

Buying Early Education: The Role of Parental Motivation in Preschool Consumption

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Abstract:

Early childhood education lacks sufficient scholarly attention. This mixed methods research study explored what motivates parents' decision-making process when they choose their children's preschool program. An investigation, including a questionnaire, interview, and a statistical analysis, was performed in a university town with parents from four preschool programs. Statistical data and qualitative data demonstrated that parent's education level, employment, and income relate to parents' preferences in various ways, especially if income levels were higher than \$40,000 per year. Our study closes by urging future researchers in pedagogy and education policy to continue assessing what accounts for early education consumption.

Introduction:

Over time an increasing amount of emphasis from society is being placed on the education system; more pressure is being placed on schools to develop well rounded and intelligent students. Early education programs are where most students begin their educational experiences, and it is through early education that gives students a greater chance at success during their educational journey; "Early exposure to child care can foster children's learning and enhance their lives[...]" (Adams & Phillips, 2001, p.35). Since the government does not sponsor an early childhood education program for all children, parents hold the responsibility to find the best type of program for their child. By analyzing parent's motivation behind the selection process of a preschool program, the United States can begin to gain a better sense of how to best teach and support their students. The strengths from the programs that parents favor can be used and implemented in public school classrooms and aid in the process of strengthening the country's educational system. "Although researchers have described the child care arrangements that result from parents' child care decisions, surprisingly little is known about how these decisions are made, the factors that undermine or support them, and the consequences they have for the family. This gap in knowledge must be addressed" (Adams & Phillips, 2001, p.49). Not much is known about the motivation behind a parent's selection of child care and early education, and this gap in knowledge is what this current research aims to address.

This research aims to explore the reasons why parents send their children to a particular child care facility, and answer the questions:

1. Which elements of a particular preschool do parents think are important for early childhood development and learning?
2. Do particular preschools attract a certain demographic profile of students and families?
3. What effect does household income have on choice of preschool? What effect does mother's occupation or level of education have on choice of preschool?

Being able to answer these questions will allow for more of this country's attention to be placed on the importance of early childhood education programs and how to better construct these programs to ensure that students reach their fullest potential.

Literature Review:

Throughout this research paper there will be certain terms mentioned, and for this studies purpose the terms will hold the listed definitions.

1. Montessori- A holistic educational approach in which the teacher acts as a guide and the multiage-age classroom is filled with self-teaching objects to develop high levels of self-esteem, self-confidence, and competence (Corry, 2006)
2. Head Start- A federally funded program targeting children ages 3-5 and providing a variety of services, including education in the form of preschool, and nutrition and medical services ("Head start services,")
3. Play School- An informal nursery group taking preschool children in half-day sessions that use play as the major way of allowing children to learn (Corry, 2006)
4. Traditional- A traditional approach where the teacher delivers district-prescribed curriculum using a variety of instructional methods to reach all students in his/her classroom (Corry, 2006)
5. Early Childhood- "Defined as preschool through third grade in this study" (Zarybnisky, 2010, p.6)

In the past, society has believed that intelligence was inherited and innate in a human being rather than being developed through experiences over time. These ideals were held by the majority of citizens until the 1950s when researchers began to challenge old views of intelligence. "The mainstream view had long been that intelligence was fixed, determined largely through heredity, but in the 1950s and early 1960s researchers started to argue that it could be modified through experience. The work of J. McVicker Hunt and Benjamin Bloom promoted the idea that intelligence was plastic and that the child's environment was a critical factor in development" (Rose , 2010, p.15). The federal government took this newly discovered information and tried to use it to build support for the Johnson administration's antipoverty efforts.

Kindergarten and preschool programs were not available to all children in the 1960s but that would soon change with the development of the Head Start program. During the Johnson administration early education began to take shape in the United States. In an effort to reduce the negative effects of poverty on children, the government thought that creating a special program, called Head Start, would be beneficial for the country's disadvantaged children. Head Start is a preschool program that encompasses not only classroom learning but medical and dental care, nutritious meals, home visits, parent participation, and community organizing; it allows for the impoverished families of the nation to give their child a head start in education (Rose, 2010). This idea of a Head Start program brought light to the idea of early education through preschool,

it “drew national attention to the promise of preschool for poor children, and in so doing raised questions about whether early education might benefit all children” (Rose , 2010, p.35). Head Start sparked an interest of early education in middle and upper class parents; seeing the positive effects a preschool program had on children of poverty, such as socialization, academic education, and better health practices. This lead them to see the many positive benefits a preschool program could also have for their own children.

Enrollments in early education programs began skyrocketing not long after Head Start’s creation. Parents were catching on to the idea that there were positive benefits and more to early education than supervision over students; “Citing research about the early development of children’s intellectual capacity, they assert that all children, not just the ‘disadvantaged,’ could be helped by early education” (Rose , 2010, p.38). Parents were not the only ones calling for early education, educators were also urging for preschool education to be offered for all children. Shortly after, more preschool programs, that were not Head Start programs, began opening. This allowed for more children to enroll even if they were not living in poverty. Families realized the importance of an early education and enrollments in preschool programs rose significantly in a short amount of time. It was noted in a 1966 *Newsweek* article that, “preschool enrollment was at an all-time high; while wealthy families were eager to get their children into the preschools linked to exclusive private schools, middle-class parents were inspired by Head Start to enroll their children in nursery schools... ‘Many educators feel it is only a matter of time-and a considerable amount of money-before every 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old can toddle off to preschool’” (Rose , 2010, p.37). The enactment of the Head Start, federally funded, program began the start of the early education system in the United States; then the rapid rise in enrollments in preschool programs continued this shift in ideals. The next part would be up to the parents to choose a program that is best suited for their child.

Parents may not perceive themselves as consumers of education. Similar to child care, however, many early childhood education programs are an enterprise. One major reason parents have difficulty choosing a pre-kindergarten institution is because they are not prepared (Bainbridge & Sundre, 1990). Unlike child care, in which parents typically must make conscious decisions as to which providers are most compatible to supervise their children, choosing a preschool program requires much more consideration as to what type of learning environment, curriculum used, or teacher-student-parent relationship is best for the child. Among mothers of preschool-aged children research has shown that children over the age of three are typically placed in formal preschool or nursery programs (Kuhlthau & Mason, 1989). It may have been common practice for care at home to be the popular choice for mothers at one point in time, but it is now not the ideal choice for mothers. More mothers are working to provide for their families, therefore, it is no longer ideal or possible to provide at home care. Attitudes towards education have also shifted, parents are more concerned about the education their child receives and wants to place them at an advantage for the child’s future. The rapid speed of change in society has left a gap between parents’ beliefs and abilities and what is necessary in choosing an adequate preschool program. Many parents are satisfied with substandard programs because they are not well enough informed on how to strategically choose a program for their child (Little & Zinzeleta, 1997). Parents lack knowledge as consumers and often times do not know what they should be truly looking for in a program; they often lean on recommends from family, friends, and ads in newspapers and magazines (Fuqua & Labensohn, 1986).

Although parents may not always recognize the diversity of early childhood programs available to them, both intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics affect their choice of institution. The

characteristics of a program play a significant role in why parents place their child there. Two groups of characteristics have been found to play a major part in this decision; parents place importance and rates on different characteristics that programs offer. “These importance ratings cluster into two groups: importance of extrinsic, or adult-oriented, characteristics of care (i.e., distance from home, distance from work, available hours, and cost) and importance of intrinsic or developmental factors (i.e., type of program offered, educational materials used, training of staff, and availability of recreational equipment)” (Johansen, Leibowitz & Waite, 1996, p.763). Working parents are more influenced by the extrinsic factors because of their employment demands more than other parents. Those parents that place a higher value on their child’s overall development are more inclined to choose a more formal preschool program; while those that value their child knowing and having a relationship with the caregiver more often choose family home care (Johansen, et al., 1996).

Programs such as Montessori, Play School, Head Start, and traditional offer aspects of early childhood education for the needs of different families. Parents go to programs based on how well that program works to meet the needs of their children and their specific family. Montessori parents were found to place “the most importance on academics, discipline, socialization, interaction with the classroom teacher, and individualized attentions from the teacher” (Zarybnisky, 2010, p.87). Montessori schools have placed an emphasis on these aspects of early childhood education, which is why it is such a good fit for these particular parents. It is up to the parents to be wise consumers and choose the type of program that offers the characteristics that work best with their child and their family.

Research Methodology:

Participants

This research study was conducted using a mixed methods approach. The participants of this study are parents living in a university town, whose children are between the ages of three to six years old. Their children are currently enrolled in four different types of preschools. The first is a traditional center which is the classic preschool experience that highlights socialization and pre-academic skills; these types of centers vary greatly and are usually offered through religious organizations, community centers or in child care centers. The second is a Montessori school where there is an emphasis in independence, freedom within limits, and learning through discovery for the students. The third is a Head Start, which is a program run by the federal government to provide comprehensive education, health, nutrition, and parental involvement services to low income students and their families. The last is a Play School which focuses more on the sensory, motor, and social development of a child over the typical pressure placed on academic skills. Participants were recruited through a classic snowball sampling; parents were given an interest form as well as a note that they would be receiving compensation for their participation. Since all participation was voluntary, there was no random sampling in this study. All participants received payment of fifty dollars after they completed the follow up interview and handed in all completed paper work. A total of twenty-six parents completed all components of the research project.

Components of Research Design

Participants of this research project had to complete three different tasks to be eligible for the study.

Consent Form and Interview Request Sheet

Parents were asked to first complete a consent form and then an interview request sheet. The consent form gave a brief introduction of the researcher conducting the study, a professor at Penn State, and general overview of what is being studied, parenting cognitive development; also that participants could receive fifty dollars. The purpose of the study was to explore parental views on early childhood and appropriate activities for young children. The procedures of what parents had to do were given, then any discomforts or risks, which were no foreseeable risks or discomforts. The benefits were stated along with the duration and amount of time the study would take. A statement of confidentiality and their rights to ask questions were given. Finally information on compensation for their participation and that the study was completely voluntary were listed. The interview request form simply restated what was required of the participants during the study, the contact information of the researcher, and a place for the parents to fill in their names, address, best time and date for an interview, and their signature.

Questionnaire

The participants were next asked to complete a questionnaire that contained various questions about family background including: parent education, parent occupation, work status, income, child age, number of siblings, and school attendance. Furthermore, the questionnaire asked questions about home activities, like reading, outings, and parent/child engagement. Additionally, parents had to evaluate their child's cognitive abilities, virtues, literacy competence, and television viewing habits. Finally, subjects had to select sources of information that influence major decisions they make about their child's education.

Interview

The final part to this research study was a follow up interview with the parent that completed the questionnaire. The semi-structured interview lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour; this follow up interview allowed for parents to describe in further detail how they felt about early education, the preschool that their child attends, and their participation in their child's education. Parents did not have to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable with answering, and were allowed to stop participation in the study at any time of their choosing.

Data Analysis Methodology: A Mixed Methods Approach

The data collected from the questionnaire will be analyzed with a program called Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and used to aid in answering the questions of what elements of a preschool are important for early childhood development? Does a particular preschool attract a certain demographic profile of student and family? What effect does household income have on choice of program? What effect does mother's occupation or level of education have on choice of program? Basic descriptive statistics will be used with the data in order to analyze the findings; frequencies, cross tabulations, means, and standard deviations will be the main type of descriptive statistics being analyzed.

In terms of analyzing the data collected from the follow up interviews with the parents, this study will focus on two particular questions from the interview, "How did you choose this preschool?" and "What elements of this preschool are important for early childhood development?". I look at overall trends in parent responses. Next, I look at parent responses by school to investigate if parent choice of preschool is associated with parent ideas about early childhood development; looking for commonality in responses by a particular variable or by type of preschool program. Finally, I look at preschool choice by the income and education category

to look for associations between family background characteristics and preschool choice. Together with the quantitative findings and the qualitative analysis the researcher will be able to gain a better sense as to what motivates parents to send their children to preschool. All parts of this study were private and all information gained from the participants will be kept confidential.

Results:

Quantitative

Table 1:

Descriptive Statistics				
School	N	MomEd	MomWork	Family Income
Head Start	4	1.75 (.500)	5.5 (6.81)	6.25 (.500)
Play School	8	3.5 (.756)	6.75 (6.45)	9.13 (1.13)
Montessori	6	3.5 (.548)	22.67 (23.04)	8.83 (1.17)
Traditional	8	3.13 (.835)	6.75 (11.35)	9.37 (.744)
Total	26	3.12 (.909)	10.23 (14.42)	8.69 (1.41)

Footnote: For the columns MomEd, MomWork, and Family Income the first value listed is the mean while the second value in parentheses is the standard deviation. The parents that are have enrolled their child in this Head Start program are not typical families that utilize Head Start’s services. These families qualify for this program because they are temporarily considered low-income. They have one parent that is in graduate school and the other parents is unemployed. A typical Head Start family is low-income working towards being middle class; however, the families in this Head Start group will be middle class by the time the parent finishes their graduate studies.

This table lists the basic statistics of the data from this research study. There were 26 parents that participated and completed all necessary parts in this project. These parents had children enrolled in four different preschools: four from Head Start, eight from Play School, six from Montessori, and eight from a traditional preschool. This study is focuses on determining if there is a relationship between a mother’s education level, amount of hours worked, and family income on which type of preschool they chose for their child to attend.

Table 2: Cross tabulations of Family Income

School	Family Income					Total
	\$25K-\$30K	\$30K-\$40K	\$40K-\$50K	\$50-\$75K	\$75K+	
Head Start	75% (3)	25% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (4)
Play School	0% (0)	12.5% (1)	12.5% (1)	25% (2)	50% (4)	100% (8)
Montessori	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	16.7% (1)	33.3% (2)	33% (2)	100% (6)
Traditional	0% (0)	0% (0)	12.5% (1)	37.5% (3)	50% (4)	100% (8)
Total	11.5% (3)	11.5% (3)	11.5% (3)	26.9% (7)	38% (10)	100% (26)

Footnote: Family income per year by percentage, the second number in parenthesis is the actual numerical count.

Table 2 compares the four different schools and how they compare to family income. All of the families fit into the income bracket of twenty-five thousand or more, therefore no family

had an income level lower than twenty-five thousand dollars a year. When looking at the row for Head Start it is immediately evident that there is a relationship between families that make less than forty thousand dollars and the Head Start preschool program. The majority of families with children in the Head Start program make less than thirty thousand dollars a year, none making more than forty thousand a year which makes all of these families low-income. This is not surprising because to qualify for Head Start services the family income must be determined to be at or lower than the federal poverty level. However, when looking at the other three preschools, Play School, Montessori and traditional, the family income level varies.

None of the families in the other three programs make less than thirty thousand dollars a year, but there is no one income level that a majority of parents of a certain preschool fall into; the family income levels are dispersed throughout. Concerning traditional, Montessori, and Play School preschools there does not appear to be any relationship between school choice and family income. However, for obvious reasons, there is a relationship between family income and Head Start with the parents in the lowest family income levels. Therefore, although we can say there is a statistical relationship between the lower income levels and preschool choice, we cannot determine a statistical relationship to be present between the higher income levels and choice of program. Since these families' income levels are higher, they have more options when it comes to choosing a preschool program; however, their level of income does not predict which of these programs they choose.

Table 3: Cross tabulations of Hours Mother Works

School	Hours Mother Works						Total
	0 hrs	1-10 hrs	11-20 hrs	21-30 hrs	31-40 hrs	41+ hrs	
Head Start	50% (2)	25% (1)	25% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (4)
Play School	37.5% (3)	37.5% (3)	25% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (8)
Montessori	33.3% (2)	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	33.3% (2)	17% (1)	100% (6)
Traditional	62.5% (5)	12.5% (1)	0% (0)	25% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (8)
Total	46.2% (14)	23.1% (6)	11.5% (3)	8% (2)	7.7% (2)	3.8% (1)	100% (26)

Footnote: Percentages are in hours worked per week, the second value which is in parenthesis is the actual numeric count

Table 3 looks at the types of preschools with the amount of hours the mother works. It is evident that almost half of the mothers, regardless of which type of preschool they send their child to, do not work outside the home. Concerning the other half of mothers that do work, the majority of them work between one to twenty hours per week. From this table we can gather that about half of the mothers do not work for pay, and the typical working mother is only part time. Mothers working between zero to thirty hours a week vary in which type of program their child attends. However, it is interesting to note that those few mothers that do work thirty hours or more per week send their child to the Montessori preschool. Since, a little more than half of the mothers do not work outside of the home and there is such variation in program choice we are unable to draw any significant or strong relationships between this variable and choice of preschool program.

Table 4: Cross tabulations of Mother’s Education Level

School	Mother’s Education Level				Total
	High School & less	Some College	Bachelor’s Degree	Bachelor’s & Higher	
Head Start	25% (1)	75% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (4)
Play School	0% (0)	12.5% (1)	25% (2)	62.5% (5)	100% (8)
Montessori	0% (0)	0% (0)	50% (3)	50% (3)	100% (6)
Traditional	0% (0)	25% (2)	37.5% (3)	37.5% (3)	100% (8)
Total	3.8% (1)	23.1% (6)	30.8% (5)	42.3% (11)	100% (26)

Footnote: The first value is in percentages, the second which is in parenthesis is the actual numeric count.

Table 4 shows the percentage of children in a specific type of preschool by their mother’s education level. Similar to table 2, where preschool choice is compared with family income, the results shows that mothers that send their children to Head Start have less education than other mothers. The mothers with a child in Head Start have an education level of high school and less or some college. Education level and family income are strongly related. The education levels of the mothers from the other three preschool programs vary greatly throughout the table. Since there is such a small sample size, we were not able to determine a pattern or statistical relationship of preschool choice and mother’s education level. Although no patterns were found some interesting facts did emerge; all mothers with a child in the Montessori program have at least a bachelor’s degree or higher. More than half of Play School mothers, 62.5%, hold a bachelor’s degree and higher; while those that have children in the traditional preschool vary almost equally across the education levels of some college, bachelor’s degree, and bachelor’s degree and higher. Though the mothers of children in Montessori, traditional, and Play School preschools do not have an education level of high school or less, there is no one specific education level that they fit into according to the preschool that their child attends.

Overall, there seems to be very little statistical relationship with the variables and preschool program concerning the Montessori, Play School, and traditional preschool. Although there is no statistical relationship with these programs, there does seem to be a relationship or pattern that has emerged. It seems that if the family’s income level is low and the mother has a lower level of education the parents are more likely to send their child to a Head Start program. However, we cannot see this same pattern with the other preschool programs and the variables. This quantitative data gives a broader picture of the variables and the role they play in how parents choose a preschool for their child. The tables show that parental choice is based on something other than family background characteristics.

Qualitative

The quantitative data showed that there were other factors involved, other than family characteristic, when it came to choosing a preschool. The parents who participated in this study completed an interview along with the questionnaire, where they could further explain their ideas and beliefs about early education, of their responses this study will look at their answers to the first two questions: “How did you choose this preschool?” and “What elements of this preschool are important for early childhood development?”. These two particular questions will give a more detailed account of how parents came to their decision.

Table 5: Most Common Responses Given by Parents by Preschool

School	#1	#2
Head Start	Recommendations, older Sibling	Socialization, Independence
Play School	Parent Involvement, Idea of Play	Variety of Activities, Loose Structure
Montessori	Recommendations	Balance of Socialization & Academics, Exploration
Traditional	Recommendations, Home Church	Listen, Follow directions, Share, & Socialization

The responses given by parents to the first question, “How did you choose this preschool?” there was much commonality in what parents had to say according to which program their child was attending. Parents of children in Head Start’s main reason for choosing this program were because it was recommended to them or one of their older children has previously attended the program. Play School parents’ reasons dealt more with the elements of the program. Overwhelmingly, these parents valued the aspect of parent/family involvement in the preschool, they also liked the idea of learning through play and how the child got to choose what they did. Another commonality among the parents’ responses was that both the indoor and outdoor environment was a “good space”. Those parents with a child in the Montessori preschool mostly chose the program because they received high recommendations from their friends; many of them had friends with children that attended the program. Parents who chose the traditional preschool program did so because they attended the church that ran the program, as well as receiving high recommendations by friends.

The second question gave parents more of an opportunity to be specific when responding to, “What elements of this preschool are important for early childhood development?” Those that chose Head Start valued the idea of social interactions and their child learning independent task such as tying their shoes, using the bathroom, and buckle their own seat belt. While those parents sending their child to the Play School high regarded a variety of activities, learning through play and not having the program be too focused on academics, and a loose structure. Montessori parents identified the elements of the program having a nice balance of both socialization and academics, individualization, and the “ability to explore without too much structure.” Parents with children in the traditional program had the most commonality in their responses, which were that they wanted their children to learn how to listen and follow directions, share, and socially interact with other children.

Limitations:

The main limitation in this research study was the sample size; this specific study had a total of twenty-six participants making it more difficult to find correlations and statistical relationships. The sample size needs to include more participants as well as participants in other geographic locations besides one university town. Variation will allow for a stronger relationship

to be identified. The second limitation was that this study utilized self-reported questionnaires, therefore, some of the data could not be fully representative of the sample.

Discussion:

The findings from this study allowed for the researcher to gain a better idea of the role parents play in the consumption of their child's early education. Through the quantitative data we were able to determine that there is no direct correlation between family income, mother's education level, and mother's occupation to the type of preschool their child attended, concerning the Montessori, Play School, and Traditional programs. However, we did find a pattern that showed low family income and low mother's education level were related to type of preschool program. Head Start showed to be closely related to low family income and low mother's education level. There is not one characteristic of a family's background that predicts or correlates with the type of preschool program chosen by the parents.

Overall, this study has found that parents value many different things in a preschool program; many elements have been identified to be important in an early education program by parents. Through this study we could not identify a specific element that motivated parents to enroll their child in a preschool program. However, we were able to identify that those parents with children in the same type of preschool all valued the same elements. Future researchers should expand this study to include more participants with a greater variation. A larger sample size might provide more clarity between these variables and their effect on parents' choice of care.

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