

Exploring Early Education Programs in Peri-urban Settings in Africa: Johannesburg, South Africa



Policy Issue

Evaluation Context

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) performed a study of preschools in Soweto, Johannesburg in July and August 2013. The study aimed to present details on access to and quality of preschools as part of a four-city project including similar work in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana, launched and sponsored by the UBS Optimus Foundation. Results show that a large number of preprimary options exist and a majority of young children are attending preschool in this area. These preschools may be more oriented towards broad developmental learning rather than the academic approaches prevalent in other study areas.

Details of the Intervention

In South Africa, a typical distinction is made between the 0-5 age range, for which the main involvement of the government is through subsidies of not-for-profit ECD centers, and the 5-6 age range, for which the public sector is more directly involved through grade R classes attached to public primary schools.

Given the general focus of this multi-country study on early education programs for children aged 3 to 6, this report encompasses both 3-5 year olds in pre-grade R centers, and 5-6 year olds in grade R.

Soweto is located about 15 km southwest of Johannesburg, with a population of over 1 million. Given the focus of the study on the poor and high income inequality in Soweto, this study selected the 8 poorest of the area's 46 wards. In South Africa, most urban poor actually live in formal settlement parts of townships, in part due to the large government-provided housing system. In the study area, only about one fourth of the households live in informal settlements.

Data collection was conducted in Soweto with the aim of documenting the scale, cost and quality of preprimary education (i.e. both preschool and grade R) in this area. In total 238 household interviews, 30 headmaster interviews and 26 classroom observations were conducted.

Results and Policy Lessons

Preprimary participation rates vary across the age range and are significantly lower for the poor

60% of 3 and 4 year olds in the study areas attend school, and more than 80% of 5 and 6 year olds. There is no significant gender gap on attendance rates for children aged 3 to 6. However, preschool attendance rises with both household income and educational attainment of adults within the



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household. In the poorest quintile, only about half of children go to school, as opposed to 91% in the wealthiest quintile.

Pre-grade R are mostly non-profit, but grade R are mostly public

71% of pre-grade R students in the study area go to a private preschool (largely NPOs) but an estimated 74% of grade R students go to a public grade R.

Parents have a relatively large number of preschool options, but fewer grade R options: the average number of preschools caregivers knew of within walking distance was 3.3, but only 2.1 grade R options.

The major factors caregivers consider in selection are proximity and cost, though teacher quality, curriculum and facilities are also mentioned.

Preprimary school-related costs average just above 500 rands (\$51) per month per child. The government's child support grant is being claimed for 74% of the children attending preprimary in our sample, but little other financial assistance is available from schools or other bodies.

Parents have a high view of preprimary education

Parents seem to view preschools as educational establishments rather than just daycare centers; both preschool and grade R are viewed as important investments in a child's future. Respondents estimated that relative to children who had not attended preprimary education, earnings at age 30 would increase by 75% for attending grade R and preschool, and 56% for just attending grade R.

We also find strong evidence that parents perceive more expensive private schools as superior to low cost private schools.

Provision of facilities and services is generally good, though uneven

Of the preschool classrooms observed there was decent infrastructure with basic learning materials, play materials, and teacher supervision in most settings. Wider school infrastructure was also generally acceptable. All schools had latrines and a fence. All except one had at least some electricity and all but two had a playground.

All but one of the schools in our sample provided at least one meal per day to students (and over 90% provide both breakfast and lunch). Most schools also had first aid kits and immunization programs.

According to their headmasters, 85% of teachers in our study area have completed an ECD-specific training course. This breaks down into 96% of public sector teachers and 79% of private sector teachers.

Less academically-oriented style than other Sub-Saharan countries

Classrooms appeared geared towards learning-through-play rather than formal academic styles. Children spent considerable time playing on the floor or outside, and around half the preschool classrooms had no desks, chairs or uniforms. Schools generally had a decent number and variety of toys available.

Grade Rs are larger and more academically oriented than preschools. Children in grade R have more learning materials, are more likely to be sitting in rows facing the front, and tend to have better qualified and experienced teachers. These differences may reflect both a difference in age range and

also the fact that grade Rs are predominantly public, while pre-grade R are predominantly private.

Registered schools are better resourced

Of private preprimaries in the study, 62% were registered with the Department of Social Development and/or the Department of Basic Education. Registered schools tended to be larger, have higher teacher salaries, have more learning materials and receive more financial support.

Conclusion

The preprimary education sector in Soweto is large and relatively well-attended, though the market may not be saturated. Most parents are aware of the value of early education, and a majority of 3-6 year olds are attending preprimary schools. However, Children from the poorest backgrounds are significantly less likely to attend school and, if attending, are more likely to be attending schools with poor resources.

IPA and its partner the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL Africa), are eager to identify cost-effective programs successful at improving access and quality of preschool services with both public and private sector partners. For questions on partnering on impact evaluations in South Africa specifically, contact J-PAL Africa (jpalafrica@povertyactionlab.org) at the University of Cape Town. For questions regarding IPA's work in the early education sector please contact Loïc Watine (lwatine@poverty-action.org).

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