, community participation is fundamental to the establishment, operation, and effectiveness of ECD programmes. The voluntary contributions of labour, materials, and food, alongside active involvement in centre maintenance, demonstrate a strong sense of collective responsibility

and ownership. This level of engagement ensures that CBCCs continue to function effectively, even in the absence of substantial external support.

Second, community leaders play a pivotal role in mobilizing parents, supervising the operations of CBCCs, and ensuring accountability in resource utilization. Their efforts in sensitizing parents about the importance of early education, monitoring children's attendance, and guiding CBCC management committees have positively influenced both enrolment and consistent participation of children. This leadership fosters trust in the community and strengthens the overall performance of ECD programmes.

Third, although partnerships with government agencies and non-governmental organizations exist, they are often irregular and inconsistent. This limitation reduces access to essential training, learning materials, and technical support, which constrains the optimal outcomes of ECD programmes. Strengthening these partnerships would enhance programme sustainability and the quality of services offered to children.

Fourth, structural challenges, including poverty, limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural beliefs, restrict the full effectiveness and long-term sustainability of community-driven ECD initiatives. Household-level economic constraints affect parents' ability to contribute to feeding programmes or support regular attendance, while cultural perceptions sometimes delay enrolment or limit parental engagement.

Finally, despite these challenges, community involvement has yielded significant positive developmental outcomes for children. Regular attendance at CBCCs has been associated with improvements in language acquisition, social interaction, hygiene practices, and school readiness. These findings demonstrate that even resource-limited, community-driven ECD initiatives can produce meaningful cognitive, social, and behavioural gains for children, underscoring the value of active community engagement in early childhood development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of ECD programmes in Lumbadzi:

The study recommends that communities continue to actively participate in Community-Based Childcare Centre (CBCC) activities through volunteerism, local resource mobilization, and parental involvement. Sustained community engagement is essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of Early Childhood Development (ECD)

programmes. Efforts should be made to encourage community ownership of CBCC initiatives to promote accountability and continuity of services.

Community leaders responsible for overseeing CBCC activities should receive regular training and mentorship in areas such as leadership, management, monitoring, and supervision. Strengthening leadership capacity will improve coordination of ECD activities, enhance transparency in resource utilization, and increase parental confidence in the management of childcare centres.

Government ministries, development partners, and non-governmental organizations should provide consistent technical, financial, and material support to CBCCs. Such support should include teacher training, provision of learning and teaching materials, infrastructure development, and regular monitoring. Strengthened institutional support will complement community efforts and contribute to improved quality of ECD services.

Since poverty remains a major challenge affecting parental participation and contribution to CBCC activities, the study recommends the establishment of community-based income-generating initiatives, savings groups, and local fundraising mechanisms. These interventions can enhance households' economic capacity and improve their ability to support feeding programmes and other essential centre requirements.

Awareness and sensitization campaigns should be conducted to educate communities on the importance of early childhood education and development. These campaigns should target parents, caregivers, traditional leaders, and other community stakeholders to address cultural beliefs and misconceptions that may hinder children's enrolment and participation in ECD programmes. Increased awareness is likely to improve acceptance and support for structured early learning opportunities.

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