

# Pre-school and early childhood development in rural Northern Ghana: A snapshot

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## Background

High quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) are critical to children's development and their success in adult life. Ghana has shown substantial commitment to improving ECCE, with one of the highest pre-school enrolment rates in Sub Saharan Africa. However despite this, significant barriers to improvements in ECCE remain, especially in rural areas.

As part of the impact evaluation of a pre-school intervention in rural Northern Ghana, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) has collected rich data on children, their families, pre-schools and teachers across two rural districts; Tolon (Northern Region), and Bongo (Upper East Region). These data cover information on 2407 households with children aged 3-5 (the "target child"), 151 Kindergarten teachers, and 80 schools. This brief highlights the main findings from these data.

**Note of caution:** The sample collected is not a representative sample of the two study districts, regions, or Ghana as a whole. Data were collected from a non-randomly selected group of 80 schools, and only cover households with children between 3 and 5 years old in the immediate vicinity of the school. Hence these results should merely be taken as indicative and not exact representations of schools, households or individuals in these districts.

## Learning outcomes

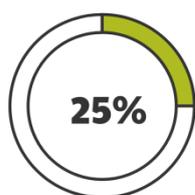


3 out of 4 eligible children attended kindergarten in the last 12 months

The education system in Ghana provides two years of free and compulsory pre-school (kindergarten) for those aged 4 and 5. Despite this, not all children end up attending. Around 3 out of every 4 eligible children in our sample are reported to have attended kindergarten in the last 12 months. Some of the reasons stated for non attendance were the child not wanting to go, and the need for the child to do domestic tasks.

The IDELA tool, developed by Save the Children, was delivered to the target children. This measures a comprehensive set of skills amongst pre-school aged children, including emergent literacy and numeracy, motor skills, and socio-emotional development. As part of the assessment, the child is asked to perform a number of games and tasks and the surveyor observes and scores the child's performance. On individual items it was seen that one in five children could count out 3 counters, one in ten could complete a simple puzzle, and one in twenty could write at least some letters when asked to write their name.

### 6-10 years olds



Can do simple addition



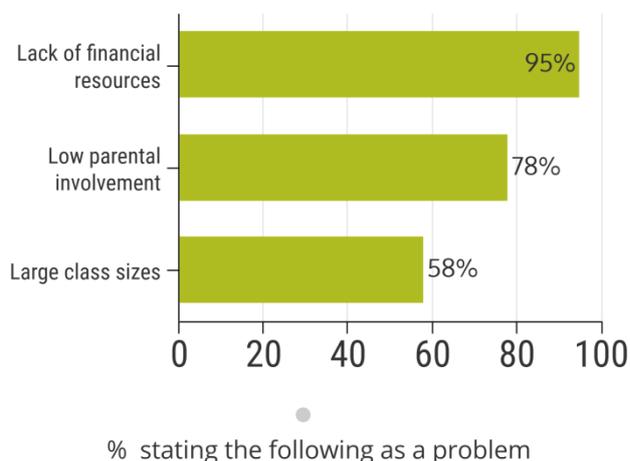
Can read an English word

Basic learning outcomes, designed from the school curriculum, were also assessed for the siblings of the target child, aged 6 to 10. This revealed relatively low rates of literacy and numeracy. One in four were able to do simple addition problems such as 7+4 and only 6% were able to read a simple word in English.

We also observe significant differences between districts. Total test scores for both target children and their older siblings were over 25% higher in Bongo compared to Tolon. The data provide some potential reasons why these gaps could exist. Despite households being richer on observed measures in Tolon, in Bongo schools have more educational resources, teachers work more hours, and parents are more highly educated. In addition, Bongo has seen a wider proliferation of NGOs and religious organisations with a focus on education.

### Schools and teachers

The majority of Kindergarten teachers are highly educated. Of the 151 surveyed teachers, the vast majority have a diploma/HND or higher and around three out of four teachers have some kind of early childhood care and education (ECCE) training. However, teachers are young and relatively inexperienced having only taught for 4 years on average. Teachers work an average of 29 hours a week, with 22 hours spent in school and an additional 7 preparing. In general teachers report being fairly highly motivated, with positive views of their colleagues, supervisors and the beneficial impact they are having on children. However, three quarters find their work monotonous and over a half believe that their work is not challenging or stimulating.



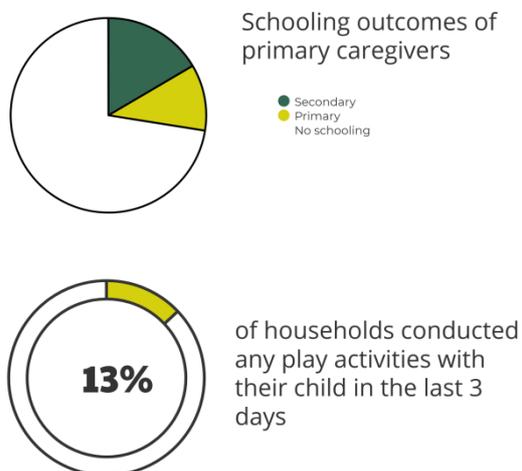
Teachers were also asked about issues potentially preventing the delivery of high-quality education in their pre-schools. The three most commonly cited issues were:

1. Lack of financial resources
2. Low parental involvement
3. Large class sizes

This may not be surprising. Observations from the 80 schools show that Kindergarten classes are large with an average of 58 pupils, yet they still only possess an average of one desk and chair for every 8 pupils. In addition, less than half of sampled schools have access to toilets or any appropriate books for children.

### Parents, practices, and well-being

Households within the sample are relatively poor. Agriculture is the main source of income for the majority of households, and the reported average daily agricultural wage is only £1.81. Ownership of basic durables is also low, with less than a half owning a bed, or table and chair. In addition, wealth indices constructed from these assets show that the study sample is relatively deprived compared to the national average.



The primary caregivers (the biological mother in most cases) of the 2407 target children were also interviewed. Parental involvement in their child’s education is relatively low; this is consistent with reports from teachers. Two out of five know the Kindergarten teacher’s name, and a similar proportion had visited the school in the last month. This may be partially attributed to low educational levels of the parents themselves, with only a fifth of primary caregivers having ever attended school.

Studies have shown that children who have access to learning materials, such as books and toys, and whose parents spend time playing and interacting with them achieve better developmental and educational outcomes. In our sample, over a third of households report having no household objects suitable for children to play with and only one in four have any form of bought toy or play materials. It is important to note that only 12% of communities have a shop nearby where toys can be purchased. Even putting material constraints aside, very few households (13%) report having conducted any play activities with the target child in the last 3 days.

Primary caregivers were assessed using a well established measure of depressive symptoms, the SRQ-20 scale. This revealed a low level of mental well-being, with many reported symptoms being consistent with depression. There are however large differences by district, with measures of depression and empowerment being substantially worse in Tolon compared to Bongo.

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## Conclusion

Ghana has been successful in providing large scale access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), teachers are relatively well-educated and the majority (although not all) of children are in pre-school. However, two broad barriers still remain. Firstly, schools are largely under resourced, with large class sizes, and a lack of basic items such as books, desks and toilets. Secondly, parents in this setting have low levels of education, are at high risk of mental illness, and have low levels of investments in their children. These factors, amongst others, mean that by the time children are in primary school, learning outcomes are far below what would be expected at their age.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of both the school environment and parenting practices in determining developmental outcomes. In light of this and the above findings, interventions aiming to improve ECCE outcomes would benefit from a holistic approach, tackling the main constraints both in the school and at home. Another crucial area for childhood development is the quality of teaching pedagogy and instruction. Our data do not allow us to shed light on this issue, but it remains an area for future research.

Finally, the large differences in outcomes across the study districts show that even within areas of similar economic status, large educational inequalities can emerge. Understanding the source of these differences could help inform future policy.