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Household Socioeconomic Status and Parental Investments: Direct and Indirect Relations With School Readiness in Ghana

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This study examines how parent socioeconomic status (SES) directly and indirectly predicts children's school readiness through pathways of parental investment. Data come from direct assessments with preschool children and surveys with their primary caregivers in Ghana at the start of the 2015–2016 school year ($N = 2,137$; $M_{age} = 5.2$ years). Results revealed SES-related gaps in all parental investment characteristics and child school readiness skills. Preschool involvement served as the primary mediating mechanism in the path from SES to most school readiness skills, though it did not predict executive function. The number of books in the household was marginally positively predictive of early literacy, whereas at-home stimulation was negatively related to motor, literacy, and numeracy skills.

Approximately 155 million birth to 4-year-old children currently live in sub-Saharan Africa, making up nearly one-quarter of the world's children in this age group (UNICEF, 2015). Projections estimate that by 2030, one in every three children under 18 will be African (UNICEF, 2014a). With some of the highest regional rates of child poverty in the world, nearly 80% of sub-Saharan African children live in families whose income per capita is < \$2 per day (UNICEF, 2014b). In Ghana, in particular, 28.4% of children live below the national poverty line (equivalent to about \$1.81 per day), and 47% of individuals living on less than \$1.25 are under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2015).

In addition to facing economic challenges, children and families in sub-Saharan Africa also face educational barriers. Despite significant progress in increasing universal primary school enrollment (UNESCO, 2014), educational quality and learning levels remain low. For example, the 2013 National Education Assessment in Ghana showed that only 22.1% of Primary 3 (P3; equivalent of third grade) students achieved proficiency in mathematics. Results worsened as students progressed through

primary school, with only 10.9% attaining proficiency in Primary 6 (P6; equivalent of sixth grade). In English, 28.1% of P3 students and 39.0% of P6 students achieved proficiency. For both grades, approximately 40% of the students failed to achieve even minimum competency in mathematics, and approximately 40% of P3 students failed to achieve minimum competency in English (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Countries' socioeconomic and educational characteristics are strongly correlated with their children's developmental well-being (McCoy et al., 2016). At the same time, recent research finds that parenting, rather than country environment, is the most important input to early childhood human capital formation (Schoellman, 2016). Yet very little is known about how individual families cope with economic hardships and prepare their children for school in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, nearly all of the research on the relations between socioeconomic status (SES), parental investments, and child development has taken place in North America and Western Europe (Bornstein et al., 2012), with some more recent work focusing on Asia and Latin America (e.g., Behrman et al., 2017; Fernald, Schonns, Neufeld, Kuzner, & Gutierrez, 2014).

In the present article, we address this gap by exploring the relations between household SES (measured by household wealth and parental

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