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Let them know they ...can just run around and nobody expects them to do homework: Parents' Expectations of Early Childhood Education and Care in Kenya

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Abstract: This paper reports findings from a study of Kenyan parents' perceptions of an ideal early childhood educational environment for their children. Honouring their voices and showcasing them as advocates for quality early childhood education and care, findings are presented as constructed conversations between parents. Twenty-three parents who are professionals, have young children and live in Nairobi were interviewed for this study. Data were then analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Parents reported that quality programs included playfulness, freedom and purpose and that it took a partnership of teacher, child and parent to realise the ideal.

Keywords: Quality, Early Childhood Education, Parents, Grounded Theory

Setting the Scene

In postcolonial Kenya, where education is not compulsory and the environment from early childhood to higher education is highly competitive, there is a growing aspirational middle-class. Among this new middle-class are parents who are seeking high quality education for their young children (Somerset 2007; Buchmann 2003; Buchmann and Hannum 2001). These parents are mostly first generation university graduates experiencing a level of affluence and standard of living not experienced within their families (Michieka 2005; Somerset 2007). In 2003 free public primary education was mandated in Kenya but only the students who are academically successful in primary school will attend secondary education, where there are places for less than fifty per cent of the children who complete primary school (Republic of Kenya 2005). The best secondary schools are government schools, but only the academically elite from across the country will find places there. This is a social milieu where pressure to enter the race for educational attainment begins early.

The study informing this paper sought to explore parents' perceptions of high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Kenya. Parents discussed the educational prospects and the best schools for their children from birth and there was an emergent culture of the 'sooner the better' when it comes to starting. In common vernacular, the term used in Kenya to refer to ECEC services for children 2-6 years of age is foreshortened to 'preschool'; and often what goes on there looks more like formal schooling than what people in the West imagine when they think of 'preschool'. The new educated middle-class parents', represented by participants in this study, want their children to attend private 'schools' or esteemed public schools, in primary and in early childhood (Ngaruiya 2008; Buchmann 2003). Entry to reputable primary schools is highly competitive and requires successful completion of a 'Standard One Interview'. The competitive educational environment is such that there is a sense of needing to find places in preschools with a reputation of having prepared their students for success in the 'Standard One Interview'.

It is direct experience of this competitive educational environment and concern for what effects it may be having on children, families and society that motivated the study reported here. This competitive educational environment raises important questions: first about what constitutes

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high quality ECEC; second the role of parents in defining quality and acting in the best interests of their children; and finally, how these issues of quality and acting in the best interests of the child are contextualised within and by historically constituted social conditions and cultures.

To claim that parents are well placed to know their children's needs and that meeting these needs is an important element of high quality education and care is unlikely to attract much argument. Yet there is a surprising absence of parent perspectives sought or expressed in the existing body of literature ringing into the debate on what constitutes high quality in early childhood services. Larner and Phillips (2002) posit that parents have not said what they want because no one has asked them. This study is an attempt to redress this absence by foregrounding parents' voices in conversations about defining high quality ECEC. In particular, it gives voice to the values and ideals of educated parents, who represent a rapidly growing urban middle class in Kenya. In discussing the issue of quality ECEC for their children, these parents expressed strong, clear views that were, at times, shot through with paradox when faced with the realities of lived experiences.

The Debate about 'Quality' ECEC. What the Literature Says

The subcultures and plurality of values in societies mean that no one definitive definition of quality ECEC exists. As pointed out by Woodhead and Keynes 1996, universal models of quality are both untenable and unhelpful. Definitions of quality in ECEC are contested and context specific and any attempt to understand quality must of necessity accommodate pluralism by considering the social context, systems and cultural values in which an ECEC programme is situated (Tanner, Welsh and Lewis 2006). Contextualising quality in early childhood practice in ways that are relevant to the values of the particular society is important in meeting the child's needs. The way these needs are defined and met will be culturally nuanced. Just as there are variations in defining quality among different stakeholders, there is also "cultural specification of quality as a theoretical concept" (Sylva et al. 2006). Different countries' curricula and expectations for the child entering school influence and reflect each country's definitions of quality and of needs (Rosenthal 2003; Holloway 2000).

Historically, 'quality' in ECEC has commonly been defined as "an attribute of services for young children that ensures the efficient production of predefined, normative outcomes, typically developmental or simple learning goals" as if it were "an inherent attribute, some universal and knowable thing waiting 'out there' to be discovered and measured by experts" (Dahlberg and Moss 2008). Over time, as 'quality' was recognised as neither natural nor neutral (Mooney and Munton 1998; Moss and Pence 1994; Woodhead and Keynes 1996), the dominant view of quality ECEC has been questioned (Ceglowski 2004; Goodfellow and Laverly 2003) and attempts were made to capture what previous measures and definitions have ignored (Ceglowski 2004; Ceglowski and Bacigalupa 2002; Goodfellow 2003, 2005; Irvine 2005, 2002; Kamerman 2001, 2000). Importantly, debates about what constitutes quality have highlighted that it is not something that can be taken for granted. The person or group defining quality determines its scope, and the definition will probably change from one context to another and under specific circumstances (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007; Woodhead and Keynes 1996). These developments make evident that any meaningful definition of quality ECEC must of necessity consider different perspectives about goals and functions of ECEC (Kamerman 2001, 2000).

Concerns about whether quality is objective, fixed and static or subjective and dynamic reflect a prevailing concern with defining, evaluating and measuring key components of public services (Mooney and Munton 1998; Ceglowski and Bacigalupa 2002). An intention to objectivity provides a useful point for developing high quality measures, however definitions of quality should move beyond this and involve discussions and reflections among different stakeholders who are 'doing quality' in early years services (Dahlberg and Moss 2008). In developed countries where the debates about quality and concerns for quality assurance dominate, extensive consultation often informs the creation of standards and measures such that basic core standards of quality are agreed

upon among different stakeholders. However dynamic debate and on-going renewal and change are always at risk of being circumscribed once the standards are published or legislated. Concerned about this risk, Tanner, Welsh and Lewis (2006) argue that it is crucial that definitions and standards form the foundation of a process rather than become an end in themselves. Failure to consider other opinions may lead to meanings and standards reflecting the beliefs, concerns and lifestyles of the dominant group, resulting in the “widespread adoption of the ‘expert’ opinions of policy makers and researchers who are most distant from children, rather than parents and early years workers who have the greatest ‘hands-on’ experience” (Tanner, Welsh, and Lewis 2006). An understanding of the contextual nature of quality is a call for informed and reflective practice by early childhood practitioners (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007; Goodfellow 2003).

Method

Participants

Twenty-three parents, (thirteen women and ten men) residing in urban Nairobi contributed extensive interview data for this study. These parents comprised a total of nineteen families with thirty eight children, (sixteen girls and twenty two boys), ranging in age from two to ten. To be selected as participants, parents had to have a child who was currently attending an ECEC centre and/or child/ren who had attended a centre within five years of the study commencing and had a minimum education level of a Bachelor degree. All participants met these criteria. One of the parents had a PhD, nine held masters degrees; two were pursuing postgraduate studies. Seven of the parents interviewed were high school teachers; three university lecturers; five were in information technology; two in administration; two curriculum developers and one in each of the following fields: communication, human resources, theology and sociology. Pseudonyms are used whenever parents are identified in this paper. The opening paragraph has no indentation.

Data Collection

In-depth, informal face to face semi-structured interviews, usually conducted in the parents’ homes and, in a few cases, in their work places were the main tool for data collection. Interviews were framed in such a way that they related directly to parents’ experiences (Glaser 1992). Interviews began with a prompt such as: *If you were given a chance to come up with an ideal preschool, what are the most important things you would put in place?* Questions were deliberately broad and open, asking parents to reflect on what they considered important for their children in the early years. The hypothetical nature of the question was intended to allow parents to describe and discuss elements of what they would consider ‘high quality’ without being confined by their direct experiences. Subsequent prompts or questions were determined by the content of parents’ responses to this opening question and called for an elaboration and/or explanation of the responses given. The intention was to probe for clarifications, explanations and rich descriptions of the components that were considered important by each parent.

Methodology

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2000, 2006) guided data collection and analysis throughout this qualitative study. Charmaz (2000, 2006) proposes a constructivist approach to grounded theory which must acknowledge the interactive nature of both data collection and analysis. She claims that a constructivist grounded theory approach assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through social interactions. Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes the study of experiences from the standpoint of those who live them.

Understanding parents’ view of what they value for their children in the early years requires generation of rich data and an approach that recognises multiple views and the temporal, cultural

and structural contexts in which they are formed and expressed. Constructivist grounded theory provides the means to understanding the field with an appreciation of the complexity of the phenomenon being studied, interacting with the data and eventually developing a basis for change (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Moghaddam 2006). Constructivist grounded theory provided a framework for collecting and giving voice to parents' views about ECEC services, their choice of services, and how they experienced these services.

Data were gathered using both purposive and theoretical sampling to select parents for this study. Parents were purposively selected because of their potential to contribute to the phenomenon on study. Preliminary analyses were done during data collection to identify emerging themes. Based on the emerging themes, theoretical sampling was used for further sampling and collecting of data. Theoretical sampling entails purposively selecting those participants with the ability to develop the emerging themes (Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2006, 2000). It is one of the appeals of grounded theory in that "it allows for a wide range of data, the most common of which are in-depth interviews, observations, and memos which describe situations, record events, note feelings and keep track of ideas" (Goulding 2005).

Interviews were transcribed and then analysed using open coding and focused coding, the two analytic procedures proposed by Charmaz (2000, 2006). During open coding data were compared with data to identify patterns of similar incidents. Once identified, these patterns were then coded with a name that represented their conceptual content. These open codes were then compared to identify similarities in a process of merging and refining until broad themes and cascading sub-themes emerged – a process referred to by Charmaz (2003, 2006) as 'focussed coding'. Focussed coding reflects congruent elements of the patterns identified during open coding such that a picture or story begins to emerge (Charmaz 2006).

Findings and Discussions

The Ideal Preschool: Three Players

Three players - the child, the teacher and the parent emerged central in parents' descriptions of an ideal preschool. Parents were concerned about the wellbeing of their children, conceptualised as affording children opportunities for play, freedom and autonomy. Such opportunities were considered as legitimate rights for children, with the teacher and parent being responsible. Parents saw these rights and responsibilities as being played out in two contexts, the home and the school. *Three players* (The Child, The Parent and The Teacher) was designated as a general theme that captures parents' ideas about high quality ECEC programmes. Further exploration of the pattern linking the concomitant rights and responsibilities of the three players uncovered a sub-theme, presented under *The Child*, which became known as *Let the child be a child*. We present parents' descriptions of the ideal preschool under the subheadings of each of the three players- *The Child*, *The Teacher* and *The Parent*. The teacher and the parent are then further discussed under the subheading, *Teacher-Parent Relationships*, which emerged as a major ingredient in the discussion of the ideal preschool.

The Child

Parents in this study seemed to view children as both vulnerable and as active players participating in their own development and learning. Being vulnerable and active, children need school and home environments to be safe and supportive. Parents most frequently talked about the preschool meeting the needs of children through providing opportunities and support for them to develop as children.

Let the Child be a Child

The theme, *Let the child be a child*, is comprised of four significant elements of high quality early childhood service provision: unstructured time, interpersonal relationships, play and exploration. Parents' responses were clearly framed by an awareness of the purposeful yet carefree, experiential nature of childhood. Implicit and explicit references were made to the importance of play and the significance of relationships with others for the intellectual, emotional, physical and social development of the child. Parents stressed that children should be afforded time and space to control, learn and develop at their own pace. Parents believed that children did not need to be forced to learn but should be free and safe to experiment and explore their environment.

Wambui: Allow the child to be a child. ... give that child enough time to play, ... to explore. They just play with each other, learn how to relate and acquire social skills.

Naisiaye: A free environment where kids are actually kids at that age.... a place to find out who this child is. Let kids be kids....

Wanjiku: ... enough time to play, ... to explore. That is what I mean by letting a child be a child. A child does most of his/her things through play, through interacting with others freely...

Within the theme of *Let the child be a child*, three sub-themes emerged: *Let the child be free*; *Let the child be playful*; and, *Let the child be purposeful*. Each of these themes as they appeared in individual interviews contributed to a constructed conversation between parents. These conversations helped to bring the data to life and convey the sense of a shared story, of shared concerns for acting in the best interests of children and what constitutes high quality ECEC.

Let the Child be Free

Parents repeatedly described early childhood as a time of freedom; to be carefree; and to explore and experiment without fear of failure or reprimand from adults. These descriptions were frequently punctuated by the phrase *Let a child be a child* and included both implicit and explicit concerns that children were being coerced to fit into adult structures and expectations, within which they were "being denied a chance to be children". Ideally, parents wanted children to be afforded time and space to do what they wanted. Their descriptions of the ideal were juxtaposed with their experiences of structured learning, where adults dictate what children do with time and space. Put together there was a strong sense of the desire to *Let the child be free*, to have more control and power over what and how they learned.

Nyaore: ... a free environment ... created by the teacher...

Naisiaye: A free environment where kids are actually kids at that age...

Ndindi: Let them know they can just run around and nobody expects them to do homework by running around. That is what I mean by children being children. Let them be free to do what they would want to do as children not what we have to structure for them.

Let the Child Play

The need for the child to play was another distinguishing feature of parents 'ideal preschool'. In fact, "let the child play" was the phrase most frequently used by all parents. They talked about

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giving children time, space and resources for play. Parents considered play to be the natural occupation for young children and crucial to their development and learning.

Ndindi: Play, play..., playing, playing and playing...the chance to grow as children and play...

Nyaore: ... more of the play things ...increase the time for play...

Wanjiku: Allow the child to play, provide free play and a variety of environments in which the child can play. As a priority giving the children more time to play...

Kanini: It will just be play play..... ...more games.

Parents' desires that the child be given time and space for play support their views that children need and are able to learn on their own, demonstrated in the sub-theme *Let the Child be free*. Parents argued that learning is easier and more adaptable to the child when it is integrated with play.

Manyasi: Play adds up to the total learning process of a child.

Akoth: Children like to play and most of the time that is their life. ... If you can especially incorporate that in learning then you just make learning easy and something they easily adapt to.

Through play, children develop their creativity, language, communication, problem solving and social skills (Myck-Wayne 2010; Duncan and Tarulli 2003). Moreover, parents in the current study considered play important in motivating learning and children's overall development. These benefits are best encapsulated in the next sub-theme *Let the child be purposeful*.

Within the context of the current study, arguably, parents' descriptions were informed and reflective, indicating that they had given considerable thought to the early education of their children as a foundation for personal, social and academic success, with the former taking precedence. Parents argued that play is unique in terms of its motivational characteristics, in that it is the only activity in which the motive of play "does not lie in its result but in the content of the action itself" (Duncan and Tarulli 2003). Play being intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated, with its focus on the content of action rather than itself, (Duncan and Tarulli 2003), aligns with the current study's parents' views about learning. Parents were more concerned with the opportunities provided by play for acquiring living and life-long learning skills as demonstrated in the sub-theme *Let the Child be Purposeful*. In our analysis of parents' descriptions of *The Ideal*, being '*purposeful*' emerged as the bridge between freedom and play.

Let the Child be Purposeful.

Let the child be purposeful refers to the bridge between Let the Child be Free and Let the Child be Playful. Parents recognised the child's ability to learn by exploring the environment through play. Free play was considered especially important in availing opportunities for the child to explore and discover and, more importantly, becoming independent learners. Accordingly, it is through free play that children learn to learn, explore their creativity, make and obey rules, and make decisions. Ideally, children need spaces and places to be, to do, to learn and to interact with others, instead of being dictated to and restricted by the adults.

Mwasambwa: Our ability to get other people's points of view and process that and give them our view ...comes out naturally when kids are playing. So they are learning but the

most important thing is that they are learning how to learn. ... Learning is about your ability to learn. ... We should concentrate more on that kind of environment where they are learning how to learn.

Namachanja: I think letting the child loose creates opportunities for innovations and creativity so when they are left out to go and play with other kids it is also a time to develop in a different way by experiencing. We should leave the child some little time for their own creativity as they interact with other children, and naturally explore their surroundings.

Linked to free play and also considered to help the child in being purposeful are the social interactions that preschool avails. Parents considered such interactions important in the overall development of the child namely: cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual and social.

Mwasambwa: Socialisation will play a very significant role in terms of their inquiry because as they interact with other kids ... they are learning a lot from each other and that is a very important thing in intellectual development.

Nyaore: In school children are many so the social environment created is quite different from the one at home... the activities they do ... will be enhanced.

Teacher-Parent Relationships

Parents emphasised the importance of the social context of the preschool facilitating and supporting the development of children. Although parents considered play to be natural for children, they pointed out the need for adult input to ensure optimal quality and desired outcomes. Optimising quality and outcomes in preschool was recognised as requiring adults to facilitate rich play experiences by providing the necessary opportunities, interactions, support and resources. Parents' recognition of the crucial role of the adult in the early development and learning of the child is underscored by Vygotsky's idea of zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). He argued that adults' pedagogical activities in the preschool setting have the potential of not only providing the direct experiences that scaffold and promote children's learning, but also supply the material and models for behaviour that guide children's own succeeding play activities.

The tone and structure of parents' claims when asked to describe an ideal preschool made it apparent that the ideal is something that is constructed, something for which 'we' can and must take responsibility. Parents used such phrases as, 'We have to structure; we should leave the child ... we should concentrate more We must look. So who are the 'we'? An analysis of interviews with parents highlighted that 'the we' are teachers and parents. Teachers and parents determine what happens at school and at home respectively, whether children have the freedom to be children, to be playful, and to be purposeful. Each must be willing to give space to the other to perform their roles effectively. But they must also be willing to work together and perform complementary roles to maximise benefits for children.

Additionally, parents appeared well aware that in the contexts of schooling, freedom is within the confines of, and dependent upon, relationships of power and authority beyond their control and the control of the children. Parents' descriptions positioned the teacher as having the necessary authority and primary responsibility for realising their ideals - ideals that included parents being invited into partnerships with teachers, to safely and successfully guide children's learning and development, and ultimately to *Let the child be a child*.

Mwasambwa: The relationship should be mutual. Parents need to respect teachers ... as the professionals Give that teacher the space and the respect to do what they need to do. But the teacher too has to accept the fact that this is my child. Being my child, I have

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the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that my child is given the right kind of education. If I have a question, a comment or an observation they should be open enough to listen to what I am saying.

Parents considered strong teacher-parent relationships an important component of early childhood education and care. Such relationships entail sharing information, working as a team, and giving space to the other partner.

Serende: It is supposed to be very strong because this is a kid who is learning, and he can easily learn the wrong things. So if you have good relationship with the teacher, they will exchange notes to ensure the child learns the right things. A cordial relationship because both of you are the child's parents. ...also the teachers ... play your role when you are not there.

These relationships are important in facilitating both parents' and the teachers' ability to meet the needs of children. For example, children need to smoothly transit from home to school. Parents argued that attending school for the first time is a daunting task for children and can at times be very stressful. Therefore, children need the support of both the teacher and the parent to feel safe in a new environment.

Namachanja: The task of providing early childhood education should be carried out by parents and teachers.... As children begin school, they are attached more to home than to school, so the transition needs to be managed well and the presence of the parent is important. You are pushing the child or taking the child from a home environment to a school environment and you need to transit them well. They need to feel secure that you are there as a parent and the teacher is also able to receive them well.

Further, a strong teacher-parent relationship is considered important in creating congruence between home and school. Home/school congruence emerged as critical in augmenting the ability of both environments to meet the child's needs, providing the necessary support for children under five years of age who need the security of the connection between home and school. As Nyaore posited, "the relationship should be close because these children are still so small, they still need that connection between the home and the preschool which the parent can provide".

Discussion

In this study, parents considered themselves knowledgeable about their children and were willing to share this information with the teacher. However, taken-for-granted relations of power and authority and routine procedures operating within schools often excluded parents' active and meaningful participation and circumscribed the potential for partnerships with teachers. Parents' descriptions of an ideal preschool matched what is in the literature and demonstrated in-depth understanding of what constitutes high quality ECEC programmes. The descriptions of what constitutes an ideal preschool were, in this case, provided by aspirational, educated parents seeking high quality schooling for their children. However, as pointed out by various other studies, parents' knowledge of, ability to judge, and to choose high quality ECE programs cannot be assumed (Cryer 1999; Cryer and Burchinal 1997; Burchinal et al. 2000; Goelman et al. 2006; Jinnah and Walters 2008; Peyton et al. 2001). In these studies, the notion that parents are not knowledgeable about high quality ECEC programmes was based on their findings that parents chose low quality services and tended to rate highly, ECEC services that researchers and professionals have rated low quality. Like Dahlberg and Moss (2008), Woodhead (1996) and Goodfellow (2003), the findings of this current study suggest that to better understand parents' choices and what they think about ECEC services for their children, it is important to hear from parents what contexts and individual family circumstances inform their choices and, what they would consider to be 'ideal'. This makes

apparent the need for further research that would enable the views and voices of parents to inform the development and implementation of policies and curriculum for high quality ECEC programmes.

Parents in the current study reported that mutually working together and sharing information can help both teachers and parents respond appropriately to children. It could be easier to identify a child's needs at an earlier stage of development, and from this to implement interventions. Contrary to the notion that parents are hard to engage in their children's learning (Hand, Wise, and Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS] 2006; Galinsky 1994; Deslandes 2001), in the current study, parents demonstrated an understanding of their role in their children's early development and learning and a willingness to be invited into partnership. The findings of the study agree with Crozier and Davies (2007), drawing on research with families of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage in the north-east of England, who question the notion of 'hard to reach' parents. They argue that rather than parents not matching up to the values and requirements of the school, it is the school that fails to discern and acknowledge the potential that the parents can offer. "[I]t is frequently the schools themselves that inhibit accessibility for certain parents."

Through individual interviews and constructed conversations, parents in this study voiced the importance of three players in the 'ideal' preschool: the child, parent and teacher. The child in this ideal preschool would be free to be a child; free, playful and purposeful. The two other players, the parent and the teacher, ideally build relationships and partnerships to best support children's learning and development. Their partnership extends between the school and the home and helps to identify needs and implement intervention, both at school and in the home.

Parents in this were aware of what constitutes high quality ECEC and were strong advocates for quality early childhood education and care. Their voices represent, within limits, the values and ideals of the growing urban middle class educated parents in Kenya.

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