"Me I don't really discuss anything with them": Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Early Childhood Education and Parent-teacher Relationships in Ghana

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Abstract

Parental involvement in early childhood education (ECE) is often presumed to be important. Yet little research exists on how parents view their role in their child's early schooling, nor on how parent-teacher relationships may shape classrooms. This is particularly true in low- and middle-income countries. This study analyzes interviews with 25 parents and 25 teachers of children in pre-primary school in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Interviews investigated perceptions about educational quality, experiences with ECE, communication between parents and teachers, and roles of parents and teachers in children's education. Results revealed important areas of both alignment and misalignment between parents' and teachers' perceptions and goals for children's ECE experiences. Implications for ECE policy and parental engagement are discussed.

Keywords: early childhood education; pre-primary school; parents; teachers; Ghana; sub-Saharan Africa

Since the start of the twenty-first century, there has been an increase globally in emphasizing the importance the preschool years and supporting children's readiness for school. Recent estimates suggest that 250 million children under five years of age in developing countries are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential, as indicated by stunting and living in extreme poverty. On the regional level, the prevalence of children at risk is estimated to be highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with 38% of the 143 million children under age 5 stunted and 50% living in extreme poverty (Lu, Black, & Richter, 2016).

Governments in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have been increasing investments in early childhood education (ECE) programs in recent years (Engle et al., 2011; Yoshikawa & Kabay, 2014). This approach could be promising, as evidence indicates that quality ECE can improve schooling outcomes for the most disadvantaged children (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Indeed, access to ECE is on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, with regional variation ranging from an average of 17.9 percent of three- and four-year-olds in sub-Saharan Africa to 61.7 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean (McCoy et al., 2018). Yet as programs have expanded, concerns have risen about their quality, including whether ECE services are structured to promote young children's learning and development and satisfy parents' desires for and perceptions of quality education (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011; Yoshikawa, Wuermli, Raikes, Kim, & Kabay, 2018).

The role of parental involvement in ECE is often presumed to be important. Yet little research exists on *how* to successfully engage parents in their young child's pre-primary schooling, how parents view their role in their child's development, nor on how parent-teacher relationships may shape children's educational experiences. This study examines parent and teacher perspectives on their role in children's early education and their relationships with each

other. It was conducted as a follow-up to a large-scale evaluation study called the Quality Preschool for Ghana project (QP4G) project (Wolf, Aber, Behrman, & Tsinigo, 2019). QP4G was an impact evaluation of two programs aimed at addressing two issues related to the pre-primary sector: training teachers and engaging parents. As part of the program, three parental-awareness meetings were held through school Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs) over the school year. The goal of the meetings was to increase parent involvement with their children's education at home and in school. Unexpectedly, this program counter-acted the positive impacts of the teacher training program on child development, suggesting that this program had unintended effects (Wolf et al., 2019). The present qualitative study was conducted as a follow-up with parents and teachers to examine their experiences in the program and interacting with each other. The results shed light on important issues related to successful parent engagement and improving the quality of ECE programs in Ghana specifically, and LMICs more broadly.

Parent Engagement in ECE

In promoting achievement across elementary and secondary school, theories, research, and policies have identified the significant role of families, family-school relations, and parent involvement in education (e.g., Hill & Chao, 2009). While parenting practices in early childhood have been well-documented and researched across diverse contexts (e.g., Bornstein, Putnick, Bradley, Lansford, & Deater-Deckard, 2015; Mesman et al., 2018), less research exists on preschool involvement specifically and engagement with teachers. In a review of the literature for middle-school students in the United States, Hill and Tyson (2009) identified school-based involvement as being associated with children's achievement, explaining that such involvement can include visits to the classroom and interactions with children's teachers, which increase parents' knowledge about the curriculum, enhance social capital, and increase the effectiveness

of involvement at home (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Similar associations between mothers' school involvement and students' academic achievement have been found in a socioeconomically diverse group of Ghanaian 15- to 20-year-olds (Nyarko, 2011).

For younger children, regular communication between parents and school may be particularly beneficial as it allows the two to work together towards the goal of school readiness. Some evidence supports this. For example, in an attempt to extend literature on parent involvement to early childhood, Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, and Ortiz, (2008) found that parents' school involvement predicted preschool children's early literacy skills in the United States. In addition, a longitudinal study found that the number of school activities in which parents participated during preschool and kindergarten was significantly associated with higher reading achievement in kindergarten and lower rates of grade retention at age 14 (Miedel & Reynolds, 2000). Yet the role of parents in ECE, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, has received little attention. In addition, the voices and perspectives of African parents and caregivers have rarely been represented in academic scholarship, limiting our understanding of how to create positive and successful opportunities for engagement in this context.

A handful of experimental studies implemented in the United States that focus on parent support for learning during the preschool years point to the causal role of engaging parents in this age group. These programs have generally focused on engaging parents with children at home, as opposed to engaging in school. For example, the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY; Lombard, 1981) is a home visitation program for parents of low-income four-year-olds that supports the transition to kindergarten. Quasi-experimental evaluations have found the program enhanced children's academic performance and grades in primary school, and improved social adjustment (Bradley & Gilkey, 2002; Nievar, Jacobson, Chen, Johnson, & Dier,

2011), while a randomized trial of the program found more mixed results (Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1998). The Get Ready program is designed for Head Start children with the goal of improving school readiness through parent engagement. The intervention involves a series of one-hour home visits between the parent and the child's Head Start teacher that occur over a two-year period. An evaluation study found improved language use, reading, and writing, as well as social-emotional competencies for children, but no impacts on aggression or self-control (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Finally, the Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a program designed to develop relations of trust and shared expectations among parents, school staff, and children, with the goal of strengthening the relationships among families in schools. Turley, Gamoran, McCarty and Fish (2017) found that the program reduced children's behavior problems through increasing families' connection to schools and social capital. Importantly, little research exists highlighting the voices of teachers and parents that have been involved in such programs.

Parent Engagement in ECE in sub-Saharan Africa

Although parents differ in their ideas about their role in their children's learning (Strom & Slaughter, 1978), research in the U.S. has shown that parents who feel efficacious in their role as parents, who view their role as that of a teacher, and who view their children as less difficult engaged in higher school involvement (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). In South Africa, research has shown that many early childhood teachers perceive low-income parents to be less interested or involved in their children's education, with negative implications for home-school communication (Bridgemohan, van Wyk, & van Staden, 2005). Additional research is needed to explore parental involvement in early childhood settings, particularly in the sub-Saharan African context, where parents have been shown to value early education (Bidwell

& Watine, 2014) yet where low adult literacy rates and education levels may limit parents' perceptions of their own efficacy in promoting their child's learning. Understanding parents' perspectives on their roles in their child's development and on school involvement may be particularly critical to unpack issues that are relevant to this population.

In Ghana, levels of at-home cognitive stimulation are relatively low, with only 33.1% of children having been read to in the 3 days immediately prior to data collection (versus an average of 54.1% in all developing countries) (McCoy et al., 2016). School involvement has been shown to partially mediate the positive associations between socioeconomic status and several domains of Ghanaian children's school readiness skills, but engagement in cognitively stimulating activities with children was *negatively* associated with child outcomes (Wolf & McCoy, 2017). In Africa, in particular, scholars have noted the importance of the social ontogenetic paradigm, with socialization organized to teach shared responsibly within the family and community rather than for individualization or academic pursuits (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994; Nsamenang, 2006). This emphasis on social and emotional competence is shared by African parents, who often cite respect and social compliance as core values that they hope schooling to instill in their children (Jukes et al., 2018). More research is needed to understand how parents see their role in their children's education and how they currently engage with schools and teachers in order to effectively involve them in their child's early learning.

A qualitative study in Zambia focused on parents' and teachers' perspectives on parental involvement in ECD centers across ten primary schools in Harare (Chikutuma, 2017). Teachers described parental school involvement as both providing resources (e.g., fundraising and donating toys and materials) and engaging in their child's education through formal and informal meetings about the child's progress. Teachers felt parents were partly involved, with some

parents engaged in both forms of involvement, others who only provided material resources to the school, and others who did neither. Parents, on other hand, mostly described their involvement as paying school fees and providing donations and resources to the school and highlighted that children whose parents failed to pay felt badly as a result. Many parents also said they were too busy to support the ECD center. Another qualitative study in rural Tanzania asked parents and teachers about the social competencies necessary for young children to be successful and that they hope children will develop in school. Parents considered respect and social compliance as core competencies they hoped their children would develop, while teachers considered confidence and curiosity as key (Jukes et al., 2018). Taken together, these studies suggest that increasing engagement and communication between parents and teachers may be critical to align expectations and investments in children's development and learning.

Early Childhood Education in Ghana

In 2007, the Government of Ghana was the first in the region to pass national legislation that incorporated pre-primary education as a universal right. Two years of pre-primary school—called *kindergarten 1* (KG1; for 4-year-olds) and *kindergarten 2* (KG2; for 5-year-olds)—were added to the universal basic education system that had previously begun in the first grade of primary school. As a result, Ghana has one of the highest pre-primary enrollment rates on the continent at 75% net enrollment as of 2015–2016 (Ghana Ministry of Education, 2016). Yet several reports have concluded that educational quality and learning outcomes are low (e.g., Ghana Ministry of Education, 2014), including in the kindergarten (KG) sector (Ghana Education Service, 2012).

Similar to the primary education system in Ghana, the pre-primary education system tends to focus primarily on academic skill development (Agbenyega, 2018), reflecting the

demands of many African parents for schools that are highly structured and "academically rigorous" (Bidwell & Watine, 2014; Jukes et al., 2018). Researchers have raised concerns that the "traditional" approaches to education that are used to promote academic growth in African countries (e.g., rote instruction and memorization) may be developmentally inappropriate for young children (Akyeampong, 2017; Osei, 2006). These practices are in contrast to "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 (Hirsh-Pasek, 2009).

The KG curriculum in Ghana is rooted in modernist approaches to education, despite parental demands, and stipulates that play and creative activities—as opposed to academic work—should be central (Ghana Education Service, 2013). The curriculum aims to improve children's holistic development, stipulating several objectives for children including developing communication skills, familiarizing themselves with the environment and its living and non-living components, learning to live a healthy life, developing psychosocial competencies, and developing creative abilities (Ghana Education Service, 2006, 2013). All pre-primary schools, including both public and private schools, are expected to comply with the national curriculum. Yet a Government Kindergarten Situational Report released in 2012 concluded that teachers had not been systematically trained in the curriculum and that most teachers had not incorporated the curriculum into their practice. The report concluded that training KG teachers was a top education policy priority, with a secondary priority to engage parents in their child's KG education at home and in school. (Notably, the government has recently updated the curriculum, guided by the same objectives but streamlining seven content areas into four.)

The Quality Preschool for Ghana Programs

The Quality Preschool for Ghana (QP4G) project aimed to train teachers on the 2004 KG

curriculum (Republic of Ghana, 2004), to enhance the quality of KG education and children's developmental outcomes, and to test the added benefits of engaging parents through an awareness campaign designed to align parental expectations with the KG curriculum and pedagogy. *Early childhood education* and *preschool* in this study refers to the two years of pre-primary education in Ghana called *kindergarten*.

There were two components of the QP4G interventions, which are described in detail in previous studies (Wolf et al., 2019). The primary component targeted teachers through in-service training and coaching. The training workshops (five days in September, two days in January, one day in May) were led by professional teacher trainers at the National Nursery Teacher Training Center (NNTTC) in Accra, and in-classroom coaching (six visits over the school year) were administered by trained district-government ECE coordinators. The second component targeted parents, with the goal of aligning expectations for ECE with the new methods taught in the training and encouraging communication between parents and teachers. The program consisted of three *parental-awareness meetings* which were administered through school Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs) over the school year. They were offered to all parents with kindergarten children in the school and administered by the same trained district-government ECE coordinators. Each meeting consisted of viewing videos developed for the intervention followed by discussions led by district coordinators. The video themes were (a) the importance of play-based learning, (b) parents' role in children's learning, and (c) encouraging parent–teacher and parent–school communication.

Treatment schools either received the teacher-training and coaching program (TT), or the teacher-training and coaching program plus the parental-awareness meetings (TTPA). The broad *theory of change* was that children's school readiness would be enhanced through improved

classroom quality (measured through teacher–child interactions) and improved teacher professional well-being (measured through teachers' motivation, burnout, and job satisfaction). For schools that received both teacher-training and parental-awareness meetings (TTPA), it was anticipated that this combined package would improve parents' understanding of play-based learning, strengthen parent-teacher communication, and increase parental involvement and engagement with teachers, and consequently have larger impacts on child outcomes.

The initial study found that children in schools assigned to the teacher training condition had improved outcomes in three of the four domains examined: early numeracy, early literacy, and social-emotional skills. When implemented with the parental-awareness meetings, there were no significant impacts of the treatment on children's outcomes, suggesting counter-acting effects of the parental-awareness meetings (Wolf et al., 2019). A second follow-up study found that one year later, there were negative impacts of the parental-awareness meetings on overall school readiness for children for children in households with a non-literate male head (Wolf, Aber, Behrman & Peele, 2019), and a follow-up study one additional year later found these negative impacts persisted (Wolf, 2019).

The Present Study

The present study uses semi-structured qualitative interviews with 25 parents and 25 teachers to examine perceptions about early childhood education, parent-teacher relationships, and roles in supporting young children's learning in Ghana. To successfully engage both teachers and parents in efforts to improve young children's education, a deeper understanding of what each group thinks about early education—educational preferences, strategies used both in the classroom and in communication between parents and teachers, unmet needs—as well as alignment and misalignment, need to be understood more fully. The goal of the interviews was to

examine (1) experiences in the parental-awareness meetings; (2) perceptions of parent and teacher roles in children's learning; (3) perceptions of teacher-parent relationships. The results shed light on some challenges that arose during the parental-awareness meetings, but also point to broader issues related to parent-teacher relationships in children's education that can inform future efforts to increase parental engagement in education.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Original QP4G study sample. Schools in the QP4G study were selected from six districts in the Greater Accra Region. These were six of the nine most disadvantaged districts (out of 16 districts total) in the region, as rated by the 2014 UNICEF District League Table (a social accountability index that ranks regions and districts based on development and delivery of key basic services, including education, health, sanitation, and governance; UNICEF & CDD-Ghana, 2014) that were within a two-hour drive from the capital city of Accra. First, a listing of all schools was conducted using the Ghana Education Service Educational Management Information System database. Schools were then randomly sampled stratified by district, and within district by public and private schools. Eligible schools had to be registered with the government and have at least one KG class. Because there were fewer than 120 public schools across the six districts, every public school was sampled. Private schools (490 total) were sampled within districts in proportion to the total number of private schools in each district relative to total for all districts. Schools were randomly assigned during the summer of 2015 to one of three treatment arms: (a) teacher training; (b) teacher training plus parental-awareness meetings, and (c) control group.

All KG teachers in schools selected for the evaluation were invited to participate in the

training. The majority of schools had two KG teachers, although the range was from one to five. If there were more than two KG teachers in the school, two teachers were randomly sampled per school for the evaluation (one from KG1 and one from KG2). Thirty-six schools only had one KG teacher, and in this case the one teacher was sampled. The final sample included 444 teachers. Children were then randomly selected from class rosters, with an average of 14.3 children per school (range = 4–15).

Primary caregivers of these children (41.6% mothers, 44.6% fathers, and 13.8% other) were then contacted via telephone to participate in a survey. Their phone numbers were collected from school administrative records, A pre-interview was conducted to determine whether the caregiver was the child's primary caregiver, defined as "the person who takes primary responsibility for the child's education and who could best talk about the child and his or her experiences in school and at home. It may be the child's parent, a family member, guardian, or another individual." Given the difficulty of obtaining correct phone numbers from school administrative records for all caregivers, the caregivers of 2,220 children were reached at baseline, 12 of which declined to participate in the survey (a response rate of 99.1%). In the follow-up wave, an additional 548 caregivers were successfully reached, leading to a total of 80% of the sample. In this study, I refer to caregivers as parents.

Qualitative study sample. For the present study, 25 teachers and 25 parents were sampled from the QP4G dataset. First, children were ranked in order of growth in their school readiness skills over the KG school year. Then, a random sample of 13 caregivers and 13 teachers were selected from the top 5% of children, and a random sample of 12 caregivers and 12 teachers from the bottom 5% of children in terms of growth was selected and contacted to participate in an additional interview. All caregivers and teachers contacted agreed to participate.

Three Ghanaian enumerators conducted all interviews in October 2016, either in the home of caregivers or in the schools or homes of teachers. Subjects were read an informed consent script in their preferred language and each orally consented to the interview. This study received Institutional Review Board approval from [institution redacted] (#1328; "Quality Preschool for Ghana"), [institution redacted] (#825679; "Quality Preschool for Ghana"), and [institution redacted] (#FY2015-10; "An Intervention to Improve Preschool Quality in Peri-urban Ghana"). The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview protocol. For parents, questions focused on perceptions about KG educational quality, their perceptions about their child's KG experience in the previous academic year, communication with KG teachers, their experiences in the parental-awareness PTA meetings, and their perceptions of caregivers' role in their child's education. For teachers, questions focused on their experiences as a KG teacher in the previous academic year, perceptions about KG educational quality, communication with parents, and their experiences in the parental-awareness PTA meetings.

Analytic Plan

All translated (English-language) portions of interviews were recorded and transcribed by the trained enumerators, and all analyses were conducted by two research assistants (RAs). Following procedures suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), the RAs began with an open close reading of a randomly chosen one-fifth of cases (five parent interviews, five teacher interviews) to establish a common understanding and develop emerging themes. In consultation with the first author, a coding scheme was developed based off of the themes emerging from the data as well as our knowledge of the literature on early childhood education. The analysis included "breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data;" the interviews were thus broken down into "data units, blocks of information that are examined

together" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Codes were general and neutral, such as "educational preferences," for which we created a data unit by collecting and compiling every reference educational preferences related to KG education. After developing the coding scheme, the RAs both then coded an additional twenty percent of the interviews, meeting frequently to resolve disagreements and discuss unclear or redundant codes, emerging themes and categories, and disconfirming information. This information was used to revise the coding scheme and ensure that the RAs were in agreement. These codes were then applied to the remaining 15 interviews in each group, with one RA coding the remaining parent transcripts and the second coding the remaining teacher transcripts.

The majority of codes referenced clear and substantive issues such as "educational preferences" "discipline," "child needs", or "teacher-caregiver relationships". Within each larger theme, sub-themes were created. For example, for "child needs," these included: physical, logistic trouble at home, hygiene, emotional/behavior, and academic. Specific passages could be assigned more than one code. With two coders assigned to each transcription, we discussed the interpretation of the transcripts and had multiple perspectives on the identification of topics. Once topics were identified, segments of the interviews were compiled into data units and assigned relevant codes.

Results

The results are organized by three overarching themes: defining educational quality, perspectives on discipline, and roles of parents and teachers, summarizing the key issues that arose for each group. Interestingly, the parents did not discuss the QP4G parental-awareness meetings in detail, other than some saying they enjoyed the meetings, and half of the parents said they had never attended a meeting. Themes related to their preferences for early education and

their perceived role in their child's learning were much more salient. Teachers, on the other hand, provided insights into their experiences with the teacher training and in the parental-awareness meetings, as well as their perceptions of quality education, experiences teaching, and relationships with parents.

Defining Educational Quality

Parent perspectives on quality

Focus on academics and materials. When asked about their preferences for kindergarten and what makes a quality kindergarten education, parents had a wide range of opinions on attributes and materials that created an excellent classroom. A recurring theme, however, was an emphasis on the primacy of academic skill development. Many parents cited children's expanding academic abilities as a mark of a quality school environment. Specifically, parents referenced their child's emergent numeracy and literacy skills as the mark of a good kindergarten experience. When asked by an interviewer what makes a good KG education, one parent replied: "An education that begins with lessons like numerals and alphabets." Another parent stated:

> At the KG, the children are young and so when it comes to their learning, toys and cards with alphabets written on them, I think if it is inherent in their studies it helps them to make progress in their studies. Because the child cannot read but when you use those letters, he knows you showed him that this alphabet is "A" and so it sticks in their mind to the extent they are able to identify alphabets like "A" and the use of colors to make sketch on a paper. There are certain colors I cannot even identify but when you ask, Junior, what color is this?, he can tell you because they have shown it to him.

Many parents explained how academic schoolwork was more important than playing too much. This academic focus carried from classroom to the home as some parents mentioned their

attempt to promote more schoolwork at home in order for their child to get ahead in school. One

parent had the following exchange with the interviewer, describing their efforts at home to

ensure their child's workbook was complete and neat:

R: Changes…one is now with his homework, his homework bookay [book] is always

neat.

I: Okay

R: He always doesn't get wrong in his homework.

I: Is it something, is that how you were, what do you do to ensure that?

R: I go through.

I: Okay.

R: And I make sure his bookay is always neat.

I: Oh okay.

R: His handwriting is always neat in the bookay.

I: Okay

R: Yes. So now he has a good handwriting in his homework bookay.

I: Okay

R: Yes, his homework bookay is always neat. He is always doing his homework

before going to school.

Parents also primarily referred to physical and structural resources as indicators of school

quality. The major themes related to the physical environment included the physical space

available for children to play and learn, the cleanliness of the classroom, the physical

infrastructure and learning resources, the arrangement of desks and chairs, and the decoration of

the walls with illustrations and other educational images / charts. There was a wide range of

opinions of the quality of the physical environment in their child's school. Some parents stated that their child's classroom was overcrowded and supplied with old desks and bare walls, while other parents mentioned that the physical environment and available materials were what they liked best about their child's kindergarten experience. When asked what she liked about her child's KG classroom, one mother focused on the structural resources in the school, saying:

> Anyway I don't, do I like anything? I don't think I like anything there; there is nothing attractive there…. the chairs look too old; these old fashion chairs. But I think they are renovating the place and the last time I went there, oh sorry, they've changed their louves [toilets]; they have a slide now, it looks nice.

Another parent described the importance of both the materials and structural resources in the KG classroom, focusing on the cleanliness and safety necessary to support learning:

> Books and posters which contain images of animals and letters must be found in the classrooms…The compound must also be neat, there shouldn't be any garbage around the school compound, and also there must be handwashing containers available where the children can wash their hands after using the latrine, also the floor of the compound shouldn't be dusty or bushy, because when it is bushy, reptiles and other poisonous animals can disturb the children.

Only two parents mentioned the importance of creativity and play in the classroom or the home. When asked how the parent supports their child's learning, one of these parents said:

> Like helping them in anything when they ask question and are not clear about something I help them understand what they need to know. The activities anything like play. I play with them, sing, dance with them and tell stories and read books to them and when they we watch the TV and they don't understand anything I explain to them.

Importance of teacher patience. While caregivers focused on academics and materials when discussing quality generally, many also mentioned the importance of a good teacher having patience, and that this virtue was something they appreciated about their child's teacher. When asked what they liked about their child's KG teacher, one mother said: "You know these children will always provoke the teachers, but they always have the patience to handle them." Another father said emphasized the patience his child's teacher had with his child:

> The teacher has a good character; she is a fine person. She also has patience. That's all I can say about her. She is nice…I knew because I often come to here [to the school] to ask about my child's performance and she tells me just like she told you that the child speaks at a low tone and she will then tell me it will be okay because it's like with some children but when they grow up it changes.

Parents had a preference for older more experienced teachers, as one mother stated: "The person should be old, should be old like how this woman is [referring to the KG teacher she was discussing]…Not JHS [junior high school] or SHS [secondary high school] graduates. Those who underwent the …teacher training. They are more knowledgeable than the little ones." The other themes related to what makes a good teacher included one who has positive interaction with children and the ability to interact positively with parents.

Teacher perspectives on quality

Insufficient structural and training resources. When asked about their perspectives of KG quality, teachers tended to focus on the daily challenges they experienced in their classrooms and the barriers to their ability to implement a quality education. Because all teachers interviewed had participated in QP4G training, large parts of their interviews reflected on the training. Teachers generally feel positive about the training, with many reporting feeling less

stress in their classrooms because of the techniques they had learned. Despite feeling better prepared themselves, teachers consistently discussed children being unprepared for KG1 and KG2, lamenting that many children were not exposed to any early literacy before arriving to school. Similarly, children having insufficient books was brought up consistently in interviews, and teachers felt this affected children's learning. One teacher said:

> So you know you've taught the child how to write one, the child writes one on the board and in the sand tray and other things but there is no book for the child to write in. So when he goes home and comes back to school, he has forgotten everything that you taught.

While parents were expected to provide workbooks and academic material for children, many children did not have classroom supplies and were thus unable to participate in activities. As a result, teacher workloads increased. The frequency of the issue of children having insufficient books speaks to the importance of classroom supplies to teachers. Another teacher said: "They only come to school, when they come to school, they learn, after school when they close from the house, when they go to the house; they don't learn again."

Most teachers also discussed their desire for safer school buildings. Many teachers said their school building was unsafe and unsanitary, including unsanitary bathrooms, insufficient plumbing, no running water, very hot classrooms, and leaking roofs. One teacher stated:

> And our environment is also another challenge, and you know the sand and everything in it, you know the wind blowing there is always there is dust. And also, toilet facility, you will be teaching and the child will say 'I want to ease myself' and there is no place for you to, it becomes a bigger challenge.

Notably, many teachers wished for a better playground (or any playground) for their school—

which may demonstrate an investment in including play and kinetic learning in their school day. After attending the QP4G training, teachers were passionate about improving their playground and play areas of their school. Many teachers integrated dancing, stretching, and other warm up activities in their classroom, which they said helped both the teacher and students. Some teachers described adding educational play corners in their classrooms, often supplied with donations from parents.

Alongside an increased and enthusiastic inclusion of play in classrooms, some teachers mentioned their increased awareness of children's emotional needs. One teacher stated: "I've learnt that a KG teacher must always be friendly, you have to be there for the children anytime they need anything, when they come to you for assistance, you have to be there for the child." However, many felt that they did not have enough resources or skills to teach or recognize social and emotional development in children. Some teachers also discussed children confiding in them and the need to be loving and responsive. Along with varied other responses, similar to the parents' responses, teachers were unanimous in patience (or a similar adjective) as the main trait of a good teacher. One teacher said: "Oh I really enjoy it…because the kids…they need a caring mother…someone loves children to handle them and if you don't have the patience you can't handle the little ones because they disturb a lot." Interestingly, some teachers also discussed needing to have patience with parents.

Proactive and positive behavior management. When discussing quality education, teachers discussed the importance of implementing positive and proactive behavior management strategies in their classrooms to support children's social learning, one of the foci of the QP4G training. Teachers also spoke in detail about their experiences engaging with parents during the parental-awareness meetings and had mixed experiences. In several interviews, teachers

described conflicts with parents over differing perspectives on how children should be treated. Teachers primarily described these conflicts related to disciplinary practices, where parents did not agree with the messages in the meetings related to positive behavior management as opposed to corporal punishment. One teacher said: "When the topics were discussed, some of them did not agree. They were like 'I gave birth to my child so why shouldn't I beat him if the child is misbehaving?'" Another teacher described a similar situation, but with more resolution as teachers pushed back on parents as well. This teacher said:

> Like getting the child some learning materials so that as they are playing they can be learning at the same time. And sometimes they have to stop using the cane but a parent voiced out and said that her kids are stubborn so without the cane...So I told her that with some parents they said the kids are always happy whenever they are around so they should avoid the cane and they will be fine.

> At the same time, other teachers described the meetings as a platform for positive engagement and change with parents. One teacher discussed how the meetings changed the nature of her communication with parents, stating:

> Before the video, if you don't give the homework to the children, some parent used to come and complain and also cross complain especially when their children had told them that they played a lot in school the previous day, but when they saw in the video that the playing and singing are all part of the learning, they stopped complaining.

This indicates that for some parents, the messages from the video resonated and teachers may have felt more encouraged to maintain the classroom practices from the training in order to improve the quality of their classroom.

Perspectives on Discipline

Parent perspectives on discipline. Discipline came up as central for socialization of children, but perceptions on appropriate disciplinary practices differed. Nearly all parents emphasized the importance of discipline as a critical feature of a quality kindergarten classroom, and parents characterized teacher's disciplinary actions as a way to positively affect their child's behavior. Support for corporal punishment was often cited as the only way to discipline children and instill good behavior, as the message from a physical punishment is very clear. Some parents saw teachers' use of corporal punishment as a sign that teachers cared about their children and wanted them to learn. One parent said: "The child has a hard heart so sometimes you have to beat him before she will respond to instruction." Other parents cited that they did not have the energy or patience to employ other disciplinary techniques and that beating was the most direct way to handle their child. In addition, some parents asserted that corporal punishment was appropriate given that they experienced similar practices in their youth. Parents felt that in the context of school, it was the teacher's responsibility to administer discipline and to encourage good behavior and discourage bad behavior. One parent stated:

> Just like what I told you, there are some teachers when children send their work to them, they would shout on them to go and sit down but this one didn't say that. He took a cane and only said 'if you do not write it well, I will beat you.' That means she wants the child to learn and progress.

Not all parents shared this perspective about corporal punishment. There was roughly an equal number of parents who were against corporal punishment or believed in the minimization of its use. One parent said of the teachers at her child's school: "Mmm…they cane them, they cane them, they use cane on them. Yeah, yes they use can on them and that I don't I agree to that." A majority of the parents that attended the parental-awareness meetings said that talking

and encouragement were better, "gentler" ways to raise their child. For example, one parent pointed to discipline in the context of the developmental period of younger children, stating that "[f]or KG children if you are not gentle with them and encourage them, they won't understand what they are being taught." Another parent discussed their positive views of teachers using alternative forms of discipline in an exchange with the interviewer:

> R: I haven't seen any kid being punished here before. Sometimes when I come they will be reading.
>
> I: So, what is your thought on that?
>
> R: When you ask the teachers they say they are told not to lash the kids so this is the punishment that they give to the kids. I see that it is good, because this punishment will even make them know how to read well. The kids came to school to learn so that they will learn how to read.
>
> I: So, at the end of the day, even though it is a punishment the kids learn something from it.
>
> R: Yes
>
> I: Okay so is it only reading apart from caning that is a form of punishment that you know?
>
> R: Reading and also sometimes the kid won't be allowed to go for break.
>
> I: So, what about that?
>
> R: If you do something wrong while your friends are on break playing, you will be denied that.

Some of these parents said that they applied specific techniques from the video at home, like having their child sit quietly in a chair as a form of punishment. One parent said that in the

meetings, "we concluded talking to them was the best way to discipline a child." These parents negatively characterized the teachers who beat their child, supplying their corporal punishment practices as something they were dissatisfied with in the KG classroom.

But not all parents said they stopped using corporal punishment altogether; some described incorporating some changes in their disciplinary techniques as a result of the training. For example, one mother said that she used less corporal punishment as a result of the meetings, but did still cane her child:

R: I no more shout at the child and how I learnt we shouldn't beat children too I no more beat her too much like that.

I: You mean use the cane?

R: Yes. Unlike first that I can whip the child till the cane is destroyed, I no more do that. I only give her about some 3 lashes and allow her.

Along the same lines, a second mother said:

R: Advice is very good for everyone so if you don't know something and you are taught, I think all you have to do is to work with it. For me I don't beat my children at home, I will only beat them when they take something I have not asked them to take without my permission.

I: Okay so after the PTA has anything changed, or you still beat them when they do something bad.

R: Yes, a lot has changed because now I make sure I speak to them and not to beat them even when they do something bad and sometimes I use strange gestures to indicate my disapproval of what they are doing.

Parents' responses suggest that there were a variety of reactions to the messages in the parental-

awareness meetings, particularly in relation to disciplinary techniques. Understanding the underlying contributing factors to these different reactions is an important area for future work.

Teacher perspectives on discipline. With the exception of one interview, teachers generally supported positive disciplinary practices in their classrooms and discouraged harsh discipline. Teachers reported using alternative strategies to manage student behavior, some of which were included in the teacher training program. One teacher described using cards and symbols as a strategy to enforce positive student behavior:

> R: This is because we talk to the child when the child is doing something wrong, we have things that we use to show them, we have cards that we have cut red, that we show to the child, that the child understands what you are trying to mean. So now we don't shout, at first, we will shout "Keep quiet" but now it is not there.
>
> I: So, you just show the cards to them?
>
> R: Yes, and they know what the card means.
>
> I: So, if you want them to keep quiet, what card do you show them?
>
> R: The red, it means there is danger ahead.
>
> I: So, what other cards do you show them?
>
> R: And when a child does something good, we mark the work and do a sign under the book for them, maybe a star, a toy, you draw the thing for them and they are happy.

Another teacher gave a different example:

> For instance, one teacher said, the boy stood on a table just jumping from one place to the other and we saw that, initially she would have beaten the boy but now, she just called the boy and asked whether it was good to be jumping on the tables, the boy

himself said no and then she addressed the whole class that it wasn't good to be jumping on the tables.

Furthermore, many teachers said they were happier as they became better able to manage their classroom with new behavior management systems. Teachers again discussed patience as an important quality for them to have when disciplining children.

Teachers also discussed ways they had helped parents incorporate new methods of discipline. Some teachers said they cautioned parents about being too strict with children, since it often makes them "timid." Overall, many of the teachers seemed to have embraced behavior management practices from the training, attempting less-harsh discipline in their classroom and reporting positive results. Only one teacher reported that harsh and corporal punishment was necessary.

Roles of Parents and Teachers

Parent perspectives on roles: Providing the necessities for their child. Parents were asked directly whether they thought education of the child was the sole responsibility of the teacher. All parents, when faced with the question, firmly expressed that it was both the responsibility of teachers and parents. However, when asked more about their role in their child's education, parents primarily saw their role as taking care of their children at home and ensuring their necessities were met, including feeding and preparing the child for school in the morning and picking them up at the end of the day. Parents described their role in school support and school involvement primarily as paying school fees. One parent said: "Now taking care of children is money especially my children, they like to play a lot and with toys also, so I work hard to get them some. I take care of their feeding, the clothing and health too." Another stated: "When it comes to the provision of educational materials such as toilet roll, soap and others, I

provide them on time in order not to affect their studies." Interestingly, some parents felt schools reinforced this role, with PTA meetings primarily involving asking parents to provide material resources for the school. As one parent stated:

> Sometimes when we go for PTA Meetings, the master (headmaster) places it before us that the washroom of the children is not in good condition so we should come to their intervention and moreover there is heat in the classrooms of the school so we should some ways and means to provide fans for them.

Some parents mentioned that they had never been to their child's school or that they rarely interacted with their child's teacher, often citing work commitments as the main reason. One father said that he rarely visited the school, and only came if there was an issue: "Well I don't come here often but anytime I come here, I come with a problem." Other parents explained that even when they went to school to drop their child, they did not meet the teacher or go to school PTA meetings. One mother stated that when she had an issue, she would speak with the school headmaster rather than the teacher. Specifically, she said, "I never spoke to her [teacher] before; in everything I call the master if I don't understand anything because when I sent the child to school the first time it was the headmaster who received me." Many of these same parents mentioned that providing books and learning materials was a sufficient way to create a link between the home and school.

Teacher perspectives on roles.

Frustration with parents. The types of relationships described between teachers and parents varied greatly. Many teachers felt frustrated with a lack of parent participation, while others had warm and friendly relationships with their students' parents. While there were a couple of examples of teachers reporting positive interactions with parents, the large majority

described frustration and suspicion with some parents. One teacher described her difficulty to reach and connect with parents despite her attempts, saying: "…if I want to see them to discuss something with them even, you can't see them—maybe you will say when you go home, call your mother or father to come, they won't come." Another teacher described her frustration with her view of many of the parents parenting practices, stating: "your irresponsible parent who left you here and careless about you (says in local dialect). Then beating the child, assaulting them; I have nothing, I have no book for you."

The majority of the negative concerns and comments teachers had about their relationship with parents revolved around poverty. Teachers were all frustrated with a lack of school fee payment—which was mentioned unprompted by all interviewees. Some teachers reported late paychecks because of a lack of school fees being paid. A lack of school supplies added a strain on teachers and their classrooms, and many teachers associate this frustration with parents. As one teacher explains:

> [T]he challenges that I face was the buying of the books. That one-up till now,
> parents don't want to come and buy the books for them. They push their wards to
> you like a... dumping ...ground, for them to go and rest. You will invite them
> come and buys books for your (repeats statement) you will not see them, even up
> till in my class, some of them in have no books so what I do, I pick old books and
> give it to them.

Teachers also expressed frustration with the fact that children moved often, and perceived negative effects of this instability on children. Relatedly, many teachers were also frustrated that children attended school hungry, which they saw impacted children's behavior and approaches to learning. Many teachers used their own resources to provide basic needs for their students. For

example, one teacher said:

> Yes but…the challenge there is but…the challenge there is in this our community
> sometimes parents can bring the children to the school but no food, no books…no-
> nothing for the child. so sometimes we or I have to help…the child. if a child did not eat
> before coming to school, do you think if we are teaching, he or he will…feel the
> teaching? So those are some the of challenges and then one, the fees too are not regular
> so you see they can sack the child let's say two weeks, one week, three weeks then child
> is not in school and we are going forward. So these are some of my challenges.

These frustrations spanned teachers in both public and private schools. This is important to note, given that teachers in public schools are paid by the government regardless of whether parents pay school fees. In the low-fee private sector, however, the schools rely on school fees to cover teacher salaries and other school expenses. Despite there being a direct monetary relationship between parents paying school fees and teacher salaries in private but not public schools, similar frustrations were reported across teachers in both sectors.

Importantly, not all teachers reported frustration with all parents. Many teachers reported positive and trusting relationships with some parents. One teacher stated she felt appreciated by parents, saying "I think…the parents brought up or the parents even rather appreciated how the teachers are able to help their wards [children]." Notably, a few teachers who struggled with insufficient classroom materials to set up educational-play corners reported that they received donations from parents and were appreciative of this involvement and support. One teacher said that parents "help them with materials like color books, logos and other objects." Another teacher spoke of parents helping repair broken furniture in the classroom, stating, "Some also are carpenters so when our children, erm this thing, when our chairs are not good, when we call

them, we discuss with them, some come to help us."

Communication with parents focused on concerns. When asked about their
communication with parents, teachers described communicating explicitly about concerns or
needs they had for children far more frequently than for neutral or positive subjects. This
indicates that communication tends to focus on problems, rather than positive feedback about
children. One teacher said: "Me I don't really discuss anything with them unless I want to talk
about a child or a need something from the parent when we are doing something."

Most teachers described the communication, but discussed much less any changes that
resulted from that communication. One teacher, however, did describe seeing positive results
after speaking to a parent. Specifically, this teacher said:

> [W]e have to call the parent to witness his behavior and his attitude toward learning and
> the father saw it. Just recently when we reopened school, I tried talking to the father and
> most parents especially…. So, I was trying to counsel him about that and he was really
> happy. So, you see right now I have seen him improving so that's an example.

Other teachers described their frustration with parents' lack of responsiveness, even when they
did organize meetings or events for parents. One teacher described the lack of positive responses
from parents in her attempts to reach out to them:

> The parents too are not helping us. In the last two weeks Monday, I invited some parents,
> they didn't come. I give them homework home, instead of them to help their wards to do
> it, some books were torn, some bathed soup. So when I invited them, they didn't come.
> Aaha, so they don't help them, they don't help them, some don't help their children.

Overall, teachers primarily discussed speaking with parents about concerns, and teachers that did
attempt to create more proactive and positive communication with parents were often frustrated

with the result.

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of Ghanaian parents and teachers of pre-primary school children related to early childhood education and their relationships with each other. The results revealed important areas where parents and teachers align in their goals for young children, as well as where they may conflict in ways that could harm educational quality improvement efforts. The results point to potential levers of change where parents and teachers can be better be supported to work together to ultimately improve young children's development and early schooling experiences.

This study was conducted in the wake of a larger impact-evaluation study called Quality Preschool for Ghana (Wolf et al., 2019), which aimed to increase ECE quality through training teachers to use child-centered, activity-based approaches in the classroom, as well as proactive and positive behavior management strategies. When implemented alone, this teacher training model improved classroom quality and children's learning and social-emotional development. However, when implemented with parental-awareness meetings focused on engaging parents in the messages and approaches of the intervention, the program did not improve children's development, and had negative impacts on child outcomes for some children (Wolf et al., 2019) and two years later (Wolf, Aber, Behrman & Peele, 2019).

Analyzing the results from both the parent and teacher qualitative interviews revealed several important insights. First, it appears that the two groups have different visions for the role they would like each other to play in children's education. Parents tended to view their role as ensuring children had their basic needs met, including nutrition and cleanliness and payment of school fees, and less so in supporting children's educational experiences through engaging in

enrichment or educational activities with children. Some teachers, on the other hand, felt

frustrated with parents and that they did not invest enough in their children's learning and

development. Importantly, the findings also indicate that there is great variation in parent-teacher

relationships, and that understanding the state of parent-teacher relationships in each context is

important when designing interventions. The results are in line with findings from a qualitative

study in Zambia on parental involvement in ECD (Chikutuma, 2017).

Second, both parents and teachers raised the issue of discipline as an important part of

ECE. But parents were split in their endorsement of corporal punishment as necessary, and

teachers (who participated in the QP4G training) nearly all endorsed more proactive, positive

behavior management approaches. This particular disagreement seems to have been raised

during the parental-awareness meetings and may be one key explanation for why the teacher

training implemented with parental-awareness meetings was less effective than the teacher

training implemented alone. These findings speak to a recent study in Tanzania, which found that

parents consider respect and social compliance as core values they hope schooling will instill in

their children, while teachers value confidence and curiosity (Jukes et al., 2018). Increasing

parent participation and engagement in education without changing parent preferences may lead

these demands to more strongly influence teachers. Interestingly, the results from this study

showed that some teachers and parents expressed frustration with the other's use of harsh

disciplinary techniques. Virtually no previous research has examined these specific issues in

detail, and these findings point to a rich area for future research to consider when designing

parental engagement programs in sub-Saharan Africa.

A third issue raised by teachers pertained to communication with parents. Teachers

reported that they primarily reached out to parents if there was a concern about a child. When

teachers did attempt to proactively engage parents, many felt parents were not responsive and were frustrated. If this is the case, parents may experience communication with teachers negatively, given the content generally discussed is focused on problems related to their child. Finding ways to encourage ongoing communication between teachers and parents, focused more generally on children's development and progress and that incorporates positive feedback about children, may be important to improving communication and building parents' social capital and investments in children (e.g., Turley et al., 2017). Teachers also felt frustrated with parents' lack of involvement in education, though many of the issues were related to family poverty where parents were not able to purchase school supplies for their children. Interestingly, this reinforces the perception raised by parents' that parental involvement in school is primarily through the provision of learning materials for their children. This suggests that if the education system could provide better materials for schools and children, some of the challenges teachers reported could be reduced and additional roles for parents may be more easily fostered.

Finally, one key finding from the parent interviews was that parents focus on academics and structural resources when assessing preschool quality. This finding is not new in Ghana or in other countries (Bernal, Attanasio, Peña, & Vera-Hernández, 2019; Bidwell & Watine, 2014; Kabay, Wolf, & Yoshikawa, 2017). Research in ECE has consistently shown that parents focus on structural aspects of schools when determining quality, but that structural resources support children's learning only to the extent that they improve teacher-child interaction quality (Slot, 2018). The results suggest that public service campaigns or messages that relay the importance of children's relationships with teachers, including nurturing and caring relationships, as key to education and learning may be needed to change what parents look for when selecting a school for their child. Investigating how such messages would be received by parents, and how they

might affect parent-teacher interactions, would be important to examine.

Conclusions

While there are some evidence-based programs that have successfully improved parenting skills and shifted parents' perceptions about their role in their preschool child's learning primarily in the United States (e.g., Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010; Turley et al., 2017), these programs have almost exclusively been implemented through home visitation. Finding ways to successfully translate the messages and impacts of such programs could be an important step to successfully engaging parents during their child's preschool years. Successfully engaging parents during the ECE years could be an important starting point to increase parent involvement in their child's future schooling.

Delivering such programs through teachers in school-based interventions is one approach that has shown some promise in sub-Saharan Africa, as is using a radio-based platform to reach parents and teachers in remote communities. A recent study in Malawi found that a more intensive, 12-module group-based parenting-support program focused on parenting skills and administered through childcare centers by teachers and their mentors combined with intensive teacher training was effective in improving early childhood developmental outcomes (Ozler et al., 2018). Furthermore, a recent study in Rwanda also focused on younger children (infants and toddlers) points to promising results. Abimpaye, Dusabe, Nzabonimpa, Ashford and Pisani (2019) evaluated a holistic parenting intervention delivered to groups of parents through 17 weekly participatory radio programs. Children of parents who received the program were significantly more likely to meet developmental benchmarks in all domains assessed. These suggests that more intensive parenting programs administered through schools by local personnel can be effective. Finally, in rural communities in Zambia, a pilot project of the Early Childhood

Education Interactive Radio Instruction pilot showed that interactive radio-based instruction successfully increased the number of ECE centers for preschool-aged children, successfully trained ECE mentors, and improved community mobilization. The results point to the promise of lower cost radio-based programming to reach parents and teachers in rural, hard-to-reach communities (Matafwali, 2014).

In this study, many teachers raised the concern that they did not have enough training or material resources to do their jobs. Despite the increased attention pre-primary education has received globally in previous years, funding for ECE is still limited. In Ghana, basic education spending is skewed towards older grades, as is the distribution of resources such as instructional space and quality teachers. The international donor community follows a similar trend. Aid funding for pre-primary education actually *declined* by 27 percent from 2015 to 2017, compared to an increase in aid to education overall. Importantly, the amount of international aid allocated to pre-primary education was small to begin with, at 0.8 percent in overall aid spending in 2015 to just 0.5 percent in 2017 (Zubairi & Rose, n.d.). Shifting resources to include ECE as a central part of the financing of the primary education system is needed. Doing so may also alleviate some of the tensions raised in the findings of this study, where teachers and parents are focused on the lack of basic materials and structural resources for pre-primary education. Both feel it is the parents' role to provide these resources, whether or not they are financially able to do so.

The expansion of ECE services in LMICs has the potential to support children's development and longer-term learning. However, in order to reach this potential, efforts are needed to increase the financial support and improve the quality of ECE services, while at the same time embracing the challenges and opportunities that come along with supporting parents and teachers. To do this successfully, it will be important to better understand the needs and

expectations of parents and teachers, as well as how to harness their relationships with each other to ultimately support such efforts.

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