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Factors That Influence Parents' Decision on the Choice of Day-Care Centres for Their Children in a Peri-Urban Community in Ghana

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Abstract:

This study examined factors that influence parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres for their children in a peri-urban community in Ghana. The descriptive survey design was employed. Using the simple random and the convenience sampling techniques, a sample size of fifteen (15) registered private day-care centres and one hundred and thirty (130) parents were selected for the study respectively. A structured questionnaire was used for data collection and analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations). The study revealed that, the environment and neighbourhood dominated the influential factors for the selection of day-care centres ($M=3.30$, $SD=0.59$), followed by parents' preference ($M=2.47$, $SD=0.50$), including how educated or trained the staff is in child development, the number of children to number of teachers, availability of adequate and appropriate teaching learning and play materials, centres' operation within hours that fit their schedule and staff that is warm and trustworthy. The study further established that, there was an average and statistically significant influence of social contacts on parents in the selection of day-care centres. Additionally, it was found that parents focused on the developmental aspect of childcare rather than the cost of childcare and income of the family. Besides, even though parents believed that family structure was a factor influencing parent's decisions in the selection of childcare, it is not as important as other factors mentioned above. Based on these results, it was recommended that school authorities, by making use of the available resources should help improve the environment since parents were more concerned with the environment in which their children spend most of their time.

Keywords: *Childcare, parental choice, childcare decisions, childcare choice*

1. Introduction

The family has long been regarded among the most interesting and influential interpersonal systems and nowhere is its influence on individual behaviours more profound than in the area of communicative behaviours (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). According to Figueiredo and Dias (2012), the most important role of the family is to transmit a social self, and it is within the family that children have their first relationship experiences; therefore, the family has a very important role in the children's social development. Leung, Lau and Lam (1988), believe that the parent functioning as a coach, exposes a child to age-appropriate challenges and experiences to encourage development and allow children to explore on their own and learn from interacting with their environment. There is no doubt that, particularly mothers, have played the traditional role of the primary caregivers in families.

Meanwhile, according to Oláh, et al. (2014), there are currently major trends and shifts in family structures. These changes have led to increasingly complex family compositions and to a growing diversity of family forms and relationships over the life course. Oláh, et al. (2014) added that the new family trends and patterns have been paralleled by changes in gender roles, especially an expansion of the female role to include economic provision for the family. Deacon and Firebough (1988) explained that, household labour is no more on gender-based expectations since the woman's employment demands sometimes take precedence over the family duties. Interestingly, women are moving away from traditional work and entering different areas of the labour force like commercial activities and paid employment (Daphina, 2015).

Similarly, in Ghana, the Population and Housing census (2010) revealed that 69.6% of Ghanaian women are economically active. Again, the report, indicated that 64.7% of Ghanaian females are employed with 4.5% of them in the public sector, 4.2% in the private formal sector and 90.9% in the private informal sector. However, the informal sector of employment which employs most women in economic activities outside the home does not have any law binding members as far as maternity leave is concerned. Working mothers in the formal sector who are also entitled to a period of maternity leave, have a short period, making it almost impossible to care exclusively for their babies, as combining work and family life becomes difficult. Accordingly, the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in Ghana, has introduced registration of crèches and day-care centres for children aged 0-4, in an effort to support working mothers to have reliable places for childcare (UNESCO, 2006). While the family, in its diversity of forms, is the environment common to almost all children

prior to school entry, it is not the environment in which many young children spend much of their waking days (Doherty, Friendly & Forer, 2002). Due to the fact that women are more engaged in activities outside the home, parents require the use of formalised or alternative childcare arrangements other than parental childcare (Laughlin, 2013).

Chaudry et al., (2010) indicated that, the task of choosing care arrangements for a child or multiple children is complicated. Parents may be considering multiple work, care, and family factors simultaneously, and feasible options may be highly constrained. According to Chaudry et al. (2010), childcare researchers and policy makers continue to struggle with identifying and understanding the decision-making process parents go through when making care choices. These authors explained that, childcare decisions are unlike many other consumption choices where the consumer can see what they are buying, or have some market indicators of the qualities of the product that matter to them, or the quality does not range very widely among competing products. They added that there is widespread agreement that childcare decisions are complex. They however, identified three distinct conceptual frameworks for understanding childcare decisions as follows: Economic Choice Model, Heuristics and Biases Framework and Social Network Model.

The dimensionality of influential factors on choice of care has been in the state of constant flux as scholars and researchers have debated on its true components. For instance, whereas Ceglowski & Bacigalupa (2002), unveiled the components as health and safety criteria and personal characteristics of the caregiver, such as warmth and sensitivity, Pungello & Kurtz-Costes (1999) as cited in Vandenbroeck et al. (2008), developed a theoretical model of childcare choices, including the environmental context, maternal beliefs, child characteristics, and the mother's demographic characteristics. Similarly, findings from a study conducted by Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) as cited in Rose & Elicker (2008), revealed that the most common reasons given for choosing care arrangements were that the care provider was warm and loving, personable and experienced, reliable and trustworthy, and known previously. Lowe & Weisner (2001) as cited in Huston, Chang & Gennetian (2002) also grouped their predictors as follows: family structure, human capital and resources, location and ethnic group, and personal beliefs and supports. However, Solomon (1994), noted that parents make childcare choices based on family financial resources, the availability or location of childcare, hours of operation, or other factors not necessarily associated with quality. These results are not only inconclusive, also there is no empirical evidence to support this claim or otherwise in the peri-urban community in Ghana. This gap in research necessitated this study.

Scholars have again noticed that, in families from all income levels, the need for childcare is likely to depend on family structure (Huston et al., 2002). The most obvious of these are family size, child gender, age of the parent, presence of an adult relative in the household, and whether the parent had ever been married. In their study, they found out that parents find it more difficult and expensive to arrange care for a large number of children than for a small number, and the cost of centre care for multiple children can be very high. On the other hand, Seo et al. (2005) indicated that maternal employment status, such as employment schedule (full-time, part-time, or non-employment) and shift work status (day shift or non-day shift), has been most frequently found to explain or predict maternal childcare time and non-maternal childcare arrangements. They added that unemployed parents were more likely to care exclusively for their children, regardless of family structure.

Besides family structure, Capizzano, Tout and Adams (2000), have noticed that family income is one of the most frequently used variables to explain the distribution of childcare arrangements and many studies have examined how income affects parental choice of childcare arrangements. Consistent with this observation, Robertson et al. (2007) have indicated that, income has been found to be most important in influencing childcare choice and with lower income families more likely to use family care than centre care. Peyton et al. (2001) support findings of earlier studies that, income is found to be the most important factor influencing childcare choice. Even though available literature has discussed at length the cost/income as one factor that affects the choice of a care centre, it appears not much has been done in the peri-urban community in Ghana.

Nevertheless, Casper and Smiths' preferences-and-constraints model (2004) as cited in Meirong (2010) have gathered empirical proof that parents weigh their preferences for different types of childcare against both competing preferences and constraints. For example, childcare preferences can include the specific characteristics of childcare programmes, the desire for a provider with shared values, religion, and culture, the convenience of the time and location, or the reliability of the provider. The Casper & Smiths' (2004) theory predicted that, in choosing one type of childcare over others, parents take into account a child's need for care, including whether the parents or another relative are available to care for their child, the quality of care, including how well suited the child is to care in the settings and other parental and child preferences, including convenience and the child's particular likes and dislikes.

Meanwhile, a study by Christian et al. (2016) expounded that, the physical environment has the potential to either positively or negatively influence physical activities and the overall health and development of young children in care. They explained that, parents consider the environment and neighbourhood within which a childcare service is located as important to childhood development. According to them, a 2010 review identified that more space per child and open play areas were correlated with increased physical activity of children attending day-care. In contrast, Chaudry et al. (2010), indicated that parents need increased availability as well as information about quality care and child development to make informed decisions in the childcare market. The lack of complete and reliable information creates considerable transaction costs for parents (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Again, Meyers & Jordan (2006) asserted that, given the limited and incomplete information, inexperience, and a short time frame for arranging care, parents rely heavily on social contacts to locate and assess childcare options. Moreover, reliance on social networks provides useful decision-making shortcuts for parent consumers and it also provides parents with information that is both limited and filtered through the acquired cultural models of parents' social networks. They believe that the family and friends who provide information also signal the legitimacy of these substitutes for maternal care giving. To this end, Meirong (2010) substantiated social networks when

she observed that, parents typically find childcare placements through informal resources, such as recommendations from friends, co-workers, relatives, and neighbours, or by previously knowing the caregiver.

Based on these conflicting results, this study examined the factors that influence parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres for their children in a peri-urban community in Ghana. As revealed that most of the Ghanaian females are employed with majority in the private informal sector making it almost impossible for mothers to care exclusively for their children during the early stages of development, mothers do enrol their children in private day-care centres. It is therefore necessary for the factors that influence parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres to be continuously researched.

2. Methodology

The descriptive survey design was employed in the conduct of the study. This design helps to obtain information about the occurrence, distribution, and interrelations of variables within a population where data are usually gathered through self-reporting (Polit & Beck, 2008). The rationale for the selection of the descriptive survey design was grounded in the conviction that, it enables the researchers to obtain opinion of the representative samples of the target population so as to enable them infer the perception of the entire population (Flick, 2008). The population for this study comprised all parents who had children aged 1- 4 years in registered private day-care centres in the study location. In all, a sample size of fifteen (15) registered private day-care centres and one hundred and thirty (130) parents were selected through the simple random sampling technique and the convenience sampling technique respectively. As proposed by Creswell (2008), the discussion of sample size reflects the need to work with enough participants to be able to create themes from the responses without having too many responses and unmanageable data.

Structured questionnaire on the factors that influence parents' decision on the choice of childcare centres for children was the main instrument used for data collection. The choice of this data collection instrument was influenced by the fact that, the quantitative approach adopted for the study required the collection of a quantifiable data that would help examine factors that influence parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres for children. The questionnaire asked parents to rate their influencing factors on the choice of day-care centres measured on a four (4) point Likert scale with 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree and 4= Strongly Agree.

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, a pre-test was conducted in one of the various unregistered private day-care centres in the community which shares similar characteristics as the study centres. Cronbach alpha coefficient was computed on the result to get 0.79 which according to George and Mallery (2003) is acceptable.

Head teachers of the various day-care centres gave their approval before data was collected. Parents were available in the mornings between 7:00am and 9:00 am. This was because parents brought their children to the centres during that time, and it was convenient for both the researcher and the parents as well. There were no inclusion criteria identified prior to the selection of participants. Since the aim of convenience sampling is easy access, the researcher simply chose to stand at one of the main entrances of the day-care centres which made it easy to invite the many parents that passed by to take part in the research. There was no exact number of parents to be used in each centre, as many parents that would be available within the said time, were used as part of the study. This procedure was used in all the fifteen (15) centres until the sample size was reached.

A total of one hundred and thirty (130) questionnaires were administered to the respondents by the researcher. For most parents, questions were read out and interpreted in the local language (Twi) by the researcher. Their responses were then marked and ticked on the questionnaire. However, parents who could read and write, filled out the questionnaire themselves. All questionnaires were retrieved with hundred percent (100%) response rate for each of the items on the instrument.

The data collected was categorized and interpreted in terms of the commonness of theme or subject matter. The IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 was used to run Descriptive statistics namely, frequencies and percentages, means and standard deviations on the items for analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

The demographic characteristics are represented in Tables 1 and 2.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	96	73.8
	Male	34	26.2
	Total	130	100.0
Age	18-29	42	32.3
	30-39	62	47.7
	40-49	24	18.5
	50 and above	2	1.5
	Total	130	100.0
Marital status	Married	108	83.1
	Single	22	16.9
	Total	130	100.0
	JHS	52	40.0
	SHS	38	29.2

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Educational level	Tertiary	20	15.4
	None	20	15.4
	Total	130	100.0
Occupation	Self employed	86	66.2
	Private sector	20	15.4
	Government sector	12	9.2
	Unemployed	12	9.2
	Total	130	100.0

Table 1: Gender, Age, Marital Status, Educational Level and Occupation of Parents

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2018

As indicated in Table 1, more female parents (n=96, 73.8%) than male parents (n=34, 26.2%) were involved in the study. Concerning their ages, findings show that the dominant age group of parents who participated in the study ranged between 30-39 years (n=62, 47.7%), followed by those who fell between 18-29 years (n=42, 32.3%) and those aged between 40-49 (n=24, 18.5%). The smallest group was those aged 50 years and above (n=2, 1.5%). The information further reveals that majority of the parents were married. (n=108, 83.1%). The distribution of parents based on their educational level revealed that, Junior High School graduates (n= 52, 40.0%) were more than Senior High School graduates (n=38, 29.2%). Again, some parents had tertiary education (n=20, 15.4%), but 15.4% had no form of formal education. The occupational status of parents also revealed that more than half of the respondents were self-employed (n=86, 66.2%), those in the private sector were 15.4%, government sector registered 12, 9.2% and the rest 9.2% were unemployed.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentages%
Number of children	1-5	124	95.4
	6 ≥	6	4.6
	Total	130	100.0
Ages of children	0-1 year	8	6.2
	2 years	38	29.2
	3 years	56	43.1
	4 years	28	21.5
	Total	130	100.0

Table 2: Number of Children per a Parent and their Ages

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2018

The data in Table 2 reveal that parents who had between one and 5 children (n=124, 95.4%) outnumbered those who had 6 or more children (n=6, 4.6%). The data also disclosed that, a larger portion of the children in the day-care centres were 3 years old (n=56, 43.1%). This is followed by 2 years old (n= 38, 29.2%), 4 years old (n=28, 21.5%) and zero to one year old (n=8, 6.2%).

3.1. Factors That Influence Parents' Decision on the Choice of Day-Care Centres for Their Children

In this study, the factors that influence parents' decision composed of five main constructs namely: environment/neighbourhood, income/cost, parents' preference, family structure and social contacts. In examining the factors that influenced parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres, mean and standard deviation were calculated. Mean ≥ 3.23 indicated very high influence; 3.22 to 2.60 = high influence; 2.50 to 2.00 = moderately high influence; < 1.9 = little influence. The general factors influencing parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres for their children are presented in Table 3.

Variables	Items	SA (%)	Response A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Level of Influence
Environment/Neighbourhood	1	56 (43)	6 (5)	8 (6)	60 (46)	
	2	100 (77)	22 (17)	6 (5)	2 (1)	
	3	90 (69)	34 (26)	4 (3)	2 (1)	
	4	88 (68)	20 (15)	14 (11)	8 (6)	
M (SD)			3.30 (0.59)			VHI
Income/Cost	5	10 (8)	12 (9)	6 (5)	102 (78)	
	6	12 (9)	8 (6)	6 (5)	104 (80)	
	7	8 (6)	12 (9)	6 (5)	104 (80)	
M (SD)			1.43 (0.93)			LI
Parents' Preference	8	38 (29)	12 (9)	10 (8)	70 (54)	
	9	14 (11)	4 (3)	16 (12)	96 (74)	
	10	6 (5)	0 (0)	8 (6)	116 (89)	

Variables	Items	SA (%)	Response A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Level of Influence
	11	70 (54)	16 (12)	14 (11)	30 (23)	
	12	116 (89)	14 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)	
M (SD)			2.47 (0.51)			MHI
	13	10 (8)	8 (6)	20 (15)	92 (71)	
Family Structure	14	2 (1)	8 (6)	8 (6)	112 (86)	
	15	4 (3)	6 (5)	6 (5)	114 (88)	
	16	2 (1)	2 (1)	6 (5)	102 (92)	
M (SD)			1.28 (0.51)			LI
	17	58 (45)	0 (0)	0 (0)	72 (55)	
	18	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	130 (100)	
Social Contacts	19	0 (0)	6 (5)	0 (0)	124 (95)	
	20	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	130 (100)	
	21	62 (48)	0 (0)	0 (0)	68 52	
M (SD)			1.77 (0.12)			LI

Table 3: Factors that Influence Parents' Decision on the Choice of Day-Care Centres

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2018.

Key: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, % =Percentage, M = Mean, SD = Std. Deviation, VHI = Very High Influence, HI =High Influence, MHI = Moderately High Influence, LI = Little Influence

The data in table 3 reveal that, parents made decisions on choice based on most of the influencing factors outlined in this study. However, using the means, it could be observed that environment/ neighbourhood ranked highest in the influential factors ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.59$). The findings correspond with Christian et al. (2016) who revealed that parents consider the environment and neighbourhood within which a childcare service is located as important to childhood development, Christian et al. (2016) explained that the physical environments have the potential to either positively or negatively influence physical activities and the overall health and development of young children in care.

Parents' preference factors investigated in this study include how educated or trained the staff is in child development, the number of children to number of teachers, availability of adequate and appropriate teaching learning and play materials, centres' operation within hours that fit their schedule and staff that is warm and trustworthy, in accordance with Casper & Smiths' model (2004) as cited in Meirong (2010), which asserts that the preference factors are child's need for care, including whether the parents are available to care for their child, the quality of care, including how well suited the child is to care in the settings and other parental and child preferences, including convenience and the child's likes and dislikes.

Based on the 4-point Likert scale used, it could be said that, parents' preference ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.51$) was moderately high. This indicates that parents take into account how educated or trained the staff is in child development, the number of children to number of teachers, availability of adequate and appropriate teaching learning and play materials, centres' operation within hours that fit their schedule and staff that is warm and trustworthy.

Findings of this study contradict some researchers (Chaudry et al., 2010), who posit that individuals are more likely to use social contact information in making decisions, when that information is more familiar, salient, or recent, ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.12$). Social contact was one of the components that ranked low on the influential factors for the selection of childcare centres of parents in this study. According to Chaudry et al. (2010), parents are likely to attend more to readily available information such as what they know about different childcare arrangements and providers based on their own experiences, what friends tell them about the kinds of childcare they use, or what is salient in their community.

Again, income/cost ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.93$) had little influence on parents' decision on the choice of day-care centres. This indicates that parents focused on the developmental aspect of childcare rather than the cost involved which is in consonance with a study by Johansen et al. (1996) as cited in Peyton et al. (2001), which stated that parents who valued developmental characteristics of the childcare (e.g., the type of programme offered, educational materials used, training of staff, and availability of recreational equipment) were more likely to choose a centre-based care. Robertson et al. (2007) also believed that, most parents see it as desirable for their child to have some early childhood education experience with the believe that there are huge benefits of social and educational development for children who have some form of formal childcare education, hence, will not put into consideration income or cost of care.

The least of all the influencing factors was family structure ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 0.51$). Family structure comprise family size, child gender, age of the parent, presence of an adult relative in the household, and whether the parent had ever been married (Huston et al., 2002). The findings disagree with the position of Huston et al. (2002) that parents find it more difficult and expensive to arrange care for a large number of children than for a small number, and the cost of care centre for multiple children can be very high. This gives an indication that, regardless of the family structure, parents will have to leave their children in childcare centres to make time for paid work. Again, probably the group of parents in this study were not so much bothered about cost because they were earning good income.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study gathered ample evidence to confirm that parents ranked environment and neighbourhood as the highest of all the factors that influence their decision on the choice of any day-care centre. It is therefore expected that school authorities, by making use of the available resources would help improve the environment in order to enhance effective teaching and learning.

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