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Low-fee private preschools as the symbol of imagined 'modernity'? – Parental perspectives on early childhood care and education (ECCE) in an urban informal settlement in Zambia

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores (1) the public and private options available at the ECCE level, (2) parents' expectation for ECCE, and (3) preferred and actual choice of preschools in an urban informal settlement in Zambia. The findings reveal strong demand for ECCE among the urban poor. This demand overwhelms low-fee private (LFP) preschool options due both to an insufficient number of public preschools as well as parents' relative preference for the LFP options. Typically, LFP preschools offer highly academic oriented curriculum with English as a medium of instruction, divergent from the government's play-based and mother-tongue based curriculum. By adopting critical cultural political economy approach as an analytical framework, we found that urban poor parents increasingly view investing in LFP preschools as an important household strategy to 'transform' their children into 'modern' citizens, eventually exiting from their stigmatized lifestyle and marginalized social status.

1. Introduction

The importance of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is widely acknowledged for its critical role in a child's physical, neurobiological, and psychological development, as well as for offering a cognitive and socio-emotional foundation (OECD, 2007, 2019). Investment in ECCE has also been justified by various economists. It is well known that the work of Nobel laureate James Heckman and his colleagues show that returns on investment are higher with ECCE than those of other educational interventions (e.g., Heckman et al., 2009). Research evidence - mostly accumulated in North America and Europe - has also shown that the benefits of quality ECCE programs are higher for disadvantaged children, meaning there is potential to compensate for family background.[1]

After a long period of neglect in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the last 10 years have seen an increase in policy emphasis on ECCE in many countries in the region. This is evidenced by 23 out of 47 countries having adopted a national ECCE policy while another 13 countries have policies under development or drafted as of 2012 (Vargas-Baron and Schipper, 2012). Overall, more children now have access to some kind of ECCE services in the region compared to 10 years ago, although the enrolment rate is still significantly low compared to the other regions. For example, the enrolment rate in Eastern and Southern Africa increased from 20 % in 2000 to 33 % in 2017 (UNICEF, 2019b). What deserves additional attention is how the number of private preschools is growing and now accounts for more than 30 % of preschools (UNICEF, 2019b). Furthermore, a noticeable trend is that these private preschools are not only catering to high-income households but are also increasingly enrolling students from relatively poor households in many informal urban settlements in East and Southern Africa (Bidwell and Watine, 2014).

The growth of low-fee private schools (LFPS) has been dramatic in the Global South and has attracted a significant attention both from policy makers and scholars alike (Heyneman and Stern, 2014; Srivastava, 2013, 2016; Verger et al., 2016). There has been an abundance of research on parental choice between public schools and LFPS, the factors that affect choice, and the relative quality between these two types of schools. The research that has emerged on these topics has resulted in a

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[1] One of the most well-known examples is the Head Start project launched in the US in 1964.

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heated debate about the desirability of LFPS, and the legitimacy of national governments and international donors that support for these institutions (e.g., Akaguri, 2014; Alcott and Rose, 2016; Cameron, 2011; Edwards et al., 2017; Härma, 2011; Mousumi and Kusakabe, 2019; Nishimura and Yamano, 2013; Riep, 2015; Singh and Bangay, 2014; Singh and Sarkar, 2012; Srivastava, 2013).

The accumulation of research on LFPS and school choice in the Global South notwithstanding, the majority of the existing studies have been conducted at the primary and secondary levels. However, parental choice at the preschool level and the various factors that determine preschool choice between different providers in the Global South remain severely under-studied with the exception of a handful of recently emerged studies (Alcott et al., 2018 on India; Bidwell and Watine, 2014 on East and Southern Africa). Moreover, parental aspiration and the value attached to ECCE, which are closely related to preschool choice decisions, have also received little attention apart from a few limited studies (Kabay et al., 2017; Kholowa and Rose, 2007). There is thus a need for scholars to examine the extent to which LFPS have proliferated in the ECCE sector in the Global South, how parents make decisions with regards to preschools, and what expectations they have for different kinds of preschools (e.g., public, private, community, NGO-sponsored).

This study aims to fill this research gap by offering insight from one of the urban informal settlements in Zambia - a country that has been neglected in both the LFPS and ECCE literature. Specifically, this study aims to explore: 1) what public and private preschool options are available in an urban informal settlement of Lusaka, the Capital of Zambia; 2) the beliefs and values parents attached to ECCE in this setting; 3) how, and based on what criteria, parents choose a particular preschool for their children from the available options; and 4) the extent to which various socio-economic factors limit parent's preschool choice.

Rapid urbanization, exponential growth of the young population in cities, and the expansion of urban informal settlements, which are often referred to as slums, have become major features of many countries in the SSA including Zambia. However, little has been studied about the local meaning of ECCE in the context of rapidly urbanizing SSA countries beyond a single study conducted by Kabay et al. (2017) on the urban slum of Ghana's capital.

Zambia presents a very interesting case as the government has recently developed a draft policy exclusively focusing on ECCDE (Early Childhood Care, Development and Education)[2]–being the first of its kind in the country's history. As part of this policy, a syllabus and curriculum were developed which envisages a play-based and child-centered approach. The government also aspired to enhance public provision through annexing ECE (Early Childhood Education) centers for 3–6 years old[3] to public primary schools while hiring 1000 trained teachers (MESVTEE, 2015). Additionally, the draft policy acknowledges the importance of public-private partnership for the expansion of ECCE.

As will be explained, this paper adopts a cultural political economy approach to explore parents' expectations for ECCE and preschool choice. In addition, by employing the concept of 'modernity' put forward by an American anthropologist James Ferguson (1999), this paper argues that growing demands for preschools in an urban informal settlement are closely related to parents' aspiration for their children to be transformed into a 'modern' citizen by achieving success in formal schooling, which, it is thought, will enable them—both—to be perceived as 'modern' and to enjoy a 'modern' lifestyle.

Based on his detailed ethnographic case-study of the lives and strategies of urban mineworkers in the Zambian Copperbelt during the 1970–1990s, Ferguson (1999) argues that, in the immediate post-independence period (1960s and early 1970s), the economic boom driven by the rise of the copper prices led to widespread optimism on the part of mineworkers, who had migrated from rural areas to the urban towns in Zambia, regarding their futures. The concept of 'modernity' was explained by Ferguson (1999, 2006) as a belief shared by the people in the idea of 'progress' as well as the desire to achieve a higher social status in the global system—a status which some people are able to achieve while other are not.

Moreover, in Ferguson's (1999) study, investment in formal education was expected to offer access to unprecedented power and comfort. Education was thus seen as a golden passport used to enter the formal sector job market, which up until the end of colonial occupation had only been available to whites (Ferguson, 1999). Many educated Zambians soon found themselves enjoying 'modernity' through increased cultural and commercial opportunities (Ferguson, 1999).

The present study demonstrates that parents in the urban informal settlements today still actively seek out formal education, for which ECCE is increasingly viewed as the necessary foundation, with the expectation that it will ultimately give them or their children a 'modern' future by breaking away from what they perceive as the current 'pre-modern' and 'uncivilized' way of life in the urban informal settlement. Parents expected that preschools would offer their children important readiness for formal schooling and increase the chance of passing the ever-competitive primary and junior secondary school completion examinations needed to proceed to senior secondary school and college.[4] Acceptance into secondary school and college, in turn, is expected to offer children the chance of attaining 'modern' formal sector jobs and the associated 'modern' lifestyle.

Parents also expect preschools will provide their children with English proficiency and those manners which are often associated with being respected, valued and 'modern,' just as Ferguson (1999) observed about urban dwellers in the 1960 s and early 1970 s. These skills are understood as qualities that differentiate students who are seen as educated from those who are not. In order to satisfy such expectations for preschools, most parents turn to low-fee private (LFP) options. Overwhelming parental choice for LFP options is explained by the inadequate number of public options in the vicinity as well as by parents' strong preference for LFP options that tend to offer highly academically oriented curriculum taught in English, divergent from the relatively play-based and mother tongue-based curriculum offered in public preschools as prescribed in the national syllabus.

2. The background - political economy of ECCE in Zambia

For the first decade after independence in 1964, the newly autonomous Zambian government seized control of the entire formal education

[2] While ECCE is widely used internationally, ECCDE (Early Childhood Care, Development and Education) is used in policy documents of some countries including Zambia. Worldwide, however, ECCE and ECCDE are generally used interchangeably (PMRC, 2017). In this paper, the term ECCE will be used throughout, while ECCDE is used when referring to the policies that specifically have ECCDE on their titles.

[3] Currently, ECCDE in Zambia comprises of two broad levels, i.e., day care, which caters to children aged 0–2 years, and Early Childhood Education (ECE) for children aged 3–6 years (National Assembly of Zambia, 2011). Previously, those institutions serving 0–2 years were called day care (or nurseries) and those serving 3–6 years old were called preschool (MESVTEE, n.d.). Yet, the Education Act revised in 2011 defines preschool as an institution offering childhood care, development, without specifying a particular age range (PMRC, 2017). Hence, in this study, the term preschool is used throughout to refer to ECCDE institutions operating at the pre-primary level.

[4] In the present Zambia, general education are comprised of primary schools (grades 1-7), junior secondary schools (grades 8-9), and senior secondary schools (grades 10-12). At the end of primary cycle (grade 7), one has to sit for the grade 7 composite examination, the results of which determines both whether they are proceed to junior secondary schools and the type of the schools that he or she can attend to. At the end of the junior secondary school (grade 9), learners take the junior secondary school leaving examination to earn their Junior Secondary School Certificate to proceed to the senior secondary level (grades 10-12).

system through the 1966 Education Act. This shift included taking over private schools, which had mostly been run by missionaries, who were primarily responsible for education during the colonial period. Similarly, during this time, it was declared that education from primary to tertiary levels would be free (Kelly, 1999).

The post-independence governments have recognized the critical role that ECCE plays as a foundation for education. Key education policy documents such as Education Reform of 1977, Focus on Learning of 1992, and Educating our Future of 1996 all recognized ECCE as a critical foundation for child development and later learning. This policy recognition in the post-colonial period does not mean, however, that the provision of ECCE has been seen as the responsibility of the government in Zambia; nor was it part the formal education system. In fact, until the mid-2000s, pre-primary education was not placed under the Ministry of Education, but was instead placed under the Ministry of Local Government and Housing (MLGH) which established nurseries and preschools primarily in local welfare centers. In 1972, the Lusaka Preschool Association was formed by the MLGH in order to create a network of nurseries and preschools countrywide and give technical advice on how to run these institutions. This entity later became the Zambia Preschool Association (MESVTEE, n.d.).

By 1980, the economy had almost collapsed due to the simultaneous fall in the price of copper and the rise in the price of oil. With a sharp decline in government revenue, the provision government preschools came to an end by the middle of the 1980s. This left the provision of preschools in the hands of the private sector, local councils, local communities, NGOs, and churches (MESVTEE, 2015, p. 12).

Following the economic crisis, a structural adjustment program (SAP) was initiated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) - a significant break from past policies of state controlled economy and social sectors, including education (Carmody, 2004). By the mid-1980s, Zambia had borrowed excessively from the IMF, World Bank and bilateral donors and accrued increased amounts of external debt, leading to a serious financial crisis. Following the implementation of the SAP, frequent rioting occurred due to reductions in food subsidies. The economic dissatisfaction became the political dissatisfaction too, which resulted in the popular demands for the re-introduction of multi-party election that was banned in 1972. Multi party election was conducted in November 1991, and the newly elected Multiparty Movement Democracy (MMD) introduced far–reaching structural reform in line with the orthodoxy of structural adjustment, including the liberalization of the economy and a drastic cut in public spending on education. This neoliberal reform resulted in the elimination of many subsidies and the introduction of school fees. Educational spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) dropped from 6.2 % in 1975 to 1.8 % in 1993, as gross enrolment rates at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels drastically declined (World Bank, 2020). At the same time, the quality of teaching and learning seriously deteriorated (Kelly, 1999).

In 1996, the Government of Zambia developed its national education policy, Educating our Future (EoF) (MOE, 1996). In line with the vision offered by Education for All (EFA) at the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education, EoF put emphasis on basic education, which included primary, junior secondary and ECCE–a clear shift away from the emphasis on tertiary and secondary schools by the immediate post-independence governments. However, EoF also explicitly noted that responsibility should be shared among governments, communities, and the private sector, proposing “cost sharing” to achieve “universal basic education” (MOE, 1996, p. 3). EoF encouraged initiatives by communities and the private sector to provide educational services while “the right of parents to send their children to the education institutions of their own choice” was emphasized (MOE, 1996, p.3). The policy portrays the belief that privatization of education and freedom of school choice would improve market efficiency, education access, and quality, a position that is consistent with the privatization discourse promoted by the Washington Consensus.

The cost-sharing approach in education was partially reversed when free education for grades 1–9 was officially announced in 2002, which resulted in a substantial increase in primary enrollment rates. However, government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP continued to drop and was only 1.1 % in 2008 (World Bank, 2020). The result was a serious challenge in terms of education quality. Achievement in both reading and mathematics in grade 6 in Zambia was the lowest among Southern African countries, according to an international assessment (Hungi et al., 2010).

In 2004, the responsibility to oversee the ECCE sector shifted from the MLGH to the Ministry of Education Science, Vocational Training, and Early education (MESTVEE).[5] Furthermore, in 2011 ECCE had become a national priority supported by a legislative and policy framework through the Education Act of 2011 and the Sixth National Development Plan and Education Sector Plan. Consequently, the MESVTEE has assumed responsibility to assist preschools for Early Childhood Education (ECE) for children aged 3–6 years old by training preschool teachers, monitoring standards, and preparing curriculum guidelines.

The MESVTEE is expected to coordinate preschools operated not only by the Ministry but also by the private sector, NGOs, churches, and local authorities such as the Lusaka City Council under the MLGH (UNESCO, 2006). The responsibility for ECCE is, however, still divided among several Ministries; MESVTEE only oversees ECE for students 3–6 years old while the Ministry of Community Development, Mother and Child Health (MCDMCH) is tasked with providing education for children from 0 to 2 years old (MESVTEE, 2015, p. 12).

In 2013, for the first time, MESVEE recruited 1000 preschool teachers and developed a national curriculum for early childhood which defined Early Childhood Care, Development, and Education (ECCDE). The curriculum pertains to both non-formal and formal education as well as developmental support for children ages 0–6. This curriculum focuses on the holistic development of the child, offered at two broad levels: Day Care (0–2 years) and ECE (3–6 years) (MESVTEE, n.d.).

The 2013 curriculum and its related syllabus, which were developed with the support of UNICEF, promote play-based learning in the familiar Zambian language as opposed to English. The policy states that the primary purpose of such play-based and local language based early learning is social interaction with a secondary purpose being the preparation for students to attend primary school (MESVTEE, n.d.). In 2014, the execution of a 2012 plan began which included the MESVTEE annexation of government-run preschools called “ECE centers.” In 2015, it was reported that there were 1526 ECE centers annexed to government primary schools which served 70, 000 children (Mambo and Simuind, 2017, p. 15).

The policy prioritization of ECCE since the mid-2000s notwithstanding, and apart from the few above-mentioned efforts, the Zambian government’s investment in ECCE remains minimal and the public provision of preschools is still limited. Although the MESVTEE has started allocating budgetary resources to ECCE since 2004, its share of the total education budget has been extremely low. In 2015, it was only 0.5 % of the national education budget (Republic of Zambia, 2015). Despite the surge of copper production, due to an increase in global demand in the early 2000′s, there remained low levels of public investment in ECCE from mid-2000 until 2014 (World Bank, 2018, p. 31). Macroeconomic growth helped transform Zambia into a middle-income status country by 2011. However, this economic growth did not result in significant increases in educational investment. Public spending on

[5] In September 2015, MESTVEE split into two ministries following the major restructuring of ministerial portfolios, i.e., the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) that manages ECE, primary, secondary education as well as youth and adult education, and the Ministry of Higher Education that governs tertiary education, vocational and technical training, science, technology and innovation.

education only slightly increased from 2.5 % in 2004 to 3.8 in 2016 (World Bank, 2020).

The result of this lack of investment is a persistently low rate of grade 1 entrants with preschool experience; even in 2017 over 73 % of grade 1 entrants were reported to not have been enrolled in any pre-primary learning institutions (Lusaka, 2017). Although the number of grade 1 entrants with preschool experience increased from 15.4 % in 2014 to 24.4 % in 2015 (MoGE, 2015), there is significant variation by province—with 36.9 % of grade 1 entrants having some kind of preschool experience in Lusaka, the capital city, but only 9 % and 10.4 % of grade 1 entrants had such experience in North Western and Western provinces, respectively (MoGE, 2015, p. 28).

The Sixth National Development Plan (2011–2015) outlines the government's desire to enhance public-private partnerships (PPPs) for effective delivery of social services (MOFNP, 2011). Thus, de-facto proliferation of private schools has been justified by neo-liberal governments since the 1990s, with the given rational for such actions being: the principal responsibility for the quality of children's education rests with the child's family and community. The share of education sector in the overall national budget of 2019 has been reduced to 15.3 % from 20.2 % in 2015 while the allocation to ECE declined by 88 % from 2018 due to austerity measures aimed to decelerate the debt burden (UNICEF, 2019a, p. 3).

Several researchers have reported that there has been a proliferation of fee-paying private preschools mostly in urban and pre-urban areas in Zambia (Hamusunga, 2012; Kalinde, 2016). What is less known is the extent to which these private preschools are emerging not only in affluent areas of cities but also in the urban informal settlements, what benefits and experiences parents attach to pre-primary education in such areas, and the grounds on which decisions related to preschool choice are made.

3. Theoretical and empirical debates about LFPS, (pre)school choice, and parents' value attached to ECCE in the Global South

3.1. LFPS and school choice in the Global South

LFPS vary significantly in their forms and specific attributes by location. Such variations notwithstanding, it is reported that the phenomenal growth of LFPS in the Global South were initially driven by *privatization by default* (Verger et al., 2016, p. 23). In other words, rather than governments explicitly promoting market-oriented policies in education, private actors spontaneously responded to a market need created by the critical shortage of government provision and parental frustration with the quality of government schools (Edwards et al., 2017; Oketch et al., 2010a, 2010b; Stern and Smith, 2016; Srivastava, 2008; Verger et al., 2016). In SSA, in particular, the free primary education policies introduced by many governments from the early-1990 s lead to overwhelmingly crowded classrooms in many government schools. This phenomenon significantly contributed to the parental perception that government schools are of poor quality (Härma, 2011; Nishimura and Yamano, 2013).

In the countries where LFPS have proliferated, the overwhelming parental preference for such schools over (officially) fee-free government schools has been well documented (Akaguri, 2014; Alcott et al., 2018; Härma, 2011, 2013; Heyneman and Stern, 2014; Nishimura and Yamano, 2013; Stern and Smith, 2016; Srivastava, 2008; Tooley and Dixon, 2005). Many studies suggest that parents claim that LFPS are of superior quality compared to government schools. Often this judgement is based on academic performance including students' test scores and fluency in English as well as other various proxy indicators such as: tighter discipline of students (Oketch et al., 2010b), lower pupil-teacher ratio (Dixon and Tooley, 2012), and better attendance of teachers (Tooley et al., 2011).

The proponents of LFPS argue that parent's preference for LFPS is simply evidence that these schools can offer higher quality education with lower costs and are more accountable for their results (Dixon et al., 2013; Tooley et al., 2010; Tooley and Dixon, 2005; Tooley and Longfield, 2015). Such an argument is in line with the neoliberal claim that freedom of school choice and market competition improve efficiency and effectiveness (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; World Bank, 2003). Relatedly, parental preference for LFPS has often also been cited by private school advocates as one of the arguments for LFPS. This argument rests upon the belief that marketization increases the choice for clients (i.e. parents), who are in turn capable of choosing 'good' schools for their children.

However, a significant amount of LFPS literature reports that, near universal preference for LFPS among parents notwithstanding, only relatively well-off families are realistically able to send their children to LFPS. This excludes the poorest of the poor from accessing LFPS and raises serious equity concerns (Akaguri, 2014; Alcott and Rose, 2016; Day Ashley et al., 2014; Fennell, Malik, 2012; Härma, 2011; Härma and Rose, 2012; Languille, 2016; Riep, 2015; Singh and Bangay, 2014). Thus, many pro-equity commentators question how free school choice really is for the less endowed, and argue that marketization advocates tend to ignore differing socio-economic realities that exist even within the 'poor community' that restrict these families ability to 'choose' a school (Härma and Rose, 2012).

Although it has been widely reported that parents often believe that LFPS offers better quality education compared to their government counterparts, research evidence suggests that LFPS frequently suffer from worse facilities (Riep, 2017) and that their teachers are un-qualified or less-qualified when compared to those in state schools (Global Campaign for Education, 2016; Ohba, 2013; Riep, 2015). Moreover, in LFPS, high teacher turnover is not uncommon. This is partly driven by the fact that teachers in LFPS are hired on short term contracts with much lower wages than official public teacher salaries (Härma and Rose, 2012; Ohara, 2012, 2013).

Moreover, the learning outcomes between LFPS and government schools show varying results. Some studies report relatively higher learning achievements in LFPS compared to government schools in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (for example, Amjad and MacLeod, 2014 on Pakistan; Muralidharan et al., 2011 and Singh, 2015 on Andhra Pradesh on India; Tooley et al., 2011 on Nigeria). Yet, other studies, including those by pro-LFPS researchers, show that relatively higher performance of students in LFPS is not represented in all subjects and fails to take into account socio-economic background (Alcott and Rose, 2016; Dixon et al., 2013; Fennell, Malik, 2012, 2012; Languille, 2016; Singh and Bangay, 2014; Tooley et al., 2010). In addition, Ashley-Day et al.'s rigorous systematic review of academic articles on LFPS concludes that even in those studies that show relatively better learning outcomes in LFPS than the government counterparts, often the difference between the two are only moderate, with the quality of LFPS and government schools being of unacceptable quality (Day Ashley et al., 2014).

The evidence also suggests that parents' judgement about school quality may not be as informed as is often assumed. Several scholars point out that parents tend to prefer LFPS for social status reasons (Joshi, 2014, 2019). Edwards et al. (2017) and Riep (2017) report that parents' perception of LFPS as being of superior quality is shaped by the branding of the providers. The perceptions inculcated by LFPS can mislead poor parents into thinking their children are receiving an 'elite' education. A number of studies also report that poor parents often prefer LFPS simply because they use English as the medium of instruction (Mousumi and Kusakabe, 2016; Härma and Rose, 2012; Singh and Bangay, 2014; Stern and Smith, 2016). Specifically, Nambissan (2012) discovered that low income parents in India equate 'good education' with English-medium schooling.

Bulmanm (2004, p. 513) notes that "culture is an integral part of school-choice decision-making dynamics for all families, privileged as well as disadvantaged." Yet, unfortunately, the role that culture, beliefs, and meanings play in the school-choice decisions has not been fully

appreciated by most research on LFPS and school choice. Parents' aspirations for, and the meaning which is attached to, education are rarely discussed in relation to school choice among different options.

3.2. Parental demands and expectations for ECCE and the proliferation of LFP preschools in the Global South

The substantial body of research on LFPS in the Global South that has been amassed thus far has been mainly conducted at the primary-and secondary levels while, regrettably, little has yet been researched at the pre-primary level. Although the research is limited, several studies report that low-fee private (LFP) preschools started gaining traction in informal urban settlements in East and Southern Africa as well as across urban and rural areas in India (Alcott et al., 2018 on India; Bidwell and Watine, 2014 on Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa; Streuli et al., 2011 on India). These studies suggest that many poor parents are proactive in securing the earliest possible start for their children.

Bidwell and Watine (2014) report that the preschools operating in the urban slums of Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa are dominated by LFPS which are typically attached to affiliated private primary schools. They also report that parents overwhelmingly believe private preschools will offer better quality education than that of public preschools–just as literature on LFPS at the primary and secondary levels has suggested (see above). However, partly because no in-depth interview data was provided by these studies, little is known as to how ECCE has been imagined and experienced by parents, nor why parents perceive private preschools to have higher quality education than that of government preschools.

Around the world, what constitutes the best approaches to pedagogical practice in early childhood development has been the source of substantial debate. Often, a distinction is drawn in early childhood education between traditional, teacher-directed pedagogies and emerging, more progressive, child-centered didactic pedagogies. In reality, practices are often mixed and develop into a complex combination of both perspectives (OECD, 2007). Recently, international organizations have increasingly paid significant attention to 'school readiness' in ECCE and stress the importance of continuity between pre-primary and primary schooling (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2017; UNICEF, 2019b). They caution, however, that the structured academic approach implemented in primary schooling is not appropriate at the pre-primary level and, instead, advocate for child-centered, play-based and holistic approaches to early childhood development as the most effective approach for fostering a child's school readiness as they develop cognitively, social-emotionally and physically (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2017; UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF, 2019b).

Partly influenced by what is viewed as appropriate pedagogy in early learning by the international development community, many African governments have made a shift away from traditional, academically-oriented early education to a more child-centered and play based education (Kholowa and Rose, 2007; Nsamenang, 2006). Yet, it should be noted that the discussions in the international development community are often based on an understanding of child development in the cultural and social context of Europe and North America. Some authors argue that these conversations ignore indigenous and locally-inspired approaches to early childhood development embedded in deep and complex historical, cultural and social contexts (Nsamenang, 2006; Serpel, 2019). With the exception of an article by Kabay et al. (2017), there is a clear absence of detailed research that considers local socio-cultural and historical context when studying parental perceptions of ECCE and its relation to current practices.

The present study fills these research gaps by investigating parents' perceptions of ECCE and how they choose preschools in an urban informal settlement in Zambia. This study draws primarily on qualitative data from parents, teachers, school managers, and government officials in order to understand how various stakeholders engage with and experience the process of choosing a preschool and how the decision-making process affects the proliferation of LFP preschools. The specific research questions are as follows:

(1) What preschool options are available in an urban informal settlement in Zambia?
(2) What benefits do parents expect from sending their young children to preschools in an urban unplanned settlement in Zambia?
(3) How do parents make decisions when choosing a preschool in the context of an urban unplanned settlement in Zambia?
(4) What influences parents' preferred and actual preschool choice for their children in the specific context of an urban unplanned settlement in Zambia?

3.3. Theoretical approach: cultural political economy approach

In order to investigate these research questions, analytically, this study focuses on how political, economic, and cultural forces at multiple levels interact to shape the phenomena of interest—i.e., the extent of the growth of LFP preschools, parental expectations for ECCE, their choices, and what factors influence those choices. In particular, this research adopts the 'critical cultural political economy' approach (Robertson and Dale, 2012, 2015) which, building upon critical political economy orientations, attempts to understand complex education phenomena by integrating both political economy and cultural aspects into its analysis (Robertson and Dale, 2015, p. 150).

Within and beyond the field of comparative and international education, the political economy approach tries to understand "how the relationship between individuals and society and between markets and the state affects the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Novelli et al., 2014, p.10). By being attentive to these dynamics, critical political economy can show how schools and education systems reproduce societal stratification and social classes in the context of a capitalist economic system (Carnoy, 1975, 1985).

Recently, Robertson and Dale (2015) have called for the need to expand the analytical framework of critical political economy by exploring not only political economic categories, but also cultural factors in an attempt to further understand our complex social world (Robertson and Dale, 2015, p. 150). Some scholars advancing cultural political economy focus primarily on the production of discourse and meaning (semiotics) and the way that actors interpret that discourse (Jessop, 2004). Per Jessop (2001), individual actors, informed by discursive trends, participate in processes (e.g., school choice processes) while engaging in structurally-oriented strategic calculations in that they analyze and take into account their institutional and political constraints and opportunities and subsequently "orient their strategies and tactics in light of their understanding of the current conjuncture and their 'feel for the game'" (Jessop, 2001, p. 1224). The point, then, is that cultural political economy seeks to be less deterministic than critical political economy by emphasizing the role of individual agency, though that agency is still circumscribed by political-economic structures, the vested interests of organizations (e.g., schools), and the discursive context in which they are located (characterized, e.g., by the messages that schools communicate about themselves to the communities in which they are located) (Jessop, 2008).

Grounded in the work of Levinson et al. (2000), various scholars (e.g., Carney and Bista, 2009; Madson and Carney, 2011; Valentin, 2011) have explored the meanings and aspirations attached to modern schooling in the Global South and specifically how "schooled persons" are imagined in post-independence countries as a result of the interplay of broader social forces–both local and global (Carney and Rappleye, 2011, p. 6). In the words of Carney and Rappleye (2011), "schooling becomes an enormously important symbolic universe" (p.6), directly associated with future opportunities, new lifestyle, and respectfulness.

The combination of cultural and political economy approaches will be highly useful in this study. For example, exploration of the meanings and beliefs that urban dwellers in an urban informal settlement in

Lusaka ascribe to ECCE cannot be discussed in isolation. Instead, it is important to consider how modernity and social mobility—and the role of schools and preschools therein—are imagined and constructed locally in the context of a particular history, and how these issues related to the broader political economy and even global capitalism.

To this end, consider that, while studying urban life in the Copperbelt towns in post-independent Zambia, Ferguson (1999) described how industrialization and urbanization were rapidly transforming the typical rural agricultural life experienced by many ordinary Zambians. This transformation encouraged many to believe that the country was rising to 'modernity.' Urbanization was understood in terms of a linear progression towards Western style industrialization. The lived experiences of cosmopolitanism enjoyed by many mineworkers offered them a sense of connection to the 'modern' (Ferguson, 1999). As noted in the introduction, formal education was seen as an important investment in order to obtain 'modern' economic and social status and thus to enjoy the fruit of urban prosperity. In other words, success in formal education meant acquiring the symbols of modern status and the world of the 'first class' citizens (Ferguson, 1999, p.234).

However, as Ferguson (1999) demonstrated vividly, such a 'myth' of modernity was turned upside down, shaken, and shattered once the country's economy sharply declined after the mid-1970s. During this time, the lives of urban mine workers became disconnected from the process of modernization as a result of the economic liberalization and privatization that followed economic decline (Ferguson, 1999).

The implication for this paper is that it is necessary to keep these three dimensions in view for analytic purposes, for each of them impinges on preschool choice process.

4. Setting the context for the study – political economy of urban informal settlements in Lusaka

4.1. Selection of the study site

Research for this study was conducted in the Mtendere compound in Lusaka, Zambia. Mtendere was selected as the sample site primarily for two reasons: (1) it is one of the largest settlements, with a population of 109,000 in 2016, and is one of the oldest informal settlements of urban poor in Zambia; (2) it was considered by the researchers to be a relatively safe area to meet and speak with parents, and educators, important since Mtendere has one of the lowest crime rates among informal settlements. As with other compounds, Mtendere can be pictured as a muddy urban area with narrow roads and a single paved main street. The settlement also commonly contains polluted water in public areas resulting from a lack of a proper drainage system. Houses in Mtendere are built closely together primarily as detached or semi-detached houses made from concrete or mud bricks which has produced a dense and unfavorable urban environment.

The following section will overview the political economy in Zambia and will particularly discuss the overall growth of Lusaka's informal settlements which have been closely linked to Zambia's economic fluctuation. Both the political economy and development of urban informal settlements in Zambia can offer critical insight into the understandings and expectations residents of these settlements may have of ECCE and how those understandings and expectations may affect preschool choice.

4.2. Setting the research site in the political economy of Zambian history

Following the national independence of Zambia in 1964, a control measure which restricted the movement of local Zambians was removed and lead to an influx of rural migrants' into Lusaka. Rural Zambians began to migrate to the cities based on a hope for economic opportunities which had become available in the immediate post-World War period thanks to the rise in prices of copper, the nation's prime export product at the time. However, as a result of Zambian cities' small industrial base, formal employment in Lusaka was primarily available only in the government sector.

Rural to urban migration in Lusaka in the immediate post-independence period soon led to a serious housing crisis as there were few accommodations available for these migrants in statutory residential areas (Mulenga, 2003; Simposya, 2010). As a result, rural migrants had no other choice but to squat in rubbish dumping areas, vacant land, quarry land, or farm land owned by the whites, all of which were located on the periphery of Lusaka (Chitonge and Mfune, 2015; Mulenga, 2003). When this lack of housing for migrants soon grew into a serious problem, the result became a massive growth of 'unauthorized' and 'informal' squatter settlements in the peri-urban Lusaka (Chitonge and Mfune, 2015; Mulenga, 2003), called 'compounds,' or *komboni* in Chinyanja (*linga franca* of Lusaka) (Mayers, 2011).

The post-independence government decided to adopt the colonial government's social services policy and, thus, refused to provide any public services to these unauthorized urban settlements for the first two decades following 1946. The government generally viewed urban informal settlements as 'problem areas' packed with 'undesirable persons' rather than places with the potential for improvement (Mulenga, 2003, p. 11). Consequently, the unauthorized urban settlements continued to grow without any proper city planning or public services, which led to overcrowding and deteriorating living standards (Mulenga, 2003, p. 10).

In 1974, the government changed its approach to informal urban settlements–including Mtendere - and began 'upgrading' these settlements by giving authority to the Minister of Local Government and Housing (MLGH), hoping the MLGH would be able to transform these informal areas into residential housing neighborhoods. The Lusaka City Council (LCC) was delegated the responsibility by the MLGH to provide the settlements with updated infrastructure and services such as water, roads, schools, and health facilities (Chitonge and Mfune, 2015; Mulenga, 2003).

This change in the governments' policy regarding informal settlements was due mostly to its concern with the high risk of crime and epidemic outbreaks in these settlements and, to a lesser extent, the realization that these settlements potentially were significant sources of urban votes (Mulenga, 2003; Chitonge and Mfune, 2015). The government's decision to 'upgrade' informal settlements notwithstanding, few actual improvement efforts have been made due to the lack of a clear policy direction or strategy combined with the weak financial and administrative capacity of the LCC. Also is important to note, as mentioned in the previous section, is that it was the LCC under the MLGH that was given the mandate to establish and run public preschools in 1970s. Despite this mandate, since 1986, in Mtendere only one preschool has been established by the LCC.

In the 1990s there was a clear decrease in living standards in the informal settlements due to the Zambian economic decline that started in the 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s. Following two decades of economic concerns, in 1991 the newly elected government shifted to more liberal economic policies. A reduction in public spending on social services in the 1990s made the availability of basic services the in informal settlements scarce. Under the various neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s, infrastructure was neglected and consumer goods were far beyond the means of many residents. Likewise, the abolition of subsidies for food, transportation, health, and education meant that many urban poor families were unable to access basic services (Hansen, 1997, p. 137). The parallel decline in employment in the formal sector also meant that many people were only left with self-reliant job options such as street vending.

The influx of rural migrants into Lusaka has grown significantly since the mid-2000s due to the labor needs in Zambia's copper sector after the 2003 global increase in copper demand. As a result, the population of Lusaka increased from only 200,000 in 1964 to 1,391,329 in 2000 and then nearly doubled to 2,198,996 in 2010 (UNDP, 1996; CSO, 2012).

The macro-economic growth in Zambia during the 2000s, however,

has not meant the growth of formal sector employment or the supply of formal housing. In 2010, 65 % of Lusaka's population lived in approximately 37 informal settlements which occupied merely 10 % of the city's land (Chitonge and Mfune, 2015, p. 212). The majority of Lusaka's citizens who reside in these settlements pursue informal economic activities due to employment shortage in the formal sector. Residents commonly earn money through unregistered and unregulated small-scale, home-based enterprises such as selling snacks, street marketing, hairdressing, etc.

While the Mtendere compound has experienced a rapid growth in population and infrastructure over the past 25 years, the provision of primary and secondary schools has remained limited. As of 2017, there are only four public primary schools and one public secondary school in the entire settlement which contains over 100,000 residents (Tembo, 2011). As Mayers (2011) points out, Lusaka is highly dominated by 'informality.' Mayers (2011) maintains that Lusaka's informal settlements, such as Mtendere, mirror the economic exclusion of Native Zambians during the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods. The informal economy and informal settlements play a significant and parallel role to the formal sector in Lusaka, but both have still remained underdeveloped and largely ignored by the Zambian Government.

5. Methodology

The data for this study was collected in the Mtendere compound in Lusaka, Zambia, over one year period from February 2016 to January 2017. The data collection was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods in three phases, with the first phase collecting quantitative data (February to March 2016) and the second (November 2016) and the third phases (January 2017) collecting qualitative data, in order to answer all four research questions set out in Section 3.2.

In the first phase (February to March 2016), the research team first canvassed the settlement on foot to seek out preschools by asking inhabitants where such preschools were located, in order to understand the numbers and the types of the preschools that are available in the setting. Canvassing and relying on local information were assessed as the most effective option for gathering data as there was no central listing of preschools available at either the municipal office or the MoGE. As Table 1 shows, a total of 65 preschools were identified. Of all 65 preschools identified, 61 were private, 3 were community based, and one was public. This means that private preschools[6] accounted for more than 90 % of all preschools operating in Mtendere.

After 65 preschools were identified in the setting, the preschool survey was administered in each of these preschools to learn more about the their ownership, the aims and the year of establishment, sources of funding, fees and other charges, socio-economic status and the age of the pupils enrolled, the number of qualified teachers with their corresponding salaries, and the relationship with the government (i.e., registration, recognition, monitoring and evaluation, and financial and pedagogical support). The data gathered through the survey is presented in Tables 1, 3, 4, 5 in Section 6.1. The preschool survey was carried out by the authors with the aid of local research assistants, in the forms of structured interviews with the managers and the teachers of the 65 peschools identified. Local research assistants also provided language support (translation) for the structured interviews.

The preschool survey was followed by the in-depth qualitative data comprised of interviews with key stakeholders as well as observations of selected preschools collected in two phases in November 2016 and January 2017. We made limited ethnographic observations of school facilities and observed several pre-school classes in session. We sought permission for observation of school facilities and lessons from key informants, that is, the school principals and teachers. We created a list of features that we had deemed relevant for observation in light of our research questions; this list included details of school facilities (classroom structure, availability of teaching and learning materials including toys and books), availability of a school yard, the school's advertisement strategy (such as billboard and paintings on the wall) and pedagogical strategies adopted by teachers. The majority of the findings reported in Sections 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 come from the data obtained during these second and third phases of data collection.

For the qualitative portion of the data collection, the central and the most densely populated section of the geographic area of Mtendere was selected, where 12 preschools of all three different institutional types were located. As Table 2 shows, these 12 preschools include one government preschool (the only government preschool in the entire settlement), one community preschool, and ten private preschools (all listed with pseudonyms). We chose this location for our qualitative study as it was expected that parents in this location would be exposed to multiple options (government, community and private) when choosing a preschool for their children. The selection of this location would also allow us to gain insight into the operation of the preschool market as they would more likely respond to market pressures.

Semi-structured interviews with parents were conducted using guiding questions, in order to explore (a) the benefits parents attached to ECCE (research question 2); (b) the parents' preferred and actual preschool choice among different institutional types (i.e., public, private, and community) (research question 3); and (c) the factors that determine parents' preferred and actual preschool choice (research question 4). In total, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 parents. Out of 23 parents, 21 of them had their children enrolled in one of the sample 12 preschools (2 in public, 17 in private, and 2 in community) while the remaining 2 parents did not have children enrolled in any preschool during the study even though they had children aged 3–6 at the time of our visit. The parents and guardians interviewed were identified through a combination of preschool visits and household visits. All parental interviews were conducted individually, either at the preschool or at their houses, depending on the preference of interviewees. Interviews with parents were conducted in *chinyanja*—lingua franca in Lusaka—which was translated directly by the third author of this paper. The interviews were recorded only with participant' permission.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the school managers and the teachers from the 12 identified preschools, to gain deeper insight into the socio-economic status of the pupils they cater to, their marketing and educational strategies, the relationships with the MoGE, and the challenges they face. During preschool visits for interviews, we were given permission to observe classes in session and to make notes on the physical setting of the classrooms and the learning materials available. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews with school managers and teachers were triangulated with the quantitative data obtained from preschool survey during the phase one, to corroborate the findings and ensure trustworthiness of the results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In-depth interviews were also conducted with

Table 1
Preschools in Mtendere by Institution Type.

School Type	# Schools
Private	61
Public	1
Community	3
Total	65

Source: Authors.

[6] Our private and community sample ECCE institutions used various terms to describe themselves, such as kindergarten, daycare, preschool, etc., at their discretion, without any clearly defined rules. Meanwhile, the Education Act revised in 2011 defines preschool as an ECCE institution offering childhood care, development, without specifying particular age range (Mayers, 2011). Thus, these institutions are all called preschools in this study.

Table 2
Key Characteristics of preschools in sample, as of 2016/2017.

Preschool name	Fee/ Term (in Kwacha)	Year Est.	Preschool Type	Number of pupils enrolled in the preschool section	Pupils's ages in the preschool section/ Grades Offered at affiliated primary and secondary schools	Teacher Qualification* (%) *	Teacher Salary in Kwacha (USD)**
1. LCC preschool	150	1986	Public	74	3–6 yrs	100.0	2700–4000 (279.7–414.5)
2. Community	150	2004	Comm.	50	2–6 yrs & G1–2	0	500 (51.8)
3. Home	90	2006	Private	48	4–6 yrs (mix age class) & G1–9	100.0	280–300 (29.0–31.0)
4. Hope	420(middle, reception class) 450 (baby class)	2015	Private	107	3–6 yrs & G1–2	50.0	800 (82.9)
5. Christian Academy	325	2001	Private	151	0–6 yrs & G1–7	66.6	1300–1600 (134.7–165.8)
6. Kumashi	450	2012	Private	17	2–5 yrs	100.0	600 (62.1)
7. Bright	540	2007	Private	82	2–6 yrs & G1–7	100.0	900–1300 (93.2–134.7)
8. Eden	600	2007	Private	38	2–5 yrs & G1–7	100.0	500–1500 (51.8–155.4)
9. Victory	495	2002	Private	62	1–6 yrs & G1–12	100.0	1500–1600 (155.4–165.8)
10. Town	350	2008	Private	74	2–6 yrs & G1–9	100.0	1100 (113.9)
11. Carol	450	2016	Private	7	2–6 yrs	66.6	800–1200 (82.9–124.3)
12. Discover	450	2011	Private	25	2–6 yrs	100.0	700 (72.5)

Source: Authors.
Note: All private preschool names are pseudonyms.
*This figure represents the percentage of teachers who hold either a preschool teacher's certificate, diploma, or a Bachler degree in early childhood education (ECE). Although in 2013 the Zambian government prescribed that the minimum qualification for preschool teachers is a diploma or a bachelor's degree, at the time of the fieldwork (2016–2017) many teachers held the view that the policy had not yet taken effect and that both certificate and diplomas were accepted as qualification for preschool teachers.
** Exchange rate ($1USD = 9.65 Kwacha) for November 2016 is used to reflect date of data collection.

government officials including: the MoGE directorate of ECCE, officers of Lusaka City Council, and the officer in charge of ECCE in the UNICEF office. These interviews offered a more complete understanding of the government policies in place that directly affect ECCE in Zamia and Lusaka.

For the analysis of the qualitative data, we carefully searched for themes and sub themes related to the benefits parents associate with preschools as well as what specifically influences parental preference and decision making. The qualitative data obtained was coded and analyzed, and the data from each preschool case was analyzed in relation to the characteristics of its specific context to understand how parents and guardians make decisions about whether to send their children to preschool and which preschool to select. Additionally, we considered and analyzed how different preschools respond to such parental actions. Then, once the analysis of each case was complete, cross-case analysis was conducted in order to explore coherence and divergence in the findings.

The codes used to analyze the data were developed from the key patterns and themes that emerged during the readings of transcripts and analysis of field notes as well as the findings and concepts that were embedded in the literature review. The themes identified include: aspiration, benefits, academic readiness, English medium, national grade 7 examination, transition to secondary school, formal employment, child behavior, child protection, childcare, urban cosmopolitanism, modernity, preferred and actual preschool choice, preschool quality, poverty, proximity, vulnerability, informality, disability, and perceptions of public education.

6. Findings

The findings section of this paper will begin by addressing the first research question: what preschool options are available in an urban informal settlement in Zambia? It will then examine the findings for the second, third and fourth research questions, i.e., the benefits parents attached to ECCE (research question 2); the parents' preferred and actual preschool choice among different institution type (i.e., public, private, and community) (research question 3); and the factors that determine parents' both preferred and actual preschool choice (research question 4). Throughout, attention is given to the political, socio-economic and cultural forces specific to the urban unplanned settlement that influence the local meanings attached to ECCE and preschool choice.

6.1. Public and private preschool options in Mtendere

As shown in Table 1 and briefly discussed in the Section 5, this study identified 65 preschools that offered some form of ECCE services for young children in Mtendere. An overwhelming majority of these preschools, 61 of 65 institutions, self-identified as private preschools. Alarmingly, there was only one institution that was identified as a public preschool in the 100,000-person informal settlement. This public preschool was established in 1986 by MLGH and is run by the Lusaka City Council (LCC). While the MoGE announced a plan to attach pre-primary classes called ECE centers (same as preschools) to every public primary school, as of the time of this paper's writing the MoGE's goal has not been met. Furthermore, the public primary schools in the settlement are currently suffering from a severe shortage of classrooms leaving zero available rooms for ECE classes. This indicates that the MoGE policy is not close to being implemented and may simply be unattainable at this time. As can be seen in Table 3, private preschools have not followed the same trajectory as public preschool and have grown tremendously since the mid-2000s in order to fill the increasing demands for ECCE.

The Education Act of Zambia (Republic of Zambia, 2011) defines private schools (including preschools) as the educational institutions

Table 3
Evolution of the Number of Preschools by Institution Type.

Year Established	# Private (%)	Public	Community	Total (%)
< 2000	3 (5 %)	1	0	4 (6.0 %)
2000–2004	5 (8 %)	0	1	6 (9.2 %)
2005–2009	16 (26 %)	0	1	17 (26.00 %)
2010–2016	36 (59 %)	0	1	37 (57.0 %)
Unknown	1 (1.6 %)	0	0	1 (1.6 %)
Totals	61 (100 %)	1	3	65 (100.0 %)

Source: Authors.

that are established and managed by a private entity. Conversely, community (pre)schools are the institutions that are established and managed by school committees comprised of parents, local communities, and teachers. Three institutions self-reported as community preschools and included 'community' in their institution names. However, two out of three community preschools also identified that they were established and run by individuals rather than a school committee. Considering this information, differentiating private and community preschools is difficult as there is currently no uniform method of identifying which preschools are private versus community based.

Table 4 provides information on the fees charged by private, community, and government preschools on a per term basis[7]. As Table 4 shows, private preschools on average charge 2.5 times as much as the government preschool.

The definition of 'low-fee' are contentious and context specific and thus cannot be defined universally (Srivastava, 2013; Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo, 2016). While acknowledging the contentiousness of the definition of 'low-fee,' it is reasonable to claim that the private schools identified in this study can be characterized as 'low-fee,' distinguished from the conventional elite private schools for two reasons. Firstly, the average fees that the private schools charge in our sample are substantially lower than those paid at elite private schools in Lusaka, which is considered important characteristics of LFPS by scholars (Srivastava, 2013; Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo, 2016). To give an indication of the discrepancy between what preschools in this study charge and what elite private schools outside of informal settlements in Lusaka charge, consider that the average term fee charged by the private schools in our sample is K380 (USD 39), while Mulenga and Daka (2018, p.73) report that private schools in high-cost areas of Lusaka charge minimum of K 2000 (USD 174) or more.[8]

Secondly, private preschools identified in this study mostly focus on serving economically and socially disadvantaged groups in the informal settlement - another important characteristics of LFPS that distinguish

Table 4
Preschool-Reported Term Fee Level by Institution Type.

School type	Number of schools	Mean Kwacha (USD)	Min Kwacha (USD)	Max Kwacha (USD)
Private	61	K380 ($39.3)	K75 ($7.7)	K1500 ($155.4)
Public	1	K150 ($15.5)	K150 ($15.5)	K150 ($15.5)
Community	3	K225 ($23.3)	K105 (10.8)	K450 ($46.6)

Source: Authors.
Notes: (1) Exchange rate used ($1USD = 9.65 Kwacha) for November 2016, to reflect date of data collection; (2) school terms are four months in length.

[7] There are three terms per year (term 1: January-April; term 2: May-August; term 3: September-December). Private preschools on average charge 2.5 times as much as the government preschool.

[8] It is however also important to note that fee levels vary among private preschools in our sample ranging from K75 (USD 7.7) to K1500 (USD155.4) per term (Table 4), suggesting the growing inequity within the setting.

Table 5
Details of Ownership among the Private and Community Preschools.

Community Schools	**# Schools**
Church & Community	1
Community Based Organization (CBO)	1
CBO & Individual	1
Private Schools	
Individual	57
Religious organization	4
Total	64

Source: Authors.

them from the elite schools (Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo, 2016; Srivastava, 2013). When asked about the socio-economic status of the pupils enrolled in their preschools in our survey, over 90 % (55 out of 61) of private preschools reported that they serve low-income families. The remaining les than 10 % (5 out of 61) reported that they primarily cater to lower-middle and middle-class children. Furthermore, when asked about the purpose of establishment (i.e., profit making, provision of care and service, etc.), more than half of private preschools (39 preschools) reported that it was to "offer children…care and early education opportunities," while only eight preschools reported that their main purpose of establishment was "profit making." The other nine institutions reported that their objective was a combination of both.

Private preschools in our sample have been primarily established by individuals (57 preschools), followed by religious organizations (four preschools). Interestingly, the preschool survey reveals that more than half of these private preschools (33 out of 61) were founded by former and/or current government school teachers - either primary or secondary - , which may mean there is some level of brain drain occurring in public education sector.

The total number of private preschools will likely change in upcoming years as new centers open and close based on ECCE demand. The majority of private preschools (69 %) in our study had affiliated private primary schools and in some cases junior and senior secondary schools, while the rest of the preschools are stand alone, with only pre-primary sections.

6.2. *Parents' strong expectation for ECCE in an informal settlement in Zambia*

The households interviewed during this study nearly all expressed a strong desire to provide their children with education prior to entering primary school. Strong parental interest regarding ECCE likely has served as a compelling market signal to entrepreneurs that additional ECCE institutions are needed. The following sections will discuss several key reasons parents have strong feelings about ECCE.

6.2.1. *Ensuring readiness for the formal schooling associated with future opportunities and modernity*

The most frequently cited reason for the high demand for preschooling was the perceived preparation of children for primary schools. ECCE is predominantly seen by local parents as an essential step to prepare young children academically before entering primary school. Specifically, most households expect ECCE will prepare their children for primary school academics through developing English language skills, acquiring basic knowledge, fostering appropriate attitudes for formal education, and establishing a norm of going to school. For example, one mother noted: "One of the benefits is that their child will be prepared to start grade 1, and she knows why she goes to school." Another mother explained: "Children can learn basic things earlier and be smart as well as be sharp at (primary) school." Other researchers have found a similar tendency in alternative contexts where parents viewed ECCE primarily as a means to better prepare their children for formal schooling (Alcott et al., 2018; Kabay et al., 2017; Kholowa and Rose, 2007; Sriprakash et al., 2020).

The evidence in this study further reveals that households viewed ECCE not only as a good opportunity for academic preparedness, but also as an 'indispensable' investment to prevent their children from failing to complete or succeed in primary school. Specifically, parents feared that their children would fail at the national examinations taken at the end of grade 7 and grade 9. Passing these examinations is required to proceed to junior (grades 8–9) and upper secondary (grades 10–12) school. The following comment by one mother is illustrative of how parents connect pre-primary education with junior and secondary school success: "I want her to be here (preschool) first before she starts grade 1, as I fear that she would lag behind (at primary school) and fail to pass the grade 7 examination."

In Zambia, despite the government's pronouncement of free and compulsory basic (primary and junior secondary) education (grades 1–9) in 2002, the grade 7 examination continues to determine entry into lower secondary schools (grades 8–9) at the time of the fieldwork of this study.[9] This is partly due to the fact that there are not enough secondary schools in Zambia to accommodate the growing number of primary school graduates. The inadequate number of secondary schools can largely be contributed to the recent neoliberal policies in Zambia which have restricted public expenditures on services including schooling.[10]

High competition and the limited chance of entering secondary schools have not deterred the majority of parents in Mtendere from expressing a strong aspiration for their children to attend secondary schools and possibly attend college. Many parents reiterated their expectation that such educational attainment would enable their children to secure formal sector jobs with regular payment and some form of social benefits. One mother's comment is illustrative: "I want all my children to finish secondary school and go to college, then start working in future. Because I know that their future would be bright." Another mother noted: "the benefits (of preschools) are that their future will be good if they get educated and keep themselves, just preparing for their futures so that they can find stable jobs." Similar views were unanimously expressed by parents and guardians interviewed. Institutionalized ECCE such as preschools are typically seen as the important foundation to prepare children to succeed formal education up to college level so as to increase the chances of obtaining a stable employment.

6.2.2. *Transforming a child into a 'modern' citizen with good moral, behavior and language*

The households interviewed during this study also stressed that sending their children to preschools offered unique social interaction. For example, one parent commented: "If children spend more time in preschool they learn good behavior and language. Because at home, the children, like mine, they follow what others are doing and saying. So I don't want my children to learn any bad behavior from the compound." Similarly, another parent expressed her concern about leaving her child at home rather than sending them to preschool citing negative 'group influence' of other children. A comparable comment was made by a separate parent saying she preferred her daughter to "mingle with their friends in preschools" rather than stay at home. Thus, for families, enrolment in preschools is seen as the first step for their children to 'obtain' what they believe to be 'modern' and 'civilized' behavior, differentiating themselves from those who are not '(pre)schooled,' and thus 'pre-modern'.

Children in the compounds are often viewed as 'troublesome' and 'uncivilized' due to perceptions of their use of bad language and disobedience to their parents or elders. Unfortunately, due to the long-term neglect of the informal settlements, these areas have become places for young people to engage in drug use, drinking, and criminal activities (Hansen, 2005). It has also become common for youth to seek out so called 'anti-social' means of earning money, including stealing, selling drugs, and prostitution (Mulenga, 2003, p. 10). Under such situations, families have increasingly viewed institutionalized ECCE such as preschools as crucial to keeping their children away from the exposure to and temptations of urban underground life.

Furthermore, several parents and owners of schools have reported that parents often feel at ease if the school is affiliated with a church or if the school name contains some Christian connotation. For example, one private preschool owner said: "Parents are willing to leave their children to us as we are affiliated with a church and I am a priest there." Thus, there seems to be an expectation that Christian schools will offer a good moral education to their children as compared to secular schools. Indeed, there are several private and community preschools that are affiliated to churches. Zambia is officially categorized as a 'Christian Nation', and Churches play a central role in guiding moral development in Zambia.

Furthermore, households spoke about the important role institutionalized ECCE plays in giving young children necessary life skills such as personal hygiene to protect themselves from hazardous environments. This is highly valuable in Mtendere because a lack of essential infrastructure and services, such as clean water and sewage facilities, has made residents vulnerable to disease and other health issues (Mulenga, 2003). Residents have largely relied on shallow water wells and pit-latrines for their water supply and human waste is often disposed of in open bushes which has created significant amounts of pollution and frequent cholera outbreaks (Mulenga, 2003).

6.2.3. *Need for institutional childcare due to the increased female engagement in informal sector*

The interviews with parents suggest that mothers are progressively participating in the informal sector either through self-employment such as running in small retail shops, hair salons, etc. or providing service duties. Mothers in this study frequently claimed their employment was necessary either to compensate for the loss of their husbands' income or to support their family as a single parent. Hansen (2005) maintains that through the economic deterioration of the mid-2000s, women's small-scale work efforts made it possible for their households to survive.

Thus, another reason for the increasing demand for institutionalized ECCE such as preschools expressed by parents, particularly mothers, was the need for institutional childcare while they are working. For example, one mother reports: "The benefits (of preschools) are that some parents are working and others do business so when you take a child to preschool you work with a free mind knowing that my child is been taken care of. ".

Furthermore, mothers said that they now prefer their children be looked after by preschool teachers rather than by a babysitter or maid, often citing safety concerns, as in, "When the child is brought here, they are safe. Rather than you give a maid at home, you are not even sure of what is happening." Many parents interviewed also perceived preschool as a cheaper option for childcare.

Thus, it can be reasoned that the necessity for women to contribute to the household income has created a demand for institutional ECCE. Furthermore, the cost of childcare has contributed to a need for a cheaper alternative.

[9] Around 2018, the government briefly introduced the policy of automatic progression of grade 7 learners to grade 8, with an aim to adhere to the principle of universal basic education of 9 years. However, the government announced in 2022 that it would abolish the automatic progression policy and re-introduce the cut-off points at the grade 7 examination, meaning that those who do not meet the cut-off points will not be admitted to the lower secondary school (grade 8-9). This change was made in order to ensure that only those students with the minimum necessary skills advance to the next level.

[10] Net primary enrolment rates have been remarkably high in Zambia, though they have declined some recently (88.1 % in 2012 and 83.2 % in 2018, World Bank, 2018); however, net enrolment rates in secondary school (grades 8-12) remain low at 25.4 as of 2016 (MoGE, 2016).

6.3. Households' preschool choice: de facto and preferred choice of private preschools

6.3.1. De facto choice of private preschools due to the inadequacy of government options in the vicinity

Many parents reported that they chose private preschools in order to satisfy their demand for ECCE, even though these preschools charge higher fees than public preschools. As noted earlier, there is only one public preschool existing in the entire Mtendere settlement (100,000 inhabitants); it can hardly meet parental demands for ECCE, which has grown exponentially in recent years. Thus, many parents have no other option but choosing private preschools if they want to send their children to preschools at all (Oketch et al., 2010a; Heyneman and Stern, 2014).

It has been well reported that the proximity of the home to the school and the safety of their children are two determining factors for parents choosing a primary school (Day Ashley et al., 2014; Mousumi and Kusakabe, 2016; Ohba, 2013; Srivastava, 2008). Similarly, the findings in this study suggest that safety and distance are substantial priorities for the parents of children of pre-primary age. For example, one mother explained the reason why she chose a private preschool for her child as: "I chose this (pre)school because of security reasons. It is near home so child is safe." Similarly, another mother commented, "(I chose this school) because the school is near, only 2 min' walk from home." Many parents reported that they normally escort their children to the preschools of their choice on foot before they go to work, and thus prefer the commuting time to be minimal.

Additionally, some parents felt it unsafe sending their children to the public preschool, which is located adjacent to the huge Mtendere market where vegetables and other goods are sold. Interviews with parents and the preschool owners suggest that those households that send their children to the government preschool typically work at the Mtendere market themselves.

From the above discussion, one might argue that many parents in Mtendere merely chose private preschool simply because they considered that as the only option available to them and therefore did not consider the difference in the institution type (e.g., public or private). However, when we asked parents which they 'would' choose (public or private preschools) provided that they had both private and public options available in the vicinity, 20 out of 23 parents or guardians reported that they preferred private preschools. The reasons provided by parents for their relative preference for private preschools over public counterparts are explained in the following Sections (6.3.2 and 6.3.3).

6.3.2. The perceived low quality of government schools (preschools and primary schools) and the 'norm of paying' for quality education

In addition to an absence of government preschool in the vicinity of families, parents also identified the perceived quality of private preschools as a determinant when choosing a preschool. The majority of households interviewed reported that they distrusted the quality of government preschools, partly because of the high teacher-pupil ratio and the insufficient attention paid to each child, and partly due to the high level of absenteeism of teachers. Conversely, a low teacher-pupil ratio at private preschools is often seen as the primary factor that allows students to have more interaction with teachers. This is reflected in one parent's comment:

"A (private) preschool—they help very much in terms of reading, but at a government preschool, children are so many, it's not easy for teachers to pay attention to all the children and teach each one to read."

Although there is clearly a general belief that private preschools have low teacher-pupil ratios, our preschool surveys suggest that the government preschool actually had lower teacher-pupil ratios compared to private preschools in the study. During the in-person observations of classrooms and facilities of both private and public preschools, it seemed as though the government preschool classrooms were much more spacious and had larger facilities compared to private counterparts. Private preschools were mostly operating in small rented premises with children squeezing into small classrooms with no additional facilities such as playgrounds.

The sizable gap between household perceptions and the reality of government preschools is likely the result of an extrapolation from experiences with government primary schools. Parents often reported public primary schools to be overcrowded due to a dramatic rise in gross enrolment rate resulted from fee abolition policy (free primary education policy) introduced in 2002.[11] The overcrowded classrooms in government primary schools are primarily a result of a lack of funding for school facilities and qualified teachers associated with free and compulsory basic education policies (UNESCO, 2016). The problems are exacerbated by the unmanageable national pupil teacher ratio of 48:1, ranking Zambia among the highest in SSA.

It has been well reported that the dissatisfaction with the quality of government primary schools is one of the determining factors for parental choice for LFPS (e.g., Srivastava, 2008). This study's findings additionally revealed that households' experiences with low-quality government primary schools has had a spill-over effect on their perception about the quality of government preschools. Indeed, the perception that the quality of public services in general is low, or second-class, compared to the fee-paying private services, continues to be a prevailing sentiment. It is assumed in Zambia that unless you pay you will not receive quality service. Parents tend to feel that educational success or failure is, to a large extent, an individual responsibility, rather than a state responsibility, and will likely depend on how much is personally invested into education during early years. In other words, parents generally believe that they can receive high quality education in private preschools simply because they are paying for it. Fee-paying private preschools are seen as a necessary investment by many parents with the alternative being educational failure for their children.

Interestingly, it should be noted that many households interviewed wished to continue to send their children to private primary schools up to grade 7 but, following grade 8, they had no problem sending their children to government junior secondary schools. One parent described: "(After grade 8), my son can go to a government school in that way we could save money. (…) Because in government (secondary) school the fees are much cheaper unlike in private school where the fees are expensive." Similar views were expressed by many other parents. Parents typically mentioned that the quality of government schools at the junior and senior secondary levels are acceptable or, in some cases, even better than their private counterparts, unlike at the pre-primary and primary levels. Thus, they see little problem in sending their children to government junior secondary schools after completing primary education. Although it is likely that their judgement about government secondary schools being of reasonable or good quality compared to their private counterparts derives from the fact that secondary schools are not free, and thus not been overcrowded, this is a point that should be further explored by future research.

Thus, poor households attempt to make strategic compromises in their investment strategies across different educational levels based on their personal judgement about the quality of private versus government schools, so as to maximize their children's chances at educational and future success while limiting cost.

6.3.3. Academic oriented curriculum with English as a medium of instruction behind the preferred choice for private preschools

Parents also expressed their relative preference for private preschools because they believed these institutions offered a more 'serious'

[11] In Zambia, free primary education policy introduced in 2002 led to the dramatic rise of the pupils in schools, which forced many schools to operate in double or triple shift system, to reduce the overcrowding class size. In a double-shift system, the first group of pupils attends school from early morning until mid-day, and the second group usually attends from mid-day to late afternoon.

academic curriculum in English. This diverts from the government's current curriculum which emphasizes more play- and mother-tongue based learning. Although the use of English as a medium of instruction is often viewed positively by parents, current government policies prescribe that initial pre-literacy skills at ECCE should be taught in whatever language the child speaks at home. It is only following the mastery of the child's primary language that schools should be encouraged to introduce a second language.

As a response to parents' preferences, all of the classes observed in private preschools, including the baby class, mimicked the instruction style of primary schools in Zambia with teachers standing in the front of the classroom delivering a lesson. In some schools, frequent tests were given to students and only a fraction of the time was used for singing or play-based education. During our classroom observations, there were no storybooks or toys present at most schools, barring a few at the highest fee school. The reception class, which targets 5–6-year-olds had the strongest focus on academic/English skills.

The households interviewed overwhelmingly reported that learning English was one of the important rationales for preferring to send their children to private preschool. As one mother noted: "They are able to learn things quickly. They are able to read and write and speak English. They are jacked up." This preference for English-medium education has also been documented by researchers as a common reason parents choose private schools and LFPS in particular in the in the Global South (for example, Mousumi and Kusakabe, 2016; Härma, 2011; Singh and Sarkar, 2012).

For many parents in the urban slums of Zambia, English competence is seen both as a characteristic of 'modern' elites and a decisive skill in the formal sector (Ferguson, 1999), one that gives them a better chance at securing consistent income in the formal sector. Fluency in English from an early age also seems to give parents a sense of pride by presenting the image of 'modernity' and urban cosmopolitanism in their family, as in, "The other thing is that it just feels good to see your child speak English as young as they are at least you see that the children are learning something."

In addition, many parents who were interviewed said they believed that teaching their children English at an early stage would enhance their academic success once they started primary school. They further explained that this would particularly assist their children in passing the grade 7 examination needed to proceed to junior secondary school as discussed earlier. In Zambia, although it is stipulated that seven local languages should be used as medium of instruction from ECE to grade 4, English is still the official medium of instruction from grade 5 throughout tertiary education. Accordingly, the grade 7 examination is administered in English with one of the seven local languages included as a subject to be tested.

In contrast to what parents expected, however, Mwanza- Kabaghe et al. (2015) alert that the basic reading and writing skills of children with a preschool background at the start of first grade in primary schools in Zambia were not better than those of other students. In some cases, the fact of having attended preschool was associated with lower reading and writing abilities by the end of first grade. They then cited the predominant use of English in preschools rather than the child's home language as a possible explanation for the negative effects. More research is needed to accumulate evidence of the effect of using English as a medium of instruction at the pre-primary level on children's later education performances.

Parents also reported that they preferred private preschools because they believed having a similar teaching style, medium of instruction, and learning environment would make their children's transition to an, often affiliated, private primary school much easier. In spite of Zambia's policy to use the local language as the medium of instruction up until grade 4 of primary school, many private primary schools in the setting do not follow the government's policy and, rather, use English as the medium of instruction beginning at grade 1. The households interviewed expressed a desire that, once their children finished ECCE at a private preschool, they would then proceed to the private primary schools, partly because the public primary schools are extremely limited in number (only four in the entire Mtendere), and partly because they believed that private primary schools are of better quality than those of the government counterparts. Both pre and primary private schools are seen as a 'serious place' for obtaining academic knowledge in English and are expected to offer a different type of learning compared to what may take place at home or in the community. As such, parents prefer preschools to be primary-school-like and to provide their children with 'readiness' for what they perceive as the 'modern' formal schooling system that is characterized by structured learning time with the medium of instruction being English.

It was also discovered that parents did not seem to care about the spacious playground that the government preschool had, the types of qualifications held by teachers, or the availability of in-service training opportunities for teachers. Rather, the progressive play-based curriculum offered in the government preschool was rejected by some, as illustrated by one parent whose child is enrolled in private preschool: "I don't want to bring my children to government preschool because they are too playful. ".

Alcott et al. (2018) report that in India parents hardly distinguish between the age-appropriate cognitive needs of their children during preschool and primary school. While it is debatable whether 'age appropriate' cognitive needs for children should be regarded as universal across different cultures, the households interviewed in this study did not seem to clearly distinguish between cognitive needs for preprimary and primary school age children. Rather, as Kabay et al. (2017) point out in their study on urban Ghana, parents in Mtendere appear to intuitively believe that an early start to learning academics, including English and pre-mathematics, will enhance their children's success in primary schooling. They seem to believe that earlier is better—and many even send their children from the age of 1.5 years old to academic-oriented private preschools.[12] This finding should be further researched in the future.

In contrast to private preschools, the public preschool in the compound strives to offer education that focuses relatively more on learning through play as the national ECCDE curriculum stipulates. Although one should refrain from making a binary opposition (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2011; Takayama, 2008), at the time of our visit, teachers appeared to be trying more action-oriented approaches and group work in the classrooms. For example, teachers would ask children to collect stones from the school yard to discuss the concept of numbers in a group and fill in daily lesson plans and daily assessment sheets for each child. In doing this, teachers attempted to offer individualized learning and developmental portfolios from multiple perspectives as is proposed in the state curriculum. Again, this type of learning strategy in line with the government ECE curriculum was not observed in private preschools. When asked about the medium of instruction, teachers in the public preschool said that they mostly use chinyanja–the lingua franca of Lusaka—in accordance with the government curriculum.

Additionally, all public preschool teachers have teaching certificates or diplomas recognized by the Zambia Preschools Association (ZPA). These teachers also have the opportunity to continually work on their skills and knowledge by participating in the refresher courses offered by the ZPA which includes further training on the government's play-focused curriculum. On the other hand, teachers in the private preschools in the study setting have either a certificate or a diploma from a private college which frequently lacks accreditation and additional in-service training opportunities. Indeed, MoGE officials have never visited these colleges for supervision/monitoring - thus allowing them to operate completely 'parallel' to the government system and its policies.

[12] However, research points to the negative side effects of this (Phillipson, 2008).

When asked if they were aware of the newly developed government syllabus for ECE which is play-based and mother-tongue based one, 9 out of 11 private preschool teachers interviewed reported that they were unaware of them.

6.3.4. Acquisition of good manners, learning outcomes, and the 'modern' appearance

When asked about what specifically they looked for when choosing a private preschool, households identified a range of issues that contributed to their decision. Some households valued the safety and sanitation of school facilities, including the availability of fences and clean drinking water. For example, one parent described: "I look at the environment of the school in terms of cleanliness and safety, such as fences." Some others also mentioned good manners and physical appearance as the signs of the quality of school. One parent said, "I look at how pupils from a particular school look and behave," while another parent described: "We see how children are interacting with their peers at school. By so doing, we can tell that the schools offer good education."

Many others, however, and as Singh and Sarkar (2012) reported on India, have cited the "performance" of each school, evaluated by the academic ability of preschool children, as the most important factor. One mother noted: "We see from the report books … how the performance is, and when they come back home if they are able to say what they have learnt at school." Children's ability to write and speak in English appeared to be particularly crucial. As one parent described: "I am very satisfied because I have seen a change. The child is now able to spell her name, she can spell some words and even write them on her own."

Reading story books, play, and singing were often less valued than writing practice. Additionally, there were clear signs of parental dissatisfaction when emphasis was placed on reading, play, or singing which results in slower development of writing skills. This sometimes led to parents considering a change of preschool for their children:

> "I saw that my child was not able to write anything or hold a pencil. There was nothing that was happening to my child (when he was at the previous school), so I thought of bringing him to this school. Because I saw my child was growing but he could not write and I became worried because next year he was going to be 7 years old and start grade 1 despite him being there for a long time, because when he started when he was 2 years and 8 months but till 6 years he could not hold a pencil, but just coloring, so I was so concerned."

Similarly, another parent noted: "Our first child was at Zack but her results were not good. Reading the singing was good but writing was bad, so we thought of moving her from there."

Moreover, the households tended to judge preschool quality by enrollment, with the rationale that more popular preschools must offer a better education, as in, "I look at how many pupils the school has, the more the children, then that school is doing well in terms of teaching." Some households also saw long hours of schooling and frequent homework as a sign of a serious school and, in turn, a high-quality education. One parent described: "If children spend more time in school they learn good behavior and language." Such parental preferences have critically shaped the curriculums of private preschools, which have largely become highly academic, delivered in English, and consisting of long hours (e.g., 9 am–4 pm). Several preschool directors mentioned that their focus is primarily on academics and English proficiency by saying they are "encouraging kids to speak English throughout", "telling children to speak English at home too", and "giving children regular tests and homework."

It should also be noted that some parents reported that they judged the quality of a particular preschool based on the pass rate of grade 7 examination at the affiliated private primary school. This has been confirmed in school choice literature on the Global South, which reports pupil's test scores as an important measurement used by parents to determine the quality of primary and secondary schools (e.g., Goyal and Pandey, 2009).

It is also important to mention that for some parents, the design of the preschool 'uniform' and the overall aesthetic of the preschool were factors when assessing preschool quality. In the words of one parent:" I just love that (pre)school - the way it looks, their uniforms." The parental value placed on the visual appearance of schools has in turn appeared to have certain influence on the market strategy of some private preschools. For example, when talking about his preschools' marketing strategy, one preschool director said: "We use flyers to distribute door to door, clean the (pre)school and make it look attractive, and put up a banner."

6.4. Proximity, affordability and disability as the constraints for parents' actual preschool choice

Although the discussion above explains how parents prefer to have their children attend 'good quality' preschools, in practice choices are shaped by the distance and affordability of a preschool. As literature widely reports (e.g., Tooley and Dixon, 2006), many private preschools in this study provided some concessions of fees to poorer children, such as fee waiver or fee reduction. Also, private preschools often allowed parents a grace period when they were not able to pay fees on time. Such flexible payment arrangements, together with promotional offers made by preschools, may create even more interest in private preschools among low socioeconomic status households. However, in some cases, parents had to withdraw children from preschools until they had enough money to pay the fees. For example, one grandmother who was the primary earner in a household that included young adults still in high school with a young child in preschool commented: "The kids stay at home till we are able to pay. Some time we talk to the (pre)school authorities and we pay in installment."

Also, many parents who would be considered in low socio-economic standing reported that they had to choose a preschool that offered some kind of "fee promotion campaign." In doing this, the burden of paying for preschool is eased by being charged lower fees or by having the fees for the first several months waived. The interviews with the owners of preschools and households indicate that it is common for newly opened preschools to offer such promotions. These promotions appear to boost the demand for private preschools in even the most economically constrained households. In fact, several parents interviewed reported that they decided to send their children to the preschool of their choice because of the fee waiving promotion. For example, one parent reported: "Well, we brought our children here because the (pre)school was running a promotion of free education for the first two months."

However, a sudden rise in fees by a preschool, without any consultation of the households, was also common. These changes often left many households with no other choice but switching to a preschool with lower fees. For example, one mother described: "At first the child was at Holiness preschool and fees were also K120 (USD 12.4) per month till they hiked the fees to K560 (USD 58.0) per time which made it difficult for me to continue so I decided to bring my child here." In some cases, poor parents had to remove their child from preschool completely due to fee increase by preschools, as this parent described: "My daughter is not going to any preschool after she stopped going to Kuma because the (pre)school increased the fees which I could not afford."

Moreover, the interviews reveled that many poor families in Mtendere are particularly susceptible to various negative life events such as death, sickness, injury, job loss, separation and divorce, and major theft. These household shocks immediately reduce an already limited income, due to the fact that many of these people work in the informal sector with no social security or savings. Such income disruptions undoubtedly jeopardize a family's ability to earn enough money to send their child to a preferred preschool. The following comment by a mother further illustrates this point:

"My daughter who is currently at grade 2 once went to Kuma preschool but stopped. She stopped after her father lost his job and there was no money to take her to preschool. We used to pay K400 (USD 41.4) plus stationary per term."

What adds to the precarity of the situation is the fact that roughly a third of household incomes are spent on nourishment, which makes these families vulnerable to food price volatility (USAID, 2017, p. 29). Unfortunately, food price volatility is only one obstacle among others discussed earlier (job loss, divorce, illness, etc).

Also, as with other studies of LFPS and school choice (Edwards et al., 2017; Verger et al., 2016), our interview data suggests that the private preschool are commonly reluctant to accept children with disabilities as a way of avoiding the additional costs associated with supporting these children. One preschool director confirmed this tendency by saying: "For kids with special needs, we refer them to institutions who provide special needs education." According to our school survey, only 16 % of private preschools reported having any students with special needs, while the only public preschool that operates in the setting reported that they enrolled two children with special needs.

7. Discussion

Education does not exist in isolation from broader socio-economic, cultural, and political forces (Bajaj, Carnoy, 2010, 1985; Ferguson, 1999, 2006). Hence, local meanings and realities concerning ECCE should be understood in specific cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts which critically shape the former (i.e., local meanings and realities concerning ECCE) and often operate in the larger world system. However, such perspectives are rarely considered in ECCE literature or in the literature on LFPS in the Global South. This has limited the scope of understanding of ECCE and LFPS in the Global South.

In this paper, in response to this gap in the literature, we explored the local meanings and expectations of ECCE and preschool choice based on the perspectives of parents and guardians in an urban informal settlement in Zambia. This was done while acknowledging the specific cultural, historical, and socio-economic circumstances of the local area and the region. Our qualitative data highlights urban poor parents' strong demand for institutionalized ECCE, with the overwhelming parental choice for private preschools being due to the inadequacy of public options. It also reveals parents' relative preference for private options, and the complex rationale behind such preference for private ECCE. Using a cultural political economy approach as an analytical framework, this study found that investing in private ECCE is viewed as an important household strategy to 'transform' children into 'modern' citizens in a limited options.

Several existing studies in Ghana, India, and Malawi suggest that parents expect ECCE to equip their children with readiness for formal schooling with a particular emphasis on English and pre-mathematics. Such findings are corroborated by Kholowa and Rose (2007) and Alcott et al. (2018). Furthermore, the present study reveals that parents in the urban informal settlement in Zambia viewed ECCE as necessary to their children's success academically in primary education and beyond. More specifically, these parents expected that ECCE and private preschools in particular could give their children a better chance of proceeding to and completing secondary school and obtaining a college degree–the ultimate outcome of the formal schooling for many participating parents.

A college degree, or at least a secondary school leaving certificate, is seen by many as the singular means to obtain a more stable job in the formal sector. For parents, success in formal education is perceived as the way to 'get out' of their informal settlements which are characterized by poverty, marginalization, stigma, lack of proper planning and public service, high risk of crime, and epidemic outbreaks resulting from years of neglect by the government (Hansen, 2005). This belief in a connection between education and upward social mobility may be directly linked to the prosperity seen during the economic boom of the immediate post-independence period, as observed by Ferguson (1999)—and as discussed at the outset of this paper.

Secondary school certificates, however, no longer guarantee such power and prosperity after the decline in formal sector opportunities resulted from financial crisis and the subsequent structural adjustment in the late 1980s (Bajaj, 2010). Furthermore, in present-day Zambia, there is a far greater number of secondary school graduates compared to the 1960 and 1970s (Bajaj, 2010).

Yet, parents in the urban informal settlements still actively seek out formal education, for which ECCE is increasingly viewed as the necessary foundation, with the expectation that it will ultimately give them or their children a 'modern' future by breaking away from what they perceive as the current 'pre-modern' and 'uncivilized' way of life in the urban informal settlement. The strong faith in the transformative power of formal education and ECCE as an essential part of it may likely have been further strengthened by the economic resurgence in the mid-2000s, which saw Zambia's position in the global economy strengthen and brought about the emergence of an urban middle class which had access to and participated in urban consumerism. However, one should be reminded that the country is still largely positioned on the periphery of the world order (Fraser and Larmer, 2010) due to the highly inequitable nature of economic globalization which often reinforces the global division of labor (Tikly, 2001). The residents of today's informal settlement may be aspiring to enjoy the fruits of 'modernity' in the age of globalization, characterized by evolving cultural and commercial opportunities, by achieving success in formal schooling and subsequently securing formal sector employment, just as the urban dwellers in the copper boom of 1960s and early 1970s expected (Ferguson, 1999).

Parents' continued belief in the power of formal education notwithstanding they are also deeply aware that the situation surrounding formal education is markedly different from that of the immediate-post independence period in two ways. First, unlike the post-independent period, primary education has become nearly universalized in today's Zambia thanks to the EFA movement and the subsequent free primary education policy. Secondly, parents feel that public primary schools no longer offer quality education like they once did. This belief stems primarily from overcrowded classrooms in public primary schools, which are partly the result of insufficient public investment during the current neoliberal regime.

With this situation, parents feel compelled to invest early in their children's education to help them become accustomed to 'modern formal schooling.' It was revealed that the belief among parents is that helping a child achieve this goal is an 'individual responsibility' rather than a responsibility of the state. This is expressed clearly by one parent, who said: "if you are to have quality education, you need to pay." Further to this end, the increasing preference for private preschools in the informal settlements seems to be partially due to the common affiliation of private preschools with private primary schools. This connection offers some promise to parents that their child would achieve success in formal schooling.

This study also demonstrates that parents expect ECCE to equip their children with skills beyond general school readiness, such as respectable behavior, language skills, and the knowledge of personal hygiene. All of these elements are believed to be essential components of the 'modern urban citizen,' and thus offer children a superior opportunity to be successful outside of the continually neglected informal settlements.

In Zambia, for the first two decades after independence, public schools were seen as the pathway to 'modernity' and is a means of gaining membership to a world society (Meyer et al., 1997). As a result of this sentiment, the Zambian government seized authority over education administration hoping to create a national education system (Ferguson, 1999; Bajaj, 2010). However, the perception of schooling generally as a sign of modernity has been replaced with the notion that private schooling (at least at ECCE and primary levels) is now the 'modern' way to achieve upward social mobility. This shift in parental

perception occurred partly due to the strong distrust of public primary schools which are not only in scarce in number in urban informal settlements but also often considered over-crowded, 'secondary class,' and underfunded institutions–the situations which were brought about by the free primary policy combined with limited public funding in education under the neoliberal policy framework.

Historically, both governments and parents around the world have tended to see public schools as the pathway to modernity (Meyer et al., 1997). In contrast, our study reveals that parents now see private schools this way, due to the inferior way public schools are perceived, at least at the lower levels of the public education system—a consequence of underfunding and disinvestment that has resulted from economic crisis and market-friendly macro-economic policies put forward by international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF. Consequently, the public education system, which was historically seen as a characteristic of modernity and being a modern nation, is changing, at least in terms of parental perceptions. Instead, as Rivzi, Lingard (2010) argue, the neoliberal mode of thinking has affected the collective social imaginary, which in turn affects how public services are perceived.

The growing demand for private ECCE in urban informal settlements has provided a strong market signal to local entrepreneurs who have rapidly developed the LFPS industry. In order to "connect with parental imaginaries and their aspirational objectives" (Angus, 2015, p. 402) at relatively low costs, the market has grown exponentially and, with it, the supply of schools including preschools. The results are early age private preschools offering an academic-oriented curriculum with English as the main medium of instruction. As was spoken about earlier, this is largely divergent from the government promoted play-based and mother-tongue focused curriculum. Frequent homework and tests, long hours, a structured schedule, and the persistent use of English throughout the preschool are widely accepted practices in LFP preschools. It is these aspects that parents have identified as the essential components of a 'modern school.' Furthermore, neat uniforms, western school names, and pictures of Disney characters on the preschool walls in many LFP preschools also seem to serve as a 'symbol of modernity,' which offers 'membership in the world society' (Ferguson, 1999, p. 236). That said, the relationship between parental demands and the marketizing strategies of LFP preschools are currently understudied and deserve future exploration.

In present day Zambia, one can see global consumerism penetrating every aspect of urban life as many multinational-owned shopping malls and cafes have sprung up throughout the country, and even within the informal settlements. Residents of the urban informal settlements may see this investment in LFP preschools as an important household strategy to eventually enjoy the fruits of global consumer capitalism, however illusionary it may be. Interestingly, many parents interviewed acknowledged that their children may not achieve this level of educational success or the desired life changes, even with their educational investment. Preparing for such a case, many of them retain their kinship to the rural home community as an important safety net. Poor parents may also see LFPS options as an important class strategy to distinguish themselves from the even less-disadvantaged population who could not afford access to LFPS (Bold et al., 2010, cited in Verger et al., 2016).

Overall, parents' relative preferred choice for preschool was for private preschools, most of which in the study setting (an urban informal settlement) are LFP ones. However, some households were unable to access such schooling at all due mostly to financial inability. Some families were able to enroll their students, but subsequently had to withdraw them due to rise fees or adverse life events common in the settlements. These issues raise serious equity concerns about who truly has access to LFPS.

8. Conclusion

LFP preschools have been expanding exponentially outside of government system of ECCE. The provision of academic-oriented curriculum with English as the main medium of instruction in these institutions is largely divergent not only from government's play-based and mother tongue-based curriculum, but also from the current global discourse of what counts as quality ECCE. The synthesis report by Zosh et al. (2017) cited in UNICEF's (2018) advocacy brief entitled "Learning through Play" concludes that a deep, conceptual understanding of abstract concepts requires that children are active and engaged through play activities rather than being exclusively instructed through rote learning. As far as the language of instruction at the pre-primary education is concerned, research has also shown that learning in one's mother tongue in infant years is better for effective learning (UNESCO, 2008; UNESCO, 2020).

The proponents of LFPS maintain that market-based competition improves the quality of education because parents, who are 'customers' of education services, are capable of making 'informed choices' and choosing the best school for their children, thereby putting pressure on schools to improve the education they offer (see, e.g., Tooley and Dixon, 2005). However, in light of the gap between local practices and international evidence, highlighted in the previous paragraph, one might argue that such an assumption (that parents are capable of judging the quality of schools effectively) may not be entirely correct and needs to be revisited.

The intention of this paper is, however, not to dismiss LFP preschools as a 'dystopia.' While the government's plan to establish a preschool section in all public primary schools appears promising, its feasibility is rather questionable given the already scarce and overcrowded nature of the public primary school system. Moreover, the role that LFP preschools play should not be underestimated when it comes to providing poor children with an environment that stimulates literacy, social skills, and morale as well as critical life skills needed to thrive in an informal settlement. In addition, these institutions play an important role in offering child-care services that are increasingly needed as more women enter the informal sector.

Ultimately, assessing the quality of ECCE is a highly complex task, and the simple binary logic of play-based versus academic-oriented curriculum should be carefully avoided (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2015). Such a binary comparison may be "too artificial to capture the subtle characteristics in the classroom" (Huang and Leung, 2004). Besides, any of the globally touted quality ECCE and desirable practices are based primarily on early childhood education practices and research results in North America and the United Kingdom (Moss, 2017). Therefore, uncritically considering them as universal standards and unilaterally assessing the quality of ECCE in Zambia may be problematic, as ECCE is essentially a social and cultural processes (Hayashi and Tobin, 2015; Nsamenang, 2006: Serpel, 2019).

What this paper wishes to argue, then, is that the government should recognize the role that LFP preschools play and provide additional support to these preschools while also making efforts to initiate a national dialogue about what should constitute quality ECCE in Zambia in its specific cultural, socio-economic and historical contexts. At the moment, LFP preschools operate completely parallel to the government ECCE system, without any monitoring or support by the government and without any interaction between these institutions and the government's curriculum unit.

Inside the government, officials in charge of ECCE in MoGE who were interviewed were unaware of the exponential growth of LFP preschool in Lusaka's compounds. Moreover, they refused to acknowledge that these LFP preschools need government support, saying that "they are merely commercial institutions, not those of education." The indifference of government officials to educational development in the compounds may reflect their view that these areas are uncivilized, problematic, and illegitimate ghettos not worthy of government support. The Zambian policy on ECCE that focuses on mother-tongue and play-based curriculum was formulated by a small group of elites with the support of international organizations such as UNICEF. The notion of 'modernity' imagined by elite government officials is thus shaped by

'global discourse' which may be of little relevance to the 'modernity' imagined and construed by the 'urban masses' in the informal settlements. The tendency of Zambian education policies to be formulated by a small group of elites who have little idea about or interest in what the 'masses' demand has been well documented (Lungu, 1985, p.288).

Additionally, as Srivastava (2008) has pointed out, government officials may be purposefully allowing LFP preschools to operate because they know that the government does not have the financial resources necessary to provide ECCE. To that end, from the perspective of the "conditioned" state, we can see current and previous ECCE policies as an attempt to enhance "the institutional functions of the education system" (Arnove et al., 1996, p. 141) in order to draw attention away from the fundamental contradictions of capitalism and redirect it towards the idea that the public school system can provide a pathway to a better quality of life. That is, from this perspective, the government's ECCE policy to this point can be seen as serving a legitimizing function, a conclusion which is strengthened by the fact that the government has tended to highlight the policy without dedicating significant resources to support it in practice, as described earlier.

Finally, we wish to suggest a need for more research directed to explore the subtleness of classroom practices that go beyond the binary logic mentioned earlier that focuses on academic oriented and play-based child-centered pedagogy (Huang and Leung, 2004). As this paper mostly focused on the parental expectations for the 'functions' of ECCE, it was not able to attend in an in-depth way to the subtleness of everyday teaching and learning strategies in the preschools studied (both government and private) and the potential role that local cultural scripts play in influencing them.

As Tan (2015) notes, teaching and learning strategies and styles are deeply influenced by what parents and teachers believe to be essential for transmitting knowledge and wisdom (Tan, 2015). Many scholars point to the enduring influence of culturally-relevant and indigenous knowledge transmission traditions on local teaching and learning strategies (e.g., Komatsu and Rappleye, 2015; Takayama, 2011), which are claimed to account for "policy divergence across societies despite their similar adoption of global/'Western' education policy" (Tan, 2015, p.205). Thus, more research is also needed to interrogate the role of local cultural scripts and "emic cultural meaning" (Tan, 2015, p. 206) in influencing preschool classroom practices in Zambia and their complex interactions with parental expectations for ECCE to transform their children to be 'modern' citizens.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Taeko Okitsu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Data Curation, **D. Brent Edwards Jr.:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original Draft, Writing – review & editing, Data Curation, **Peggy Mwanza:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original Draft, **Scott Miller:** Investigation, Writing – original draft & editing.

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