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MOTHER TONGUE LITERACY AS TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ABAKALIKI EDUCATION ZONE OF EBONYI STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on Mother Tongue Literacy as tool for Sustainable Development in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. Three research questions in line specific objectives and null hypotheses guided the study. The population of the study comprised all the 221 English Language Teachers in Public Secondary Schools in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The breakdown has 116 male and 105 female teachers. The sample of the study was the entire two hundred and twenty-one (221) English Language Teachers in Public Secondary Schools in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The researcher developed a structured questionnaire titled, Questionnaire on Mother Tongue Literacy as tool for Sustainable Development (QMTLTSD)' which was used as instrument for data collection. Data collected were analyzed using mean (x) and standard deviation to answer the research questions and t-test statistics to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The study revealed that: mother tongue literacy served as an instrument for improving access to quality education was to high extent, secondly, mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion and empowering communities participation in decision making process were to a high extent while the results of the hypotheses revealed that There is no significant difference between the mean ratings on male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education and for social inclusion Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. Based on the findings, the study recommended that: Governments should integrate mother tongue literacy into national education policies, ensuring that curricula reflect and promote local languages alongside global languages and Government of Ebonyi State should organise teacher training and provide infrastructure supports with mother tongue education accessible educational materials in various local languages.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Literacy, Quality Education, Sustainable Development, Social Inclusion, Community Participation

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the significance of mother tongue literacy extends beyond individual educational success; it serves as a foundational pillar for sustainable develop ment. Mother tongue refers to the first language that a person learns from birth, typically spoken by their parents or caregivers. It serves as a primary mode of communication and cultural expression. Mother tongue is basically, the language learned by children at home from their parents. This definition highlights the home environment's role in language acquisition. Andrew (2020), emphasizes that a mother tongue is not merely a means of communication but also a vessel for cultural identity. He stated, that wise man does not lay down his knowledge in one language; it becomes part of his life in many languages. Therefore, one's mother tongue forms the foundation of cognitive development and understanding of the world.

Mother tongue literacy refers to the ability to read and write in one's technical skills of literacy but also the comprehension, critical thinking, and cultural appreciation associated with using one's native language (Okoro, 2020). Research by UNESCO, (2020) shows that children who learn in their mother tongue have a greater chance of becoming proficient in literacy, which in turn supports better learning outcomes in other subjects. The United Nations recognizes the critical role of language in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

At its core, mother tongue literacy preserves cultural heritage and identity. Languages carry traditions, histories, and values unique to each community, through educating individuals in their native languages, societies safeguard these cultural resources, thereby promoting social cohesion. For instance, indigenous languages often encompass ecological knowledge and practices vital for sustainable environmental stewardship (Okoro,2020). By encouraging literacy in these languages, we not only validate the speakers' identities but also empower them to participate actively in dialogues about sustainability. Moreover, mother tongue literacy catalyzes economic development. Individuals proficient in their native languages are more likely to engage in local markets and contribute to their economies. Education in the mother tongue has been shown to increase job prospects and income levels, facilitating upward mobility for families and communities. A literate workforce can adapt more readily to technological changes, promoting innovation and economic resilience. Lastly, fostering mother tongue literacy enables the intersection of global and local narratives. In a world dominated by a few languages, grammatical and participation in global issues become difficult. we acknowledge diverse perspectives that contribute to finding holistic solutions as a strategic tool for embracing native languages. Societies can preserve cultural identities, empower economies, improve educational outcomes, and foster sustainable future by investing in mother tongue literacy which represents a vital step in building more inclusive,

equitable, and resilient communities. But aspects of sustainable development in which study investigated on are access to quality education, social inclusion and communities' participation in decision making process (Isu, 2021).

Access to equality in education refers to the right and ability of all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic background, race, gender, or geographic location, to receive a high-quality education that meets their needs. The concept emphasizes that educational opportunities should be equitable and inclusive enable every learner to achieve their full potential. UNESCO (2021) highlights that access to education is not merely about physical availability but also includes aspects such as affordability, acceptability, and adaptability of educational provisions to meet diverse learners' needs. They argue that quality education must incorporate relevant content and pedagogical approaches that are culturally appropriate and supportive of learners. Maton and Moore (2014) emphasize the importance of recognizing and integrating indigenous languages and cultural knowledge within educational frameworks. They assert that access to quality education entails empowering marginalized communities by validating their identities and nurturing their languages, thereby promoting life-long learning. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) 2017 provide further insight, defining access to quality education as ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This definition stresses the need for educational systems that do not discriminate and that uphold the dignity of every learner.

Mother tongue literacy plays a critical role in improving access to quality education, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts. The following study explores how literacy in one's native language enhances educational outcomes and fosters a more inclusive learning environment. Language is a powerful vehicle for knowledge transfer and cognitive development. When children are educated in their mother tongue, they can better understand concepts, express themselves, and engage with learning materials. Okoro (2020) states that early education in the mother tongue significantly enhances comprehension skills and overall reception of instruction in their native language to develop stronger reading skills, better vocabulary, and improved cognitive abilities. Kingsley (2019) argues that proficiency in a child's first language lays the groundwork for literacy development, enabling them to grasp complex subjects more that are taught in their mother tongue. They are more likely to comprehend lesson contents and participate actively in discussions.

Access to education in one's native language also supports cultural identity and inclusivity. Education systems that recognize and value indigenous languages create environments where students feel respected and understood. This cultural affirmation levels of motivation and engagement among learners, translates to better attendance and persistence in education. Mother tongue literacy is essential for improving access to quality education. It enhances

comprehension, fosters cultural identity, promotes inclusivity, and bridges language gaps. Educational policies should prioritize mother tongue instruction as a fundamental strategy for achieving equitable and effective educational outcomes for all learners (Oduma, 2019). As we seek to create educational systems that are truly inclusive and accessible, recognizing the importance of mother tongue, literacy is a crucial step forward.

Social inclusion is a vital concept that refers to the processes through which individuals are integrated into society, allowing them to participate fully in social, economic, and cultural life. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances, have equal opportunities to engage, contribute, and benefit from societal resources, (Okoro, 2020). Social inclusion involves enabling individuals to be free to achieve well-being, emphasizing the need for equitable access to resources and opportunities. Social inclusion is not merely about economic participation but also encompasses social relationships, support systems, and the recognition of diverse identities. Social inclusion requires active efforts to dismantle barriers that marginalize certain groups, promoting diversity and mutual respect. According to Madani (2019), social inclusion is the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. It focuses on fostering equality and reducing disparities in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and healthcare. Social inclusion is primarily concerned with creating environments that enable all individuals, especially the marginalized, to participate actively in society. This includes dismantling systemic barriers and fostering conditions that promote equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Mother tongue literacy, defined as the ability to read and write in one's native language, plays a critical role in enhancing social inclusion. This aspect of linguistic education fosters a sense of identity, promotes educational equity, and facilitates greater community engagement.
Learning in one's mother tongue is intrinsically and self-worth. Mother tongue literacy allows individuals to express themselves cultural identity. When learners see their languages valued and used in educational settings, it affirms their identity and fosters a sense of belonging. This self-respect and confidence can lead to increased social participation, as individuals are more likely to engage in community activities when they feel proud of their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Mother tongue literacy is foundational for academic success. Research by Cummins (2000) suggests that students who are educated in their mother tongue perform better academically compared to those who use second language. When children are able to learn in the language they speak at home, they grasp concepts more effectively, have higher levels of comprehension, and ultimately achieve better educational outcomes. Access to quality education in their native language empowers marginalized communities, thus promoting social equity and inclusion.
Promoting mother tongue literacy can also serve to break down linguistic barriers that

often lead to exclusion. As noted by the Global Education Monitoring Report (2021), multilingual education initiatives help to include learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This inclusivity not only benefits those who speak minority languages but also enriches the educational experience for all students by fostering intercultural understanding and respect. Policies that advocate for mother tongue instruction in schools should be prioritized, recognizing that such an approach not only benefits individuals but also strengthens communities and enhances social cohesion. Addressing the needs of diverse linguistic populations is essential to building a truly inclusive society where all members can thrive and contribute meaningfully. It leads to active communities participate in decision making process. Community participation in decision making and help active involvement of individuals, groups, and organizations within the processes that affect their lives. This concept is rooted in the belief that those most impacted by decisions should have a voice in making them. Nweke (2021) states that community participation can range from manipulation and therapy (low levels of participation) to citizen control processes. He argues that when communities are interconnected and actively engaged, it fosters trust and cooperation, which enhances decision-making processes. Furthermore, Adrew (2018) describes community participation as an essential mechanism for ensuring that local knowledge, preferences, and values inform public policies. She posits that such involvement promotes transparency, equity, and accountability in governance. The ability to read and write in one's mother tongue is crucial for effective participation in decision-making processes. Mother tongue literacy not only empowers individuals but also strengthens communities by providing a foundation for informed civic engagement. This study explores the extent to which literacy in one's native language enhances community participation in decision-making processes. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021) highlighted that, students who receive education in their mother tongue are more likely to succeed academically. This success as literate citizens are better equipped to engage with policies and advocate for their rights. A report by the Global Education Monitoring Report (2021) emphasizes that education systems should prioritize mother tongue instruction to enhance community engagement, recognizing that language is a vital tool for participation. Mother tongue literacy significantly enhances community participation in decision-making processes. By empowering individuals, bridging cultivating informed citizens, literacy enables a more inclusive and equitable approach to governance. As evidenced by current research and reports, fostering mother tongue literacy is critical for successful community engagement and decision-making. Therefore, educational policies must prioritize and support mother tongue instruction, recognizing its vital role in enhancing community participation. The focus of this paper is to investigate the extent to which Mother Tongue Literacy serve as a tool for Sustainable Development in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

Statement of the problem

The emphasis on mother tongue literacy as an important component of sustainable

development strategies is to position mother tongue literacy as a panacea for educational and social challenges. Poor communication can lead policymakers to neglect other critical areas of intervention, such as infrastructure, teacher training, and resource allocation. Second, a narrow focus on mother tongue literacy may marginalize communities who do not have a written form of their language or those that speak multiple languages. Such a focus can exacerbate existing inequalities, alienating groups whose languages are deemed less. This could perpetuate stereotypes about certain ethnic groups, further entrenching prejudices rather than fostering inclusivity. When individuals are viewed, it reduces their identity to a singular attribute, which can undermine their broader social contributions and agency.

Furthermore, the unequal distribution of linguistic power and privilege perpetuate social inequalities and reinforce hierarchies based on language proficiency which create barriers to effective communication and collaboration among diverse groups, limiting the potential for mutual understanding and cooperation. In addition, the lack of recognition and respect for mother tongue contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes and discrimination against other languages. The focus of this paper therefore is to investigate the extent to which Mother Tongue Literacy serve as a tool for Sustainable Development in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate Mother Tongue Literacy as tool for Sustainable Development in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Ascertain the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State
2. Determine the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State
3. ascertain the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for empowering communities' participation in decision making process in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. to what extent does mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?
2. to what extent does mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?
3. to what extent does mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for empowering communities' participation in decision making process in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother

tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education

2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion.

Research Method

A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. Descriptive survey design according to Abonyi, (2011) consists of studies in which data are collected from a small sample of a large population to enable the researcher describe in a systematic manner and interpret the characteristic features and facts about things that exist. A survey is a descriptive study when it seeks to document and describe what exists or the present status of existence or absence of what is being investigated. The study was carried out in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The population of the study comprised all the 221 English language teachers in the 77 public secondary schools in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State (Ebonyi State Secondary Education Board, 2024). The entire population was used as the sample size of the study. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher, titled 'Mother Tongue Literacy as tool for Sustainable Development Questionnaire (MTLTSDQ). To determine the reliability of the instrument, 30 copies of the questionnaire were trial tested in public secondary schools in Onueke Education Zone of Ebonyi State which was outside the study area. The instrument was administered to 30 teachers and the data collected was subjected to the test of internal consistency using Cronbach Alpha procedure with reliability coefficient of 0.86. The data collected for this study were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while the hypothesis was tested using the t- test at 0.05 level of significance. Any item with a mean equal to or greater than 2.50 was accepted, while those below 2.5 were rejected. That is, on a four-point scale of (Very High Extent (VHE = 4), High Extent HE = 3), Low Extent (LE = 2), and Very Low Extent (VLE = 1). Where: 4+3+2+1 = 10/4 = 2.50. +

Presentation of Results

Research Question One: To what extent does mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education

S/N	Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
1	Mother tongue literacy enables students to better understand instructional materials	3.48	0.60	HE
2	Mother tongue literacy allow students to participate fully in educational programs	3.29	0.68	HE
3	Mother tongue literacy enables students to actively participate in classroom discussion	3.16	0.67	HE
4	Mother tongue literacy helps students in retaining information	2.72	0.80	HE
5	Mother tongue literacy facilitates effective teacher-student interaction	3.36	0.76	HE
	Grand Mean	**3.20**		**HE**

Table 1 showed that the respondents agreed to high extent in item 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 with mean score of3.48, 3.29, 3.16, 2.72 and 3.36 respectively. This is an indication that, mother tongue literacy serves as an instrument for improving access to quality education in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State with a grand mean score of 3.45.

Research Question Two: To what extent does mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion

S/N	Items	X	SD	Decision
6	Mother tongue literacy enables individual to connect with their heritage and community	3.29	0.88	VHE
7	Mother tongue literacy help in breaking language barriers	3.39	0.71	HE
8	Mother tongue literacy empowers marginalized groups	3.39	0.59	HE
9	Mother tongue literacy foster social cohesion	3.40	0.62	HE
10	Mother tongue literacy enable individual to participate in democratic processes	3.15	0.85	HE
	Grand Mean	**3.32**		**HE**

Table 2 showed that the respondents agreed that to a high extent, mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State, this was recorded on item, 6,7,8,9 and 10 which scores a grand mean of 3.32.

Research Question Three: To what extent does mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for empowering communities' participation in decision making process in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation on the extent to which tongue literacy serve as an instrument for empowering communities' participation in decision making process

S/N	Items	X	SD	Decision
11	Mother tongue literacy enhancing community engagement	3.27	0.84	VHE
12	Mother tongue literacy promotes community leadership	3.54	0.63	HE
13	Mother tongue literacy fosters community identity, enabling individuals to connect with their cultural heritage	3.21	0.62	HE
14	Mother tongue literacy facilitates community mobilization	3.02	0.89	HE
15	Mother tongue literacy help in building community capacity	3.39	0.67	HE
	Grand Mean	**3.28**		**HE**

Table 3 showed that the respondents agreed that to a high extent do mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for empowering communities' participation in decision making process in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State, this was recorded on item, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 which scores a grand mean of 3.28.

Hypotheses: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which

mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education**.**

Table 4: t-test of difference in the mean responses of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education

Items	Category of respondents	N	Mean	SD	df	T	P-Value	Decision
1.	Male Teachers	116	3.52	0.59	219	0.959	0.338	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.45	0.61				
2.	Male Teachers	116	3.26	0.73	219	0.633	0.527	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.31	0.64				
3.	Male Teachers	116	3.14	0.72	219	0.550	0.582	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.18	0.63				
4.	Male Teachers	116	2.64	0.86	219	1.641	0.102	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	2.79	0.74				
5.	Male Teachers	116	3.38	0.76	219	0.321	0.749	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.35	0.77				
6.	Male Teachers	116	3.37	0.64	219	0.255	0.799	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.39	0.69				
7.	Male Teachers	116	3.26	0.67	219	0.029	0.977	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.26	0.78				

Result on Table 4 revealed that the mean rating of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State was not significant. This means that the male and female teachers were of the same opinion on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

2 There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion.

Table 5: t-test of difference in the mean responses of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion

Items	Category of Respondents	N	Mean	SD	df	t	P-Value	Decision
8	Male Teachers	116	3.21	0.95	219	1.407	0.160	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.35	0.83				
9	Male Teachers	116	3.38	0.75	219	0.290	0.772	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.40	0.68				
10	Male Teachers	116	3.39	0.64	219	0.040	0.968	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.39	0.56				
11	Male Teachers	116	3.41	0.65	219	0.250	0.803	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.39	0.59				
12	Male Teachers	116	3.08	0.85	219	1.286	0.199	Not Significant

	Female Teachers	105	3.21	0.85				
13	Male Teachers	116	3.16	0.64	219	0.377	0.707	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.13	0.50				
14	Male Teachers	116	3.21	0.66	219	.0104	0.917	Not Significant
	Female Teachers	105	3.20	0.63				

Result on Table 5 revealed that the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State was not significant as the items as the p-value is greater than alpha level of 0.05. This indicate that male teachers and female teachers has the same opinion on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

Discussion of Findings

Result of the study as presented in Table 1 showed that the respondents agreed that, Mother tongue literacy enables students to better understand instructional materials, allow students to participate fully in educational programs, enables students to actively participate in classroom discussion, helps students in retaining information and facilitates effective teacher-student interaction. While hypothesis result indicates that There is no significant difference between the mean ratings on male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

The result is in line with the findings of Mäntynen (2023) argues that proficiency in a child's first language lays the groundwork for literacy development, enabling them to grasp complex subjects more are taught in their mother tongue, they are more likely to comprehend lesson content, participate actively in discussions. Access to education in one's native language also supports cultural identity and inclusivity. Education systems that recognize and value indigenous languages create environments where students feel respected and understood.

The result on table 2 showed that the respondents agreed that Mother tongue literacy enables individual to connect with their heritage and community, help in breaking language barriers, empowers marginalized groups, foster social cohesion and it enable individual to participate in democratic processes while the result of hypothesis revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings on male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for social inclusion in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

The finding is consistent with the views of World Bank (2020), asserted that social inclusion requires active efforts to dismantle barriers that marginalize certain groups, promoting diversity and mutual respect. Social inclusion as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. It focuses on fostering equality and reducing disparities in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and healthcare. Social inclusion is primarily concerned with creating environments that enable all individuals,

especially the marginalized, to participate actively in society.

Result of the study as presented in Table 3 showed that the respondents agreed that, Mother tongue literacy enhancing community engagement, community identity, promotes community leadership, enabling individuals to connect with their cultural heritage, facilitates community mobilization and help in building community capacity. While hypothesis result indicates that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings on male and female teachers on the extent to which mother tongue literacy serve as an instrument for improving access to quality education Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

The result is in line with the findings of Global Education Monitoring Report (2021) emphasizes that education systems should prioritize mother tongue instruction to enhance community engagement, recognizing that language is a vital tool for participation. Mother tongue literacy significantly enhances community participation in decision-making processes. By empowering individuals, bridging cultivating informed citizens, literacy enables a more inclusive and equitable approach to governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate a high extent to which mother tongue literacy serves as an instrument for improving access to quality education, fostering social inclusion, and empowering community participation in decision-making processes. By enabling individuals to, mother tongue literacy helps bridge gaps in understanding, increases retention rates, and enhances overall learning outcomes. Furthermore, when communities are empowered to participate in decisions affecting them, they better articulate their needs and preserve their cultural identities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:
1. Governments should integrate mother tongue literacy into national education policies, ensuring that curricula reflect and promote local languages alongside global languages.
2. Government of Ebonyi State should organise teacher training and provide infrastructure supports with mother tongue education accessible educational materials in various local languages.
3. Government should establish partnerships with local communities to co-create educational programs that resonate with their cultural contexts, thereby increasing buy-in and participation and also promote awareness regarding the value of mother tongue literacy among stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and the community at large, to foster an environment of support and recognition.

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