

Exploring Early Education Programs in Peri-urban Settings in Africa: Accra, Ghana



Policy Issue Evaluation Context

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) performed a scoping study of preschools in Ashaiman, Accra in September and October 2013. The study aims to present details on access to and the quality of preschools as part of a four-country study including similar work in Nairobi, Johannesburg and Lagos, launched and sponsored by the UBS Optimus Foundation. The results show that a large number of preschool options exist in Ashaiman, particularly in the private sector, and that an overwhelming majority of young children are attending these preschools.

Details of the Intervention

The Ghanaian early education system includes four years of preprimary education. Children enter Nursery at age 2, after which they enter Kindergarten, and enter primary school at age 6. All children attend 5 days a week and spend on average 41 hours per week at preschool.

Ashaiman is a town of roughly 200,000 residents, located 30 kilometers east of the Ghanaian capital Accra's city center. Although Ashaiman is clearly regarded as a 'slum area' by Ghanaians, most dwellings are permanent structures made of bricks or concrete.

Data collection was conducted in Ashaiman with the aim of gathering data on the scale, cost and quality of preprimary education. In total, 286 household interviews, 30 headmaster surveys and 40 classroom observations were conducted.

Results and Policy Lessons

Large preschool participation rates, even among the poorest

There are a large number of preschool options in Ashaiman, and participation rates are very high. More than 80% of 3 year olds attend preschool, and more than 90% of 4-6 year olds are attending either preschool or primary school, with no significant gender gap.

High attendance is achieved across all levels of income, despite the fact that about 30% of 3-6 year olds live in households live below the poverty threshold of 2.50 dollars per capita.

Options exist, but costs still a barrier

Parents have a relatively large number of options when choosing a school for their child. The average



RESEARCHERS

Kelly Bidwell, Loïc Watine

COUNTRY

Ghana

PARTNER

UBS Optimus Foundation

PROGRAM AREA

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caregiver knows of 3.6 preschools that their child could walk to.

The major selection factors caregivers consider in a preschool are proximity, cost and teacher quality. 60% of parents whose children walk to school are not sending their child to the school they consider to be the best within walking distance, most commonly due to cost. Preprimary school-related costs, including mostly fees, food, and books averaged \$38 dollar per month per child.

Parents value preschool education, particularly of private schools

Parents view preschools as educational establishments rather than daycare centers. 80% of parents said their main motivation for sending their child to school was for the child to learn skills and be prepared for primary school. Only 12% said that the main reason was that there was no-one at home to take care of them.

We also find evidence that parents perceive private schools to be better than public schools, and more expensive private schools to be superior to low cost private schools. An estimated 91% of preschool students in Ashaiman go to a private preschool.

Content and teaching academically oriented

Materials and teaching style are geared towards an academic style of learning, with the prevalence of forward-facing desks and exercise books. There is considerable variation, however, in provision of materials within classrooms; the responsibility of buying school books generally rests with parents and within most classes a minority of pupils remain without learning materials. Toys and play materials are limited; only 26% of children attend schools that had any toys for preschool use.

Homework is generally assigned as of age 3.5 on average, and learning goals are very ambitious. The average ages by which headmasters consider that children should know the single-digit numbers and the full alphabet are 3.6 and 3.7 years respectively. Almost half (45%) of private schools have exams for 3 year olds and 90% have exams for 6 year olds.

Gap between government plan and reality

23 of the 24 private schools in the sample said they were registered with either Ghana Educational Services (GES) or the Ashaiman Municipal Council.

While the Ghanaian government has recently formulated the ambitious and comprehensive “Operational Plan to Scale-Up Quality KG Education in Ghana,” classroom realities depart from this vision in two key ways:

- 1) Rote learning techniques have not yet been overtaken by the Government’s espoused child-centered teaching model.
- 2) Around three-quarters of observed classrooms used primarily English for instruction, despite the Government’s literacy acceleration plan for 90% of kindergarten instructional time to be in national languages.

In order to bring classroom behavior more in line with government rhetoric, GES has stipulated that teacher training is their number one priority within the preschool sector. They are currently seeking appropriate models of mass transformational training, which will target Ghana’s 27,000 untrained preschool teachers.

Conclusion

While Ashaiman has a large, well-attended preschool sector, private providers dominate and evidence suggests that cost remains a barrier to attending higher quality institutions. While Ghana has advanced educational policies, classroom realities do not always reflect the government's vision. The high numbers of untrained teachers and overwhelming usage of English to teach numeracy and literacy are of particular concern. The Government has recently published an ambitious plan to deal with these issues which, if successfully implemented, could cement Ghana's status as a leader in preschool education services in Africa.