



“So that his mind will open”: Parental perceptions of early childhood education in urbanizing Ghana



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ABSTRACT

As policy makers and practitioners work to increase access to early childhood education (ECE) and to improve the quality of existing services, it is important that the field consider the perspective of a key stakeholder: parents. This study analyzes 33 interviews with parents of young children in urban Ghana. The interviews investigate (1) what parents believe to be the purpose of ECE, and (2) parents' perspective on what and how young children should learn. Results are analyzed around five themes: play, homework, mobility, language and diversity, and age of entry into school. Implications for global ECE policy are discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the demand for and supply of early childhood education (ECE) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Governments, multinational organizations, and NGOs across the globe are expanding access to ECE, aiming to promote children's development, learning, and school readiness, and to use ECE as a strategy to reduce long-term poverty (Alderman, 2011). Empirical research supports these initiatives. The fields of economics, developmental psychology, and neurobiology have each drawn attention to the enormously sensitive and expansive period of learning and development that occurs prior to school entry, as well as the long term impact of these early experiences (Knudsen et al., 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

As ECE in LMICs expands, this work needs to be considered in the context of urbanization. The urban population of Africa, for example, currently estimated at 455 million, is expected to triple by 2050 (United Nations, 2015). Anticipated changes to physical spaces, livelihoods, the economy, public services, and society more generally inspire the claim, “urbanization is the single-most important transformation taking place on the African continent” (Kariuki et al., 2013). Efforts to address urbanization need to incorporate the needs of young children and their families. It is equally important that work to address children's early learning and development consider the dynamic settings in which children live.

The focus of the present study is on the intersection of these two phenomena: recent growth in the supply of and demand for early childhood education, and rapid urbanization in LMICs. Both have

entered the global agenda in the 2015–2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which incorporate for the first time an urban goal (Goal 11, “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”) and a target on early childhood development (Target 4.2, with one of its two indicators a year of preprimary education for all; United Nations, 2015). Though parents are a key stakeholder in this movement to address early childhood education, and around the world parents are opting to enroll their young children in early education (Bidwell and Watine, 2014; McCoy et al., 2016a,b), little to no research exists on parents' perceptions of preprimary education in LMICs, and particularly not in rapidly urbanizing countries where widespread preprimary education is a fairly recent and urban phenomenon.

The Ghanaian government was the first nation in Sub-Saharan Africa to pass national legislation for universal access to ECE, and is currently working to both expand access and improve the quality of existing services (Ghana Education Service (GES), 2012). Better understanding parents' perspectives will be essential to this effort. And in light of the country's growing urban population, with 54% of Ghana's total population living in urban areas and an annual rate of urbanization of 3.5% (CIA, 2016), it is increasingly important to understand urban and peri-urban communities as settings for ECE efforts in Ghana.

In the current study, we explore parents' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations in relation to their children's early education experiences and related development in urban Ghana. Specifically, we analyze 33 interviews with parents of young children in greater Accra to assess (1) what parents believe to be the purpose of pre-primary education and (2) how and through what activities parents believe that young children learn. These questions introduced issues related to both culture and

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context, and parents' responses suggested a number of different connections to policy and practice. Our findings provide a foundation from which to understand parents' perspective regarding ECE and generate insight for the governments and organizations that are increasingly investing in ECE.

2. Background

2.1. Policy and practice in pre-primary education

Internationally, increasing enrollment in preschool is generally lauded as a successful development, as research has shown that access to preprimary education has significant positive impacts on children's later educational and other life outcomes (Rao et al., 2016; Berlinski et al., 2009). However, there is considerable debate within the field of preprimary education as to what kinds of experiences and settings will best serve children, and lead to positive short- and long-term outcomes.

In various contexts around the world, researchers are concerned that "traditional" approaches to education (i.e., teacher-driven, highly-structured, academically-focused) are being applied inappropriately in early education settings, making ECE simply an extension of ineffective primary school (Gauntlett et al., 2011). More "modernist" approaches to early education (i.e., child-centered, activity- and play-based approaches) that address social skills and the unique needs of very young children are becoming increasingly popular (Comisión Intersectorial de la Primera Infancia, 2013).

This debate takes many forms. For example, in September 2013, a letter signed by 130 early childhood education experts was published in the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in England, arguing that "The Government should stop intervening in early education" as "Ministers in England persist in viewing it simply as preparation for school." (*The Telegraph*, 2013). The experts argue that the trend of extending formal learning to younger and younger children "can only cause profound damage" (*The Telegraph*, 2013). They recommend that formal schooling should not start until children are six or seven years old, such as in the Scandinavian education system, and that preprimary education should instead be an opportunity for children to learn through "active, creative, and outdoor play."

An extensive body of research documents the importance of play to children's learning and development (Whitebread et al., 2012). It is argued that independent learning is an important educational aim, and that the teacher-directed approach present in much of primary education is less effective in promoting learning (Whitebread et al., 2005). Theories of development from foundational psychologists and early educators Vygotsky and Pestalozzi stress how children learn through everyday play and interactions with adults in meaningful cultural and community activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Preschool and early childhood pedagogy sometimes integrate play and independent learning into student-centered curricula, or even reject curriculum entirely. Alternatively, many popular models of preschool such as Montessori and High Scope are highly structured, emphasizing specific skill acquisition.

In addition to concern over how young children learn and what pedagogical approach might be best for young children, there is also debate as to which skills should be emphasized during preschool. Researchers and international organizations have argued that an emphasis on children's academic preparedness continues to overshadow the importance of children's social and emotional development necessary for school readiness (Raver, 2003; UNESCO, 2013). This argument references a growing field of research that draws attention to the importance of social and emotional development to children's success in school, as well as the ability of school-based interventions to target and improve these skills (Durlak et al., 2011).

Research and debate over evidence-based approaches to preschool focus primarily on high income countries. One of the key challenges facing the field of ECE is that the knowledge shaping both program content and delivery mechanisms fails to incorporate an understanding

of cultural differences (Pence and Marfo, 2008). Research in a variety of countries and cultural contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa has found that parents and caregivers practice different patterns of care and support of learning than the primarily European and North American models that foster particular sets of skills and socialization goals. This field of work shows that goals for learning at societal, community and family levels may differ from the so called "normal development" patterns of white, middle-class Americans that are the focus of most English-language research in child development (LeVine, 2004; Nsamenang, 2008). Instead of considering this variation as a deviation from the norm, research on human development needs to expand and generate more diverse knowledge and understanding of human development and early education (LeVine, 2004; Pence and Marfo, 2008). One important step in this regard is obtaining the views of parents regarding the role of early education in understudied cultural, economic and educational contexts.

Many low income countries are just beginning to expand access to ECE. In some of these settings, preschools are believed to be responding to parents' expectation that a good preschool emphasizes academic skills (O'Gara, 2013). Research among preschools in multiple African cities found a strong emphasis on academic concerns, with children sitting in forward facing desks and with far more academic supplies than resources for play (Bidwell and Watine, 2014). Researchers have expressed concern that incorporating new learning styles, such as an emphasis on play-based learning, might be met with resistance from parents who prefer highly academic and didactic schooling for their children. However, research on parents' perspectives and preferences is extremely limited (Bidwell and Watine, 2014).

More work is needed to better understand African parents' perspectives and different cultural approaches to early childhood care and education (Marfo et al., 2011). Efforts to improve existing ECE services and to expand to new areas and populations must consider culture and its role in children's development. High quality intervention should be informed by parents' desires and expectations, as well as community values and local perspectives, and cultural beliefs and priorities.

2.2. Culture and perceptions of the purpose of early childhood care and education

Myers, in his seminal *The Twelve Who Survive*, observed that approaches to preprimary education generally reflect societal goals for adults (Myers, 1992, 2006). Although economic and educational success have become globalized as the primary goals for early education (Heckman, 2006; Gertler et al., 2014), there is substantial cultural variation across low- and middle-income countries in the perceived purpose of preprimary education. For example, parents in Cambodia reported wishing that children in preschool would learn how to interact with strangers, through proper greetings and other conventions of speech (Britto et al., 2014). As another example, the Colombian national early childhood policy *De Cero a Siempre* indicates that the primary activities in preschool should be play, exploration, and the arts (Comisión Intersectorial para la Primera Infancia, 2013).

Across different cultures, parents of preschool-aged children differentially emphasize goals of self-maximization and individual achievement, vs connectedness, social cohesion, and prosocial behaviors (Keller et al., 2004). Urbanization appears to play a role. In Keller's research, urban Indian and German parents emphasized the former set of goals, while rural Indian and Cameroonian parents emphasized the latter set significantly more frequently (Keller et al., 2004). However, very little research has explicitly asked parents in low- and middle-income countries about the purpose of preprimary education.

The absence of such research significantly undermines efforts to expand access to ECE. Theories of learning such as intent participation (Rogoff et al., 2003) and human ontogenesis (Nsamenang, 2006) suggest that children in many different cultures learn through their integration into everyday social life, rather than through explicit learning

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