



## From the Will to the Field: Parent Participation in Early Childhood Education in Madagascar

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### Abstract

Among state and international actors there is consensus that early childhood education (ECE) is important for future well-being of the child and that parent participation in various school activities is relevant. The willingness of actors in formal education to encourage parents to participate in their school activities varies. There remains a challenge of how to take the will of parents and mobilize it into participation in the field of ECE. In this paper we focus on parents' participation in ECE in Madagascar, placing that participation within an existing complex context of poverty, former colonialism, contemporary political instability, and international cooperation. We report on data gathered in Anatanarivo, Sakaraha, Toliera, and Betioky to show that there is suspicion between the state and parents in general and that unless current actors (parents, teachers, administrators, NGOs, and government) value parents' resources and create new ways for parent participation in the extractive model of schooling in place, the ECE cannot be enhanced and advanced.

**Key Words:** Early childhood education; school-parents relations; parent ethnotheories

### Résumé

Les acteurs locaux et internationaux s'accordent à dire que l'éducation de la petite enfance (ECE) est importante pour le bien-être futur de l'enfant, et que la participation des parents à diverses activités scolaires est bien indiquée. Chez les acteurs de l'éducation formelle, ce désir d'encourager la participation des parents aux activités scolaires est variable. En effet, reste la problématique de prendre en charge la volonté des parents, puis la mobiliser pour la transformer en participation à l'éducation de la petite enfance. Dans cette étude, l'accent est mis sur la participation parentale à l'éducation de la petite enfance à Madagascar,

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alors même que cette participation doit se dérouler dans la complexité du contexte actuel caractérisé par la pauvreté, le passé colonial, l'instabilité politique contemporaine et la coopération internationale. Les données glanées à Antananarive, Sakaraha, Toliera et Betioky nous ont servi de base pour démontrer la persistance, en général, d'un soupçon entre l'Etat et les parents : l'éducation de la petite enfance ne pourra ni s'améliorer ni avancer tant que les acteurs actuels (parents, enseignants, administrateurs, ONG et l'Etat) ne valorisent les ressources parentales et trouvent d'autres voies et moyens de faire participer les parents au modèle extractif de scolarisation en place.

### **Introduction**

Imagine parents' participation in their children's formal education around the world, and then focus on sub-Saharan African contexts. Consider the context of poverty in which many families live and the limited resources that schools have from government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As anyone familiar with sub-Saharan African countries knows, there will be many differences in parents' participation in the school systems their children attend across the continent. Some will invest their time and money in their child's school, others will expect professionals to be solely responsible for educating their children, and still others will have no input at all because schools do not create opportunities for them to participate. If we narrow our focus to Madagascar where the majority of the population lives in extreme poverty, with 89.6 percent of the population living on less than \$2 (USD) per day (World Bank 2011) and where many parents have very few years of formal education, then the situation is even more complex. Given this context, we need to ask what types of parent participation in early childhood education (ECE) exist and which forms of parental involvement are missing.

Research studying parent participation in Madagascar is hard to find so we draw on the extant literature. Parents' participation in their children's formal education has been found to be positively related to children's academic performance (Fan and Chen 2001; Jeynes 2003; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, and Sekino 2004), is widely considered a hallmark of quality education (UNICEF), a stronger predictor of parental involvement than race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, and Aupperlee 2009) and important for engendering local community values and rendering education relevant to contemporary society (Kruger 1996). When there is a high quality relationship between the parent and the educator research shows that children have had enhanced academic learning and social outcomes (Dekkar and Lemmer 1993) even after controlling for quality of teacher-child interactions and parental characteristics of education level and educational activities at home performed with the child (Powell, Son,

File, and San Juan 2010). However, there are at least two studies recently conducted in the US that did not find a strong relationship between parent involvement and academic outcomes, though a positive relationship was found for social and behavioural outcomes; one with a sample size of over 11,000 (Graves and Wright 2011) and the other with over 1,000 students from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal 2010).

Strategies for advocating for parent participation are increasingly promoted by parents, schools, and NGOs (for example, *Aide et Action*; USAID) in developed and developing countries, but research on the role of parents in ECE is scant, perhaps because parent participation is under valued or not done effectively, as was the case found in a study of South African pre-school programmes (Bridgemohan 2002). Examining the role of parents and quality of ECE interventions is a new line of research (Britto et al., 2011) and therefore more research is needed.

Most of the research on parent participation comes from studies conducted in developed countries and in the developing country of South Africa, although recently there are high quality studies being published on the Madrassa pre-school programmes located in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania/Zanzibar (Malmberg, Mwaura, and Sylva 2011; Mwaura, Sylva, and Malmberg 2008). The Madrasa programme focuses on delivering high quality early childhood education with culturally appropriate content and parent involvement, but the primary focus reported to date is on children's developmental outcomes. The studies reported above are important to the topic of understanding parents' roles in ECE, yet research on parents in Madagascar is missing from the literature, so our goal here is to report on our research in Anatanarivo, Sakaraha, Toliera, and Betioky, Madagascar where we spoke with parents and grandparents about their participation in the affairs of the pre-school where their children attend.

In Madagascar interest in and support for public early childhood education is in the early stages of development, mostly through the support of NGOs. One organization in particular, *Aide et Action*, has recently focussed its efforts on capacity building so that communities may develop and sustain pre-school classrooms. The efforts of *Aide et Action* directed towards ECE were launched in 2011 with a focus on increasing the presence and intended positive effects of pre-schooling. A critical component of this organization's strategy is mobilizing parents. One of the organizations providing funds to *Aide et Action* for ECE in Madagascar (which requested anonymity) asked us to conduct research relevant to the initiative. We are engaged in a three-year research endeavour to examine the impact of public school ECE on

children, families and communities in Madagascar within the context of poverty, former colonialism and contemporary political instability and international cooperation. With decentralization of state bureaucracy more responsibility, and consequently participation, is demanded of parents. In this paper we report on findings from one of our first studies in which we collected data in May 2011 with a goal of describing parents' participation in ECE. We organize this report first by reviewing parent participation in ECE, next presenting our research questions, followed by method, findings, and discussion.

In the literature both terms 'parent involvement' and 'parent participation' are used in various ways. For the purpose of this study we use the term 'parent involvement' to refer to parents' participation specifically in their children's educational processes either in home or at school (for example, reading with their child or supervising homework) (Griffiths and Hamilton 1994). Parent involvement in this sense is consistent with the conceptualization that parents are partners with educators in the formal and informal education (Kruger 1998; Wolfendale 1989). Further, in some places, such as South Africa, parental involvement means that parents ensure their children attend school while they are within the required age range. In this way, parental involvement is compulsory by law. We use the term 'parent participation' to represent parents' interactions with children, teachers, and other actors to support the school.

Models and aspects of participation are many and varied. In South Africa research shows that clear, effective two-way communication from school to parent and parent to school is an important form of parental involvement which when used properly, can make a positive impact on the partnership (Lemmer and van Wyk 2004). Models of partnership are also important to understanding parental participation in schools. Again, we find the work of Eleanor M. Lemmer (2007) very informative in this regard. She presents various models of partnership and draws on the Epstein's (1987) theory to create a training programme to prepare parents for their involvement with schools. Joyce Epstein's theory centres on responsibilities that may be separate, shared or sequential between families and schools.

The literature is clear that having parents participate in multiple domains in effective ways positively impacts the livelihood of the school and children's academic and social learning. The question is not 'do we need parent participation', but rather 'how' do we do it considering parents' context. This question becomes more challenging when families live in impoverished conditions, the state does not care, and powerful and influential NGOs have an outsider perspective, such as is the case in Madagascar.

## Research Context

As this study occurs within the context of Madagascar it is important to understand its context of poverty, former colonialism, languages, contemporary political instability, and international cooperation. The country of Madagascar gained independence from France in 1960. Since then there have been periods of political stability and the government's ability to provide education to all has varied over time, as have philosophies about education, particularly those concerning the role of languages and cultures, in which the concept of multiculturalism remains a sensitive topic. In this case multiculturalism refers to the 18 Malagasy tribes, Comorans, Indians, Chinese, and French and particularly extends to the choice and use of language. Malagasy is spoken throughout the country, though in the form of several regional dialects that differ significantly from the national dialect and from one another. The country has also experienced shifts in the language of instruction in schools from French to Malagasy, to incorporating English (in 2003) and reducing English (in 2010). Although these languages co-exist there is an educational and social stratification between the Malagasy and French, with French speakers having more formal education and being employed in positions with higher pay and power than those who do not speak French. Malagasy is the predominant language used in private and professional spheres and reports from the field show that knowledge of French is instrumentally used only to obtain a position of higher status while Malagasy is the language used in day-to-day business operations. With shifts in educational policies concerning languages, educators have variable ability in the French language and teaching practices using French vary widely, particularly in ECE.

In synthesizing the literature we argue that understanding parents' participation requires consideration of at least four aspects of this complex relationship among actors involved in ECE (parents, children, schools, and governmental and non-governmental organizations). Accordingly, in the current study our research objectives were to document parents' current participation with schools concerning pre-primary education and to describe parents' ethnotheories (that is, beliefs about how their children develop and learn), their hopes for and fears of formal schooling, and their expectations from government and NGOs.

## Method

This research used an observational and survey study design. We collected data in May 2011 in Madagascar. During three weeks we visited seven pre-school centres, which were located at primary school sites in four locations. The number of pre-school centres visited follows in parentheses the name

of the city in which they are located: Anatanarivo (3), Sakaraha (2), Toliera (1), and Betioky (1). We conducted a focus group at each of the sites, except one in Sakaraha where logistical issues prohibited it. There were six focus groups with a total of 54 parents and grandparents who self-selected to participate in this study. Caregivers of children in pre-school were invited orally by local school staff to come to the school to talk with researchers in a group setting.

Interviews were conducted in the Malagasy language with the aid of and through a translator (a retired professor and former school commissioner from the southern region) who is also a member of the research team. The interview guide consisted of questions about forms of participation, thoughts on why pre-primary education is important, child development ideas (parent ethnotheories), and expectations from government and NGOs. The ordering of the questions varied (i.e., unstructured) in order to follow a conversational flow with the research participants. The interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours with two researchers leading it and a third researcher audio recording and taking field notes. We (the co-authors) of this study conducted the data analysis and interpretation.

## **Findings**

In this section we report the findings from the group interviews, determined by our four research questions.

### ***Document Current Involvement with Schools Concerning Pre-primary Education***

Parental involvement is primarily in the management of the pre-school. A decentralized educational policy in Madagascar opened opportunities for parental involvement in school management with the committee representing the parents of school children playing an important role in the operationalization of decentralization. This is an important lever of parental involvement.

In the sites visited, we found that parental involvement ranges from passive participation (Sakhara rural site), to an average attendance (Tulear), and active participation (Sakhara urban site). In an urban school in Sakhara, we observed that the parents' association, which includes some merchants from the city, is very active and fully involved in decisions made about pre-school. For example, parents are sometimes involved in decisions on the construction of pre-school classes and other activities such as keeping the school kitchen. With the exception of Betioky, parents also participate in the financing of pre-schools, paying a fee in all sites investigated. The fee paid is variable, higher in Tana (4000 Ariary per month), lower in other regions (5000 Ariary every two months).

***Parent Ethnotheories***

During interviews with the parents we tried different ways to talk with them about their conceptions of education and early childhood. Despite conducting interviews in Malagasy or a local dialect by our translator, parents seemed very resistant to the idea of sharing with us their cultural conceptions of pre-school. Similarly, parents did not share with us their concepts of childhood, such as at what age a child is able to perform a particular household task or learns a special custom or aspect of local knowledge.

***Parents' Beliefs, Hopes, and Expectations for Formal Schooling***

In all the school sites visited (urban, rural, Tana Capital, South), we found a real passion among parents for schooling, pre-schooling in particular. Few parents explicitly refer to the importance of establishing a strong link between home and school, but they want their children to obtain a formal education. When asked about the desired model for pre-school, all parents interviewed in the focus groups described an urban model of private pre-school. Even though this model is out of reach for those parents of modest means, the private pre-school is the model of reference. Parents believe their children deserve schools and pre-school classes that resemble those of the city. Even at the level of architecture and organization of classes, the model based on the use of modern building materials cement and classes of the urban model are favoured. Parents also emphasized their right to enjoy the same public services as those that exist in urban areas.

Regarding the language of instruction, parents interviewed discussed the importance of pre-school using French, rather than Malagasy, which is spoken at home and in the local community. The reasoning of the parents, even if it seems unrealistic, is simple. Attending school regardless of the age of a child is seen as the only way out of poverty and moving ahead in life. But this perspective of this benefit from schooling is always thought of as outside of the local community. The expectations of parents in the development of the pre-school are linked to various reasons: they can focus on their daily tasks, have a primary preparation for their children, and a place for cultural imitation of the privileged, private and urban areas.

In interviews with parents of the rural school near Sakhara, many wished that the school would help their children to leave the community. It is true that this community lives in poverty and with subsistence agriculture, mining activity and sporadic insecurity (even in this rural town), many parents are very pessimistic about the future of their children. This uncertainty in the lives of parents and communities has a direct impact on schools. The permanence of children in school is low since the size of the school according to the director fell from 30 to 40 percent between the beginning and the end of the school year.

In all the sites visited, education is never seen as a means of developing the community from within. The pre-school is not seen as a way to improve the lot of the community but rather as a tool for individual advancement, forcibly removing children from the community for their own good. For this reason, we can present parents' conceptualization of formal schooling as an extractive model.

### ***Parents' Expectations of Government and NGOs***

Parents have high expectations from the government in infrastructure, construction of classrooms and teaching materials. On one of the school sites visited (rural school Sakhara), an interesting discussion ensued regarding the possibility that parents are involved in the construction of the class for the pre-school. Despite the fact that parents are building their own houses using local materials, very few have been willing to put their skills to building the pre-school. During our fieldwork, we observed high expectations of parents towards their governments and cooperation agencies. Expectations concerning priority infrastructure, school materials, support teacher salaries, and food were central to parents' remarks. Parents have explicitly requested that their needs are relayed to policy makers involved.

### **Discussion**

Most of the international declarations and recommendations from research emphasize the importance of parental involvement in schooling. This involvement is particularly highlighted when it comes to pre-school, a turning point in the child's life between family, community and school life. Our field survey shows that the situation in Madagascar does not support a successful collaboration between parents and school in pre-school. Several reasons explain this finding. First, there is suspicion between the state and parents and an extractive model of schooling is in place. Not only is there international pressure to have ECE, there is also internal pressure in Madagascar both nationally and from parents. In South Africa two-way communications were found to be essential in fostering parental involvement (Lemmer and van Wyk 2004). Constrained communications in Madagascar in the education sector across all actors may be part of the problem we observed. A related second point is the resistance of parents to see a possibility of connecting the school to their cultures or their cultural conceptions of childhood. The pre-school is seen as a way to remove their children from the community by ensuring student success. Addressing parents' belief is critical so that the outcome is not a child lost from a community. One approach to doing this is to engage parents in educating children in ways that are both connected to the local community cultural resources and extended to multicultural knowledge.

The implementation strategy of Aide et Action is very original in the context of international cooperation. Not only does this organization emphasize the commitment of local employees, but it also implements a work methodology based on the mobilization of local communities. We found in Madagascar that Aide et Action employees are near to or present in the field. They have a thorough understanding of local realities and live close to the targeted communities. Central to their approach is the mobilization of parents. There may also need to be a mobilization of school actors to encourage parents to participate in meaningful and effective ways. However, the extreme poverty of the communities does not give these parents enough leeway to take action leading to the posture of waiting that we found among community members who participated in the study. Parents are waiting for more powerful actors to act on their behalf. Moreover, the mobilization of parents in the pre-school is difficult despite efforts by Aide et Action. Indeed, to mobilize sustainable development for ECE there must be many cultural resources and physical material which is not the case in the communities studied.

NGOs are dominant actors in the field of education in Madagascar and can play an important role in realizing the possibility for more and different types of parent participation. Yet, much work remains to be done. Without building on culture we do not have quality schooling, which is indicated by having appropriate schooling (Tawil, Akkari, and Macedo 2011). A duality exists in the relationship between community and school. On the one hand, both parents and teachers do not value local cultural resources – even parents say they want a French-speaking model of ECE. On the other hand, parents say that this type of schooling has no relevance to their lives and a child succeeding in school is lost to the community. This dilemma plays out in a complex history of colonialism and political instability that affects educational policies and practices. Unfortunately, we did not observe these and other cultural issues being addressed by NGO's conceptualizations of parental participation.

Paradoxically, we find that within the context of extreme poverty, parents' involvement with schools is mostly on the financial level and other forms of participation are rarely seen. The State, by the weakness of its resources (transport, teachers, funding), is virtually absent and cannot even pay the salaries of pre-school teachers. Consequently, one commonly used form of parent participation is to pay fees that pay teachers' salaries, among other things. School administrators also ask parents for financial support of the school in general, cooking, or bringing water to school and sometimes engaging them in administrative aspects such as constructing and maintaining buildings. This finding in Madagascar is similar to that found in South Africa

(Lemmer 2007). In Madagascar, it is clear that parents sustain the infrastructure of existing schools in their current modes of operation.

### **Limitations**

As in all research this project has limitations that may guide future research. One limitation is the position of the researchers as a heterogeneous team of cultural insiders and outsiders (that is, not Malagasy, or if Malagasy not from the local region, even if familiar with it). This research was conducted collaborating with indigenous university professors and having former Malagasy teachers working as research assistants. It is impossible for us to give a native insider's account, but we have some resources to draw on that help us to understand structural inequality.

This study was not successful in hearing the voices of parents on their beliefs about what children know and do at various ages of childhood, so we were unable to document parent ethnotheories. It may be that interviewing parents at a school does not facilitate communication on these topics if they consider it as a community issue rather than related to the school. A related methodological consideration is the cross-cultural interactions with strangers. It may be that in order to disclose this information parents need to have more time with researchers and develop individual conversations with researchers rather than in groups among peers and educators. Future research may want to consider conducting individual interviews on the topic rather than focus groups. Another aspect that may be important is for a researcher, including researchers from Madagascar, to spend time engaging with parents and developing a trusting relationship in advance of asking questions on this topic, and perhaps conducting future interviews with parents at home might make a difference in their willingness to share their beliefs about child development. Interviewing mothers in their homes in Madagascar has been used successfully by Mingat and Seurat (2010), who studied child development and parenting at home, so this approach may be adopted to investigate parents' beliefs on child development and ECE.

In our interpretation of the findings, a highly plausible explanation for a lack of disclosure on this topic may be that parents may erroneously think that outside knowledge is superior to local community knowledge (a form of internal colonization). This belief may be exacerbated by the limited ways in which parents participate with schools. We observe that schools ask parents to participate solely in management of material resources and salaries for teachers, so as a result parents may not feel like allied partners in the education of their children, excluding or at least undervaluing, their knowledge and role in informal education as part of children's schooling. These factors may contribute to parents' reluctance to share with indigenous and outside

researchers their views on child development and their observations at home and in the community (i.e., outside of the school). There is some evidence to support this explanation; parents defer to school actors and wait for others to initiate school activities. Understanding parents' wisdom about how children develop in their local culture can inform pre-school curriculum content and processes of engaging students. Our research team will step up efforts to talk to parents on this very important issue for the pre-school.

### **Conclusions**

In Madagascar, ECE is situated in a context of extreme poverty that includes issues of food security, health, and sanitation. Working in solely one sector at a time (for example, health only or education only) renders the possibility of broad-based impact almost impossible. What is needed is a multi-sectoral approach that addresses health, food, and education together, as well as some shifts in ideologies and power sharing.

We are not naïve in what is required to change parental participation in ECE in Madagascar. It can be enhanced and advanced if current actors (parents, teachers, administrators, NGOs, and government) value parents' resources and create new ways for parent participation in Madagascar. Ultimately, valuing diverse resources is about power. Parent participation is about power and parents have less of it than other actors in ECE. Even though the state is weak it has bureaucratic power. The power of NGOs is largely in the form of money. Parents in Madagascar currently have no power. We propose that progress can be made in power sharing among ECE actors when parental participation is comprehensive.

A comprehensive conceptualization of parental participation is comprised of two models: an infrastructure model and a cultural resource model. Participation in an infrastructure model has a goal of making up for Madagascar's national problem of extreme poverty that includes issues of food security, health, sanitation, and education. In this model parents contribute significantly to the financial operations of ECE in schools. They bring water to school, cook, build classrooms, pay money, and find more money to pay teachers, and so on. The infrastructure model of participation is important and necessary but it is not sufficient. Participation of parents in a cultural resource model also is needed. In a cultural resource model parents would come into the classroom to speak about local trees, farming, herding, weather cycles, languages, cultural activities, etc. Yet, our data shows that all actors are ambivalent about the role of cultural resources in ECE. Although parents are living in impoverished circumstances, they still have resources that are untapped by schools. Parents may have lower levels of formal schooling, but in fact they still have education and ideas about early childhood

development and care and ECE. Parents are experts in local languages (or dialects), community, and religion, yet we found no evidence of school administrators and teachers engaging parents in co-educating children within a school setting or inviting parents to work with teachers in order to inform the curriculum and suggest educational activities that may be similar to those engaged in at home. Admittedly, there are areas of development for parents as well, as we found that some parents hold the idea that a child succeeding at school is a loss for community.

Addressing this belief is critical to changing school processes so the outcome is not a child lost from a community and one approach to doing this is to engage parents in educating children in ways that are both connected to the local community cultural resources and extended to multicultural knowledge bases. The education of children can be enhanced and advanced if current actors (parents, teachers, administrators) value parents' resources and create new ways for parent participation. We conclude that using both an infrastructure model and a culture resource model can provide a foundation for comprehensive parental participation that would contribute to reaping many benefits for all stakeholders in ECE.

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