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The Perils and Promises of Listening to Parents: Encountering Unexpected Barriers to Improving Preschool in Ghana

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What happens when parents push back on efforts to improve preschool quality? My colleagues and I stumbled across this issue while conducting research in Ghana.

Ghana has been a pioneer in expanding children's access to preschool—or what Ghanaians refer to as *kindergarten*. In 2007, the government introduced two years of kindergarten (for 4- and 5-year-olds) as part of the free, universal, basic education system. As a result, Ghana now has some of the highest enrollment rates on the continent (approximately 75%) and has achieved more than 94% enrollment in some areas of the capital city.



For the last four years, my colleagues and I have partnered with Innovations for Poverty Action and the Ministry of Education to improve the quality of these two years of early schooling by developing a teacher training and coaching program. This program aims at helping teachers integrate more child-centered and activity-based learning approaches, as well as positive behavior management practices.

Such educational approaches are in stark contrast to traditional teacher-led methods, where children repeat and memorize what the teacher says. There is even a popular saying in Ghana that captures this older approach: “Chew, pour, pass, forget”—memorize what the teacher says, pour it out to pass the test, and then forget it.

When teachers push forward and parents push back

Because teachers told us they were concerned parents wouldn't like these methods, we also developed a program to engage parents and explain these new approaches to them. We hoped that parents would respond to our outreach by better supporting teachers and maybe even using some of these practices at home.

Ghanaian parents care deeply about their child's education. They see education as key to their child's success in life, and they spend a lot of money on preschool. We assumed that

engaging both teachers and parents would be better than just working with teachers. But we were wrong.

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I'll start with the good news. Training teachers led to improvements in classroom quality. Teachers shifted away from the “chew and pour” methods and instead supported students to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills, and teachers created a more positive emotional climate in the classroom. These changes led to improvements in children’s social and emotional development and in their academic outcomes. As a matter of fact, children in these classrooms performed better in both literacy and numeracy.

Now here’s the bad news: All of the gains for children were erased in schools where, in addition to providing the exact same teacher training, we engaged parents in similar messages through video screenings and discussions during Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. While teachers in these schools did improve some aspects of their teaching practice, they maintained the “chew and pour” approaches to teaching, and all positive gains for children were counteracted. Clearly, our efforts to engage parents as positive participants in the teaching process were not successful.

When confronted with unexpected findings, researchers must dig deeper. My colleagues and I went back and interviewed teachers and parents who had participated in these PTA meetings. We were not surprised to learn that Ghanaian parents want to offer their children the best start to their education, but we were surprised by how strongly they held on to their ideas of what constitutes quality education. Parents were concerned that their child would not learn enough if these new educational approaches were implemented, and some urged teachers to revert to the old approaches, particularly those concerning behavior management, and using intimidation and fear as a strategy to support learning.

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In response to these findings, a Ghanaian colleague of mine asked: “Why don’t you just forget parents and work with teachers? Let the parents focus on making sure the child is fed and cleaned and school fees are paid, and work with the teachers to provide better quality learning.” This, after all, is the approach Ghana’s education system has taken to date. But we know that parents play a major role in their child’s development, and that they are already doing things to support their child’s development at home. To cut parents out of our approach would be doing a disservice to them and their children.

“How to get the parents on board?”

How can we build on the foundation parents have already laid in ways that are also productive for learning? We are heading down two paths that we hope will lead us to the answer to this question. The first path is taking us outside of the field of education to see what community-based approaches have been effective in changing behaviors. The second is

taking us back to the parents themselves, to better understand their needs and desires.

The health sector has developed many successful community-based approaches to alter health-related perspectives and behaviors. A recent study found that community-based theater was an effective way to teach about the prevalence and social predictors of stroke and change behaviors. On a larger scale, nationwide public awareness campaigns have helped countries successfully vaccinate entire populations.

Perhaps we need a similar approach in education, with both national campaigns and community-based strategies to relay information about best practices in early childhood development and education. Such approaches related to parenting and early education have never been tried before, but they are worth considering.

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My colleagues and I are also planning to spend more time listening to Ghanaian parents. What do they desire for their child? How do they see their role in their child’s education, and what would they like help with?

Nearly everything we know about how parents can support preschool children’s early learning comes from high-income countries, where parents are more likely to be literate and have higher levels of education. In countries like Ghana, where some parents may only have a few years of schooling and may have never learned to read, what types of interventions can help them find their role in their child’s learning?

While we don’t yet have the answers, perhaps Ghanaian parents will.

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