



“To tell you the truth, I did not choose early childhood education”: Narratives of becoming a pre-primary teacher in Tanzania



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tanzanian prospective pre-primary teachers navigate competing discourses of ECE.
- Prospective teachers weave institutional discourse into their own narratives.
- Shifting narratives demonstrated agency in a context of limited opportunity.

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ABSTRACT

The current global focus on expanding access to early childhood education (ECE) is accompanied by calls to professionalize the ECE teaching force. In Tanzania, efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the pre-primary level led to the development of a new pre-primary diploma training program. In this article, I examine this effort from the perspective of 12 prospective teachers. By tracing their narratives of becoming a pre-primary teacher, I demonstrate how diploma students navigated competing discourses and incorporated institutional discourses into their own narratives as a way of exercising agency in a context of constrained opportunity.

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1. Introduction

The current global focus on expanding access to early childhood education (ECE) is accompanied by calls to improve the qualifications of the ECE teaching force. Growing recognition that ECE teaching requires specific knowledge, skills, and expertise has translated into global recommendations for improving the quality of childcare and early education through increased training for ECE professionals (Urban, 2010). A recent *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, for example, tied ECE quality to teacher preparation, noting:

The quality of childcare for very young children remains a serious issue. The knowledge, skills, status, and pay for early childhood teachers must be addressed ... It is agreed that [ECE] professionals are more effective in supporting children's

development if they have at least some specialized education and training (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 45; 55).

A report from the [International Labour Organization \(2014\)](#) similarly highlighted the connection between classroom quality and teacher preparation, noting: “High-quality ECE provision is dependent on adequate investments in initial ECE personnel education and training” (p. 10). A research brief from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also pointed to teachers’ level of education and specialized education and training as key determinants of ECE program quality (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], n.d.).

Around the globe, echoes of these calls to improve the preparation of ECE teachers resound. In the United States, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), which evaluates publicly-funded pre-kindergarten programs, includes teacher qualifications as one of its ten quality benchmarks (Barnett et al., 2016). Many states now require public pre-K teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree as a result of some evidence, albeit mixed, that

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teachers' level of education is related to program quality (Barnett, 2004; Barnett et al., 2016; Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010; Early et al., 2006, 2007). In low- and middle-income countries, where ECE teachers tend to possess low levels of education and are often not required to complete tertiary education, efforts are underway to increase ECE teachers' educational attainment as a means to improve the quality of ECE programs (Neuman, Josephson, & Chua, 2015; Sun, Rao, & Pearson, 2015).

In Tanzania, whose pre-primary teacher education program is the focus of this article, the government recently underscored its commitment to ECE by making one year of pre-primary education (PPE) compulsory (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2014). As part of a broader ECE reform effort, the government introduced in 2014 a new, three-year PPE teacher education program, which I refer to in this article as the PPE diploma program. The diploma program addresses the reality that many PPE teachers in Tanzania have little or no formal ECE training, with just over half of PPE teachers in government schools considered "qualified," according to the government (President's Office Regional Administration and Local Government, 2016). The primary goal of the PPE diploma is to supply PPE classrooms with qualified teachers in order to improve the quality of pre-primary classes, which serve five-year-olds in Tanzania.

In this paper, I examine this effort to increase the number of qualified PPE teachers in Tanzania from the perspective of 12 students who were members of the first cohort to enroll in the diploma program. In particular, I focus on the following research question: *Why do preservice pre-primary teachers' career aspirations and perspectives about PPE teaching shift over time?* Drawing on interview data, I employ elements of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and critical narrative analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014) to analyze prospective teachers' stories of becoming a pre-primary teacher. I demonstrate how their narratives shifted in response to social, economic, and institutional realities and discourses and contend that they restoried their narratives as a way to "refigure their past and create purpose in the future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1986, p. 385). I assert that through this process of restoring students adopted powerful institutional discourses as a way to exercise agency in a context of constrained opportunity.

In the midst of unprecedented global attention to ECE, this study provides insight into the experience of prospective teachers, who are a key focus of global efforts to improve the quality of ECE programs (Neuman et al., 2015). Understanding the experiences of prospective teachers is critical to the success of ECE reforms like the ones being undertaken in Tanzania. As key actors in Tanzania's PPE policy ecology (Weaver-Hightower, 2008), an understanding of these teachers' paths to PPE teaching and the ways they make sense of their experience contributes important policy knowledge (Dumas & Anderson, 2014) that can inform efforts to professionalize the ECE workforce.

1.1. Background: pre-primary education and teacher preparation in Tanzania

In Tanzania, pre-primary education is schooling for five-year-olds, prior to primary school entry at age six. As of 2016, 34% of age-eligible children in Tanzania were enrolled in pre-primary classes, though this statistic masks regional and urban/rural disparities (UNICEF, 2016). PPE is provided in both government and non-government institutions, though the focus of this article is on teachers being prepared to teach in public (government) schools. PPE classes tend to be large, though there are marked differences between government and private schools. In 2016, the national average pupil-teacher ratio was 135:1 in government schools and

19:1 in private schools (President's Office Regional Administration and Local Government, 2016). The prospective PPE teachers interviewed for this study described teaching classes of about 75 in their practicum setting. While PPE is currently a site of considerable investment and has been framed as a new initiative in Tanzania, it has been part of Tanzania's education landscape since the 1995 Education and Training Policy (ETP) called for a pre-primary classroom to be established in every primary school in the country (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1995). At that time, however, the government did not commit funds to PPE, nor did it include PPE in its system of school regulation and inspection. As a result, pre-primary classes were established throughout the country, but primarily through informal mechanisms. Without government funding, PPE was supported largely through family contributions. Teachers were recruited from the community and compensated through *michango*, or small contributions from parents. These teachers, who lack formal ECE training, are referred to as paraprofessionals. In some cases, the government assigned veteran primary school teachers to teach PPE classes after providing them with a 10-day training course.

The decision to make one year of pre-primary education compulsory in Tanzania led to what the Minister of Education and Vocational Training called a "massive employment exercise" ("Tanzania: Qualified pre-primary teachers urged to submit applications," 2013), because it necessitated the recruitment and deployment of nearly 16,000 formally trained PPE teachers (Personal communication, March 2015). To address the need for qualified teachers, the Tanzanian government rolled out a pre-primary diploma program in October 2014. The program was implemented in six government teacher training colleges (TTCs) across the country, replacing a two-year certificate program. In late 2016, the diploma program was temporarily eliminated, and training for PPE teachers reverted back to the former certificate program. According to government officials, the suspension of the diploma program was the result of political change; the newly-elected president's administration decided to transfer oversight of teacher education to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST). MEST is now revising the national teacher education framework. In the future, this framework may include both a certificate and diploma for pre-primary education. Students, including the ones interviewed for this study, who were pursuing the PPE diploma when this change occurred, will continue their studies and earn a diploma, but no new students are being enrolled in the PPE diploma until the framework is revised. This first cohort of students to earn a diploma will graduate in late 2017. It is likely that this change in the diploma program will affect the students in this study, but at the time data for this paper were collected, students and TTC administrators were unaware of this impending change. Therefore, any concerns related to this change are not reflected in this analysis.

1.2. Policy ecologies

This study is framed by Weaver-Hightower's (2008) notion of policy ecologies, an analytic tool and theoretical framework used to analyze the complexity of policymaking and implementation. Policy ecologies is used to "theorize and account for the many interconnections that create, sustain, hold off, or destroy policy formation and implementation" (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 154). It provides a framework for making sense of why policies are taken up in particular ways, and the role that actors, relationships, environments, structures, and processes play in the creation and enactment of policy. In this situated understanding of policy, it is assumed that policy is political, rather than a technical-rational tool deployed in response to societal needs and conditions (Ball, 1994; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Following the policy ecologies

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