

Ghana Education Service (GES) Lively Minds programme

Community engagement: successes and challenges

Briefing

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Children at a Play Scheme, Northern Region / Thrive

Key messages

GES-Lively Minds is empowering for mothers who participate in the programme. Through teaching children at Play Schemes and participating in parenting workshops, mothers have gained confidence, self-belief, knowledge and skills to nurture their pre-school children. Mothers also reported greater respect from their husbands and less household illness due to improved nutrition, sanitation and hygiene.

The intrinsic benefits motivate mothers to continue participating. At the same time, some mothers are demotivated by the lack of payment, opportunity costs and some community criticism of them for working at the school unpaid. This affects their attendance at the Play Schemes, and there is a need to provide ongoing encouragement. These findings are nuanced – but indicate the need to do more to motivate participating mothers.

Broad community support and ownership is key to successful implementation. This was underpinned by in-depth community engagement during set-up – going beyond parent teacher associations to sensitise the wider community and place chiefs in a leadership role.

Greater focus on enrolling a new set of mothers every two-years should enable the programme to extend the outcomes to more families. Some participants could be re-enrolled in order to help train and support new members.

Further work is required to promote the role of fathers. The programme is helping fathers to appreciate the value of early child development and parental roles – but many do not see themselves as capable.

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Introduction

Ghana's education sector has seen significant increases in enrolment over recent years. Two years of pre-school education are now mandatory for children aged 4 and 5, and the government updated its early childhood development (ECD) policy in 2021 to provide play-based learning for all children within these age ranges. Despite these advances, two key barriers have persisted.

- Low quality kindergarten education, which is affected by challenges such as large class sizes, low teacher-pupil ratios, teacher absenteeism, a lack of teacher training in ECD (until recently), an overuse of rote-based teaching and an absence of play-based learning resources.
- Limited parental knowledge and practice of ECD at home, where rural kindergarten-aged children spend most of their time. In rural Ghana, many parents struggle to provide good quality, nurturing care and learning opportunities because they lack access to the knowledge and skills to do so. In many cases, this is compounded by low self-esteem and low confidence in parenting.

Recognising these challenges, the Ghana Education Service (GES) is rolling out kindergarten teacher training on the new play-based curriculum. Ghana's ECD provision also now actively involves parents and caregivers of young children.

Ghana Education Service Lively Minds programme

In alignment with the objectives described above, GES is implementing the GES Lively Minds (GES-LM) programme through its existing systems. This parent-powered ECD initiative aims to both raise the quality of kindergarten education and to improve parents' skills and confidence to provide nurturing care and education at home. The programme is implemented in public schools with the support of headteachers and kindergarten teachers, who train and mentor the participating mothers and work with parent-teacher association (PTA) executives to build community support and engagement. The programme was initiated by the Lively Minds international NGO in 2008 and is now being scaled up by GES across Ghana, starting in the northern zone. There are three main interventions.

- **Play Schemes.** These are play-based, group educational activities within kindergarten classes that are designed to stimulate learning, improve wellbeing and encourage good hygiene. The Play Schemes are facilitated by mothers, who are trained and supervised by kindergarten teachers. Between 30 and 40 mothers are engaged per community, with each working at the school once a week for around 1.5 hours. Most of the mothers have limited formal education and lack confidence at the start. The training is verbal, participatory and interactive.
- **Parenting Workshops.** These are provided for the participating mothers (monthly) and fathers (once per term), delivered by kindergarten teachers. They are designed to build parents' ECD knowledge (e.g. nurturing child engagement, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition and financial management) and encourage them to apply this knowledge at home.
- **Lively Minds Together radio programme.** Broadcast weekly in local languages, the radio programme is intended to reach wider community members, including fathers. It promotes practical ways for parents to support their children's development using everyday household routines and resources. It also addresses parental wellbeing, health and gender norms. It is delivered by GES district teams and kindergarten teachers.

Mothers' participation in GES-LM is unpaid. This is both to enable sustainability at scale (as the GES cannot pay thousands of mothers) and because GES-LM aims to strengthen parenting, with an emphasis on the fact that participants' children benefit. Instead of payment, the programme aims to empower the participating mothers by building their knowledge, skills, confidence and social networks. At the end of the training, the mothers also receive a certificate confirming that they have completed a GES-accredited course.

About the study

This policy brief summarises the findings of qualitative research on the community-level dynamics of the GES-LM programme. The full report is available on the Thrive website: <https://thrivechildEvidence.org/resource-centre/>

The study took a 'deep dive' into 12 communities, across 4 districts in northern Ghana. Communities were purposively sampled, to include some where community support and implementation has been strong, and others where it has been weaker. The aim was to develop a rich understanding of how the programme works at community-level – to identify success factors, challenges and lessons learned.

Interviews (493 respondents)

- 283 enrolled mothers (24 focus group discussions)
 - 60 husbands/relatives of the mothers
 - 23 teachers/headteachers
 - 12 PTA chairs
 - 31 chiefs, assemblymen and opinion leaders
 - 68 wider community members
 - 17 district GES officials
-



Outdoor games during a Play Scheme,
Mion District, Northern Region / Lively Minds

Findings

Outcomes for schools

Kindergarten teachers are motivated by GES-LM. Many teachers explained that the mothers provided much needed classroom support, and that they enjoyed the lively atmosphere and notable child learning that GES Lively Minds has enabled.

The programme is improving kindergarten teacher attendance and punctuality. This was reported by headteachers across the sampled schools. Kindergarten teachers explained that they feel obliged to be punctual as the mothers (who are unpaid) arrive early in the morning. Kindergarten teachers also want to sustain the programme.

Stronger parent engagement in schools was identified in most sampled communities. Many parents explained that, prior to GES-LM, they felt apprehensive about going to the school but daily presence is helping to bring the community closer. Beyond the participating mothers, more parents now visit the schools to see the Play Schemes and more frequently engage with teachers.

Many parents perceived much stronger child willingness to attend kindergarten, due to the more nurturing, play-based environment, learning in their mother tongue, and the presence of their mothers.

Outcomes for participating mothers

Empowerment. Most mothers explained that participating in GES-LM has increased their confidence, self-belief, skills and knowledge to educate and nurture their pre-school children. Many have also gained greater respect from their husbands due to their work at the school and changed practices at home – such as calmer interaction with their children and improved sanitation and hygiene. Mothers also emphasised that they enjoyed the Play Schemes and the learning and social opportunity offered by the programme, which had nurtured female friendships and a sense of pride and unity.

Participating mothers perceived that their pre-school children were developing faster (more confident, social, creative and inquisitive) as a result of attending the Play Schemes and more nurturing interaction at home.

Parenting Workshops have enhanced mothers' knowledge, leading to improved household sanitation and hygiene and efforts to cook more balanced meals. Due to this, numerous husbands reported reduced household illness.

Mothers also faced some challenges. Key among these are the opportunity costs of working at the school (as this leaves less time for farmwork and livelihood activities) and periodic marital tensions about this (especially in rainy season when farm work is intensive). Additionally, while many community members appreciated the mothers' efforts, some criticised them for leaving their farmwork and housework to work at the school unpaid. Such criticism was found in all sampled communities, albeit to varying degrees.

Play Schemes — success factors and challenges

Across the sampled communities, teachers reported that mothers were delivering good quality Play Schemes. Their descriptions of 'quality' included being able to arrange the children in groups, being able to ensure that learning materials faced the children (not the mother) and making sure that the children took turns. Teachers also defined quality in terms of the mothers' engagement with children, such as having a 'calm, friendly manner', providing clear guidance, demonstrating, listening, asking questions and gently correcting mistakes.

There were also some perceived weaknesses, however. Teachers reported that some mothers had weak classroom control, and some still struggled to remain calm. Capacities to teach also inevitably varied: some mothers were described as 'less engaging' or as not understanding the more complex games. These challenges have been the focus of ongoing mentoring and support from kindergarten teachers.

Enablers. Building on the initial training, the mothers iteratively developed the confidence and capacity to teach through ongoing practice and supportive supervision. Building the kindergarten teachers' patience and capacity to work with mothers has been key to success, working on areas such as encouragement and praise. Appointing respected community members (as GES-LM ambassadors) to monitor the Play Schemes has also motivated the mothers, by demonstrating senior community members' support and recognition of their work.

The most widely noted challenge was mothers' punctuality and reliability, especially in rainy season when farming is intensive. Their attendance was also affected by broader dips in motivation, affected by the lack of incentives, the opportunity costs, and fluctuating support from husbands.

A related challenge for teachers has been the ongoing need to coax and remind mothers to come to the school on their assigned day. Some teachers spoke of doing so nearly every day, which has been a burden on their time. Thus, while the Play Schemes are being implemented each week, this has not happened smoothly.

Sustaining mothers' motivation

When mothers' motivation has dipped, community leaders have often played a role, counselling mothers and husbands, emphasising the intrinsic benefits of the programme, and intervening in community criticism. Strong engagement from community chiefs has stemmed from in-depth community sensitisation during the programme's set up phase, which helped to build local ownership,

Community recognition is crucial. Mothers are encouraged by public praise for their Play Scheme work. In most sampled communities, kindergarten teachers, local leaders or PTAs have also given the mothers occasional small gifts to show their appreciation (e.g. canned drinks or biscuits). Despite the modest nature of the gifts, they often made mothers feel appreciated.

Many mothers asked for livelihood training to be included in Parenting Workshops, focusing on businesses with small start-up costs, and capacity building on how to start and run a business. Another common suggestion, already implemented in some communities, was training mothers to establish savings and loans groups (Susu).

We asked the engaged mothers 'As GES cannot pay you, they are providing you with knowledge and skills through the parenting workshops. Is this a fair deal?'

- Two-thirds of mothers said 'Yes, it's a fair deal'. When explaining why, they emphasised the intrinsic benefits of participating.
- One-third of mothers said 'No, it's not a fair deal'. Their explanations focused on opportunity costs, social costs (community criticism) and direct costs of participating (such as needing smart clothes for teaching and needing to spend more on laundry soap to clean them), emphasising that parenting workshops 'did not put food on the table'. These mothers were also more likely to emphasise that they did not feel appreciated for their work because they are not paid.

Some communities had a larger share of 'frustrated' mothers. Notably, more mothers were frustrated where community leaders had not played an active role in the programme. In such areas, there was more open community criticism of the mothers, and the mothers had not received small gifts of appreciation, or the frequency of such gifts had reduced.

We asked the mothers who were frustrated why they remained in the programme. Alongside the intrinsic benefits, the majority explained that they were hanging on for future personal incentive (payment or employment for example), which they believed would 'eventually come'. This was despite ongoing explanation that they would never receive remuneration or other rewards for taking part in the programme. Many mothers expressed fear that if they left the programme, the anticipated 'reward' would be given to the new set of participating mothers. Due to this, most mothers had re-enrolled in the programme after their initial two-year period.



Children at a Play Scheme, Savelugu District, Northern Region / Lively Minds

Which programme features have been most important in supporting community engagement?

Key drivers of success	Key barriers and challenges
Mothers' active engagement, underpinned by the intrinsic benefits	Mothers' low literacy and self-belief
Iterative building of ECD skills, self-belief and confidence through guided practice at Play Schemes	Mothers are already overburdened: opportunity costs of participation and expectations of incentives
Use of local languages	Mothers' unreliable attendance and punctuality
Motivated kindergarten teachers	Community jeering/ teasing mothers for working at the school unpaid
Community leadership and ownership	
Community recognition	

Parenting Workshops: Mothers' behavioural change and intrinsic benefits of participating

Mothers described most of the positive personal outcomes of the programme – such as greater self-confidence and self-belief, **changed parenting practices**, and improved household health, hygiene, sanitation and nutrition – as derived largely from the Parenting Workshops. The mothers placed high value on these personal and familial outcomes and saw them as **intrinsic benefits** of participating in the programme, which has driven their continued engagement. The workshops have also been a key space for **reinforcing local ownership** of GES-LM, through group reflection and peer learning in the presence of community leaders.

Play Schemes: Realising the benefits of early childhood education and parental roles

Building on initial training, mothers iteratively developed the **confidence and capacity to teach and nurture** their children through ongoing practice and guidance at the Play Schemes. Successfully delivering the Play Schemes has gradually built their **self-belief and realisation of the benefits of ECD**, which has encouraged them to replicate the games at home. This has fostered pride and respect from children, relatives and many community members.

Use of local languages: Localisation and pride

Most community respondents emphasised the use of their local language as key to success: it piqued community interest, highlighted the importance of their dialect in pre-school learning, and thus the role of native speakers in ECD. Particularly for husbands, the latter helped to justify why local women would give up time on their farms to support kindergarten teaching without payment. Improved child fluency in the local language was also widely emphasised as an important outcome of the programme.

Implications

Strategy implications for GES consideration

While the findings on mothers' **motivation** were nuanced, there were **indications that the programme might benefit from further approaches to sustain this**. Mothers suggested the provision of livelihood training and capacity building on how to establish savings and loans (Susu) groups. More broadly, our research suggested that the mothers value community recognition of their work, and the GES may consider routes to promote such recognition.

The outcomes of the programme might be strengthened by engaging a new set of mothers every two years, rather than focusing largely on re-enrolling existing participants. This should extend the notable female empowerment and household-level outcomes to a wider set of families. This might be combined with the re-enrolment of some committed mothers, who could help to train and support the new members. **A decision to more actively promote the engagement of new mothers should include an exit strategy for the current mothers**, such as livelihoods training.

The research highlighted the importance of in-depth community engagement in the programme set-up phase, which goes beyond the PTAs to also sensitise the wider community and place local chiefs in a leadership role. Some district GES teams have also used local radio to raise awareness. Where chiefs have played an active role, they have counselled mothers and husbands when they feel frustrated with the lack of incentives, reduced community criticism and promoted community recognition of the mothers' work.

The study identified the need to **further promote the role of fathers in ECD**. We found that GES-LM is helping fathers to appreciate the value of ECD and parental roles in it, but that many fathers did not see themselves as capable agents. Instead, they were thankful that their wives had gained this capacity and respected them for it. **Many community leaders suggested that the engagement of fathers be approached through existing men's groups and institutions** – rather than creating new spaces such as parenting workshops for men.

The Lively Minds radio programme aims to reach men in their everyday spaces. This is achieving some outcomes, yet our study suggests that there are challenges with access to radio sets – almost half of the respondents said that they had no access to a radio. In our sample, the radio intervention had been most impactful where communities had communal information centres with a functioning radio, and where this promoted peer discussion. In communities without such information centres, some mothers suggested that the GES could share recordings of the radio programme with a community stakeholder, so they could facilitate group listening and discussion.

Potential lessons for other countries

Taking a parent-powered approach to ECD can enable child development outcomes. The study shows that training mothers on matters such as child engagement and hygiene, and guiding their practice of these skills in classrooms, can iteratively strengthen their parenting practices at home. Beyond skills building, this has required nurturing the mothers' confidence and self-belief in their capacities to teach and be change-makers. This highlights the potential of tapping into parent power as a route to improving pre-primary care systems in other countries.

Building parental capacities to play this role takes time and can be nurtured through ongoing mentoring, peer support and feedback. Creating spaces and processes for such iterative capacity building is important. In Ghana, ongoing supportive supervision was key, as was peer sharing and feedback.

Engaging parents in this role requires careful consideration of how to motivate and sustain participation in culturally appropriate ways. The Ghana study highlights some possible challenges, including the opportunity costs and potential for tensions at home, as well as cultural expectations of hospitality and symbols of appreciation. It also shows that offering educational sessions (Parenting Workshops) can be an incentive for parental participation, while also contributing to child development outcomes. **Early planning for a programme like GES-LM would ideally include community-level scoping on expectations, challenges and potential models for motivating parental participation that can be sustained at scale.**

Where parenting ECD interventions focus on one caregiver (mothers, grandmothers and so on), it is important to also engage wider family members. In Ghana, engaging mothers has worked well, but with the unexpected result that men tend to see ECD as their wife's skill and role. Intentional inclusion of all key caregivers is likely to strengthen outcomes.

Local ownership is key and nurturing this requires careful messaging and engagement. In Ghana, the active involvement of community leaders has been an important driver of success, which has strengthened local ownership and recognition of the mothers. Where external actors (like international NGOs) are involved, a low profile may be important.

Conclusion

This briefing contributes to the global discourse on community-led ECD. It captures the complexity of local engagement, particularly around motivation, participation and empowerment, while offering pragmatic recommendations for strengthening and scaling the GES-Lively Minds model. With modest refinements in strategy and support systems, the programme is well-positioned to deliver long-term transformative change in early childhood outcomes in Ghana and potentially other low-resource settings.

Thrive

Thrive is a multi-country research programme that aims to support countries to turn what we know about positive early childhood development into practical, scalable, low-cost programmes, able to transform societies over multiple generations. Working closely with policymakers and other stakeholders, Thrive aims to build understanding of early childhood development service delivery models and how they can be provided cost effectively and at scale, and how these systems can innovate, improve, and better serve children and communities in low- and middle-income countries.

Our five focus countries are Bangladesh, Ghana, Kiribati, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

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