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Exploring Early Education Programs in Peri-urban Settings in Africa: Nairobi, Kenya

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**Timeline**

2013

**Sample Size**

220 households and 29 preschools

**Research Implemented by IPA**

Yes

# Exploring Early Education Programs in Peri-urban Settings in Africa: Nairobi, Kenya

## Context of the Evaluation

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) performed a study of preschools in a slum of Nairobi, Kenya, in May and June 2013. The study aims to present descriptive details on the access and quality of preschools in this growing sector as part of a four-city project including similar work in South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana, launched and sponsored by the UBS Optimus Foundation.

*Note: This is not an impact evaluation, but a scoping study in four African cities designed to support future research. You can see the full Nairobi report [here](#) (PDF), the full 4-city report [here](#) (PDF), and the main page with links to the other summaries [here](#).*

## Details of the Intervention

Data collection was conducted in the Mukuru slum area, a large industrial community in the south east of Nairobi, where an estimated 75% of children aged 3-6 live in an informal dwelling, generally a tin structure. With the aim of documenting the scale, cost and quality and preschool education in this area, 221 household surveys, 29 headmaster surveys and 32 classroom observations were conducted.

## Results and Policy Lessons

### ***Large preschool participation rates, even among the poorest***

Preschools abound in Nairobi and can be found on many streets in slum neighborhoods. Over 80% of 4 and 5 year olds in the Mukuru area are attending preschools, with no significant gender gap. Children in the poorest quintiles still have participation rates over 70%.

These high attendance figures are achieved despite the fact that 41% of the 3-6 year-olds in the area live in households with a daily income of less than \$2.50 per capita. All school-related costs come to about KES 1,500 (\$18) per month per child on average.

### ***Many private preschool options***

The preschool sector is largely dominated by the growing private school industry: an estimated 94% of preschool students in the study area of Mukuru are attending private preschools. Parents generally give a high priority to sending children to preschool for primary school preparation, and put a great emphasis on academic study starting as soon as at age 3.

We also find strong evidence that parents perceive more expensive private schools as superior to low cost private schools, and private preschools to be superior to public preschools. On average, parents estimate that attending a low cost private preschool instead of a public preschool would be associated with higher educational achievement and a 33% greater income at the age of 30.

The average caregiver interviewed knows of 4.9 preschools that their child could walk to, which shows the large set of options that parents have when choosing a preschool. The vast majority of private primary schools have attached preschools. Amongst the major factors caregivers consider when selecting a school are proximity, teacher quality, fee level and school test results.

### ***Gaps in infrastructure and services***

The observed preschool classrooms had adequate infrastructure, with basic learning materials, seating options and teacher supervision in most settings. The average preschool student in Mukuru is in a class of 27 students, with a student teacher ratio of 32:1.

Classroom observations revealed very few cases where students had insufficient seating. An estimated 50% the preschools attended by the children in our sample have access to electricity, 87% have latrines, 66% have a playground or open space, and 65% are enclosed by a fence or a wall. Many preschools have little in the way of health or nutritional provision.

### ***Strong emphasis on academic instruction***

Notably, classroom observations revealed that 100% of instruction was teacher led, where the teacher provided instruction at the front of the class to students at desks. Children are taught literacy and numeracy, are given exams, and are ranked within the class from as early as age 3. Learning goals at young ages significantly outstrip those in place in Europe or

America, and the teaching style of preschools mimics that of primary schools. In contrast, education experts underline the importance of developing a wide range of skills in preschool years, with equal emphasis being placed on social development, creativity, problem solving and emotional development.

There was no shortage of very basic learning materials, with an average of 100 exercise books per class. However, materials with additional content such as textbooks, storybooks, activity books, art materials or toys were generally limited or absent, which is in line with the strong academic emphasis of all preschools.

### **Conclusion**

These findings indicate overall that the low cost private schools movement, particularly developed in urban Kenya, seems to also be reaching preprimary students. Most parents are aware of the value of early education, even in very low income areas, and a large majority of 3-6 year olds are attending academically-oriented preschools. There is evidence suggesting, however, that cost remains a barrier to good quality preschools, and that preschools might benefit from improved facilities and a more diverse curriculum focused on developing a broader range of skills.

*IPA is 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 IPA's work in the early education sector, please contact Loïc Watine ([lwatine@poverty-action.org](mailto:lwatine@poverty-action.org)).*

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