



UNIVERSITY of OULU  
OULUN YLIOPISTO

ASHU FELIX BRANDON

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN  
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Department of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education Master's Degree Programme in Education and Globalisation		Author Felix Brandon Ashu	
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Abstract <p>This research aims to provide some suggestions for the role of parents in early childhood education in Cameroon. It also tries to create an awareness of the current state of educational structures and institutions that are available for early childhood education and to identify gaps where urgent attention is needed. Data for this study was collected through interview with the use of Skype. A stratified random sampling method was used and the focus groups were parents who live both in cities and the countryside. Analysis was carried out through content analysis, based on the perceptions from those interviews and the results are presented in terms of percentages. Based on the findings, the level of education of parents, their income levels and cultural awareness have a great impact on early childhood education. Those in the rural areas had more challenges than those in the urban areas and this affects on child performance. The availability of education and resources for learning is in limited supply. Despite these challenges, parental involvement in early childhood education has an overall positive effect and helps to build capacity for future development.</p>			
Keywords    Early childhood, Cameroon, content analysis			

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Education systems around the world are in constant change and countries around the globe strive to meet an ever-increasing educational standardization (Sackey, 2007). Specific countries, through some educational measurement tool, have singled out and improved their respective educational sectors and can be considered role models to many other countries. Countries like Finland, South Korea, and Singapore are nations that can be cited in this context. There are many variables that serve as gauge for change and success in the educational milieu of the aforementioned countries. The role of parents is one of the variables, if not the most important social variable after the class teacher, which influences the growth of their education sectors. The interwoven roles of parents, in child guidance and additional educational support cannot be undermined, as it has direct links with the success of children's educational foundation and lays the foundations for children's future academic success (Alstott, 2004; Naughton, 2003 and Robinson and Jones, 2006).

The concept of parenting is contextual and differs from city to countryside, income level and from developed to developing countries level of educational attainment (Alstott, 2004; Sackey, 2007; Togunde, 2006; Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009). Despite the different points of view about parenting with regard to pre-school education, many scholars are of the view that early childhood education is extremely beneficial to children's cognitive and social development (Manhas and Qadiri, 2009; Lee and Hayden, 2009). Such thinking has created a window of opportunity for the development of early childhood education programs in many parts of the world (Gallagher, Clifford and Maxwell, 2004).

Early childhood education in this study refers to all forms of formal education for children before their commencement of basic primary school education. In about 85 per cent of countries, participation in pre-primary education is not compulsory (UNESCO, 2007: 129) and Cameroon falls within this 85%. Early Childhood education is generally referred to as nursery school education in Cameroon. Family engagement in children's early education is said to provide a better foundation for children. These engagements are often considered to be in collaboration with parent's involvement in early childhood education programs (Iruka and Carver, 2006). Though most researchers have established a positive relationship between parent participation in school activities and the outcomes for their children (Mantzicopoulos, 2003; McWayne et al., 2004), issues related to culture, economic status

and family structure remains a problematic (Crawford and Zygoris-Coe, 2006). Apart from socio-economic considerations, differing scholarly views as to what the right age might be for children to begin early childhood education, also differs from region to region. Between the ages of three to six years have all been cited as beneficial in commencing early childhood education (Bommier & Lambert, 2000; Sander, 2003), but in most developed countries, daycare is considered as an invaluable form of early childhood education, which is not the case in some developing countries.

In Cameroon, early childhood education is very diverse due to the greater diversity in socio-economic, political, cultural and even environmental landscapes. This is one of the reasons why Cameroon has been considered to be 'Africa in miniature', as it is representative of the larger African continent. Preschool education programs are much more developed in the urban areas of Cameroon than in rural areas. Approximately 60% of the population in the rural areas in Cameroon have not attained schooling beyond basic education and can in some way be considered as illiterates. In the cities, the literacy level is higher and parental teaching is a common form of preschool education. Almost all the kindergartens, in Cameroon, are found in the cities and children starts to attend at the age of two or three and by the age of five years they can enrol in primary education (Leke, 2000; Landry, 2008).

Despite such diversity between city and countryside, and optimal starting age, it is important to evaluate the perception of parents towards early childhood education. The following issues were taken into consideration for this study, in order to provide a basis for better understanding the role played by parents, society/community and the government in childhood education. The issues considered include: family size, culture, gender, literacy levels of parents, educational structures, and resources for learning and monthly household income. These variables are considered to be important, as they affect early childhood education either directly or indirectly. According to the World Bank, more than 50% of the population in Africa lives on less than \$1/day. The family size in Cameroon, especially in the rural regions, ranges from 4-6 children with average family size of 7 including parents. Living on less than \$1 per day with such a large family size requires child labour as a source of income for the family. The above variables combined, have a negative effect when incomes are low and family sizes much larger while having a positive effect when income levels are higher and family sizes much smaller (Tenikue, 2010).



### **1.1. Objectives of the study**

The general objective of this study is to critically examine the role, effectiveness and impact of parental involvement in early childhood education in Cameroon. Cameroon has undergone some educational reforms, which have created both positive and negative impacts on early childhood education. These reforms have also affected the participation of parents, NGOs and civil society in early childhood education. Amongst such reforms is the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) which is a private body financed by parents to support teachers that are not on government payroll (private teachers hired by the institutions to support the low staff capacity). The role of the PTA will be examined and how it contributes to public-private cooperation and on early childhood education in general. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To examine the impact of parental involvement in early childhood education in Cameroon.
- To evaluate the contribution made by the PTA to early childhood education in Cameroon.
- To examine the factors that affects parental involvement in childhood education.
- To recommend measures that can increase parent's involvement in early childhood education.

### **1.2. Research questions**

To evaluate the role of parents in early childhood education in Cameroon, the following research questions were used:

- In what ways does the public-private partnership affect early childhood education in Cameroon?
- How is early childhood education in Cameroon affected by socio-cultural and economic issues?

- Does parental literacy have an affect on their contribution to early childhood education?
- What are the challenges faced by parents in contributing towards early childhood education?

### **1.3. Background of study**

Cameroon, a former German colony (1884-1916) and a former French and British mandated territory (1916 – 1960/61) respectively is located at the west of central Africa region with Nigeria, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, Central African Republic and Congo as its neighbours (Ngho, 1996) *See Appendix 3*. This colonial history is the reason why Cameroon today is a one of the few bilingual countries in the world with English and French as the two official languages. When English and French took over Cameroon from Germany, they ruled their independent areas as two very separate countries under their respective socio-political cultures at the time (ibid, 1996). When these two parts of Cameroon choose to reunite in 1961, they agreed to preserve their respect educational systems. As a result of this, these two systems co-exist in Cameroon today.

### **1.4. Cameroon Educational system**

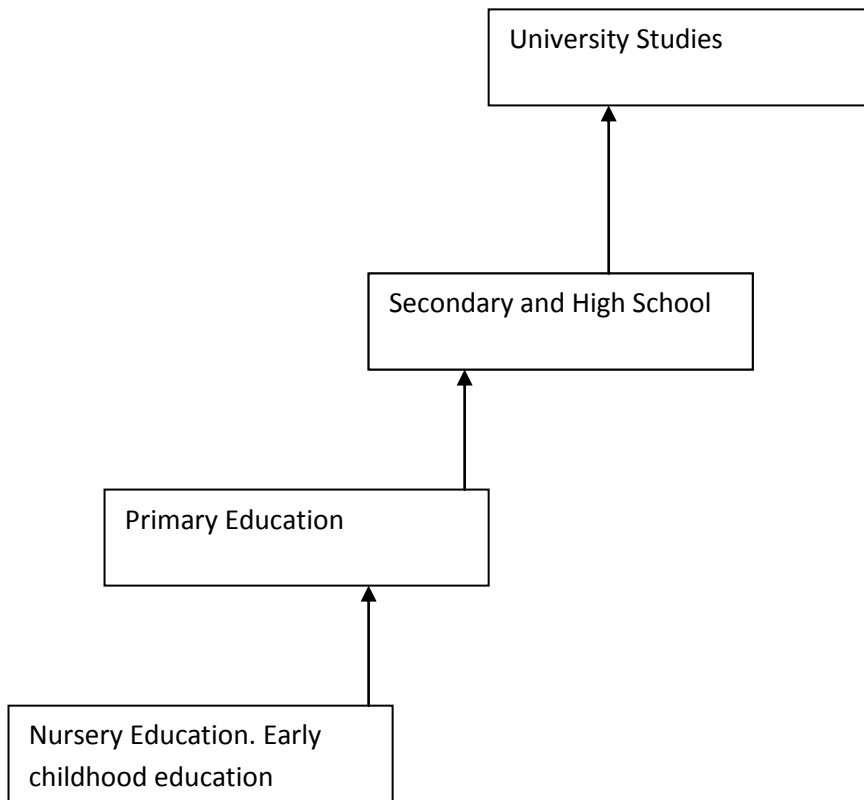
Education is a process of learning knowledge skills attitudes either formal or informal. Illeris (2002) refers to such learning as all processes that lead to relatively lasting changes of capacity, whether it is cognitive, emotional, motivational, attitudinal or in terms of social character. Formal education refers to that kind of education where learners learn in a given formal structure. Coombs (1973) defines formal education as “the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialized programs and institutions for full-time technical and professional training” (11).

Conversely, (Kleis. 1973) refers to non-formal education as any intentional and systematic educational enterprise (usually outside of traditional schooling) in which content is adapted to the unique needs of the students (or exclusive situations) in order to take full advantage

of learning and minimize other elements which often occupy structural teaching programmes. This kind of education is more learners centred.

Informal education on the other hand can be said to be “the life-long process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experience and exposure to the environment—at home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television” Coombs and Ahmed (1974: 8). Such education can be very spontaneous and has not limitation. (Kleis. 1973) opines that this kind of education deals with everyday experiences which are not planned or organized (incidental learning). When these experiences are interpreted or explained by elders or peers they constitute informal education.

Formal education in both educational systems of Cameroon starts at kindergarden (nursery education) and this is neither free nor obligatory. As a result, only not everyone can afford this or see its importance. Compulsory school (basic education) starts at the age of 5-6 and abiding to the universal primary education agreement, these six years of schooling are free of charge and compulsory (Tchombe 2000). Pupils generally have to spend six year to complete their basic primary education from where they can either move on to secondary school or drop out to learn a trade like tailoring. Students spend five and four years in secondary schools for English and French respectively from where they move into high school. High schools are two years and three years for English and French speaking respectively. Students graduate from high school into university where they spend from 3-4 years to acquire a bachelors’ degree.



**Figure 1.** Structure of the Cameroon Educational System.

However, early childhood education is not compulsory in Cameroon but dependent on the ability of parents to support their children with school materials such as books, uniforms and other related costs, such as transportation as some schools are located far away from homes (Tambo, 2003). Education in Cameroon in most cases is considered free but in reality there are always several costs for education ranging from cost of book, uniforms, school shoes, transportation to school, food at school etc (Mbua 2003). Such can be a burden to a good number of people who are poor especially those in the rural area (Alemanji 2010) The Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon, in one of its reforms to meet the demand of the growing population, created schools that can serve a number of communities in a given region. The increasing demand for early childhood education has continually proved problematic for the government in the provision of educational structures and learning resources for its citizens (Leke, 2000).

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA), which is a private body made-up of parents and teachers, started in the late 80s to support learning in most areas that have been neglected by the government. This association (PTA) was the starting point of an effective public-private relationship between the government and the parents with the goal of providing better learning environments and conditions for children and teachers. The PTA in most villages has financed the construction of classrooms, toilets and public taps for children and teachers (Leke, 2000; Tambo, 2003). In the English-speaking region of the country, pre-school education is known as “nursery school” while in the French section of the country as “l’ecole maternelle”. Children attend the pre-school education for two to three years and between the age of 5 and 6, they are considered ready for elementary or primary school (Johannes and Noula, 2010).

One of the recent reforms in the education sector by the Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon took place in 2008. In this reform, the duration of primary education that used to be seven years (primary classes 1 to 7) was changed to six years (primary classes 1 to 6). After six years in primary school education with a pass grade, children are then considered qualified for university education. This reform most affected the first school leavers under the new reform, as in 2008 the children in the sixth and seventh grades had to take the Common Entrance Examination into college. The parents of children in the sixth grade in 2008 were not prepared for their children to attend college while the government also failed in providing adequate structures and resources to accommodate this reform. Notwithstanding, the system is now working much better than when it was first implemented (Johannes and Noula, 2010).

The enrolment rate of children in early education has ‘mixed blessings’ because while the situation in the cities is much better, enrolment in the rural areas is fast degrading. In 1994 for example, the gross enrolment rate of 6 to 14-year-old in a sampling of ten urban areas in Cameroon was 65.9% while the corresponding rate for ten rural areas was 35%. In the academic year 1994-1995, about 79.2% of all children enrolled in school in Cameroon went to public schools (owned by the government) while 20% attended private institutions (Johannes and Noula, 2010). Primary school in 1995 had a gross enrollment rate average of 88% and out of this percentage approximately 50% for boys and 38% for girls. The number of private institutions (NGOs) has increased and they have better standards than

those owned by the government. The United Action for Children (AUC-Cameroon) is a good example in which funding comes from many international organizations, some such schools have buses for transportation, better paid staff and a welcoming learning environment (Tenikue, 2010).

Ndoko and Tambo are of the view that, the period between 1914-1922 and leading up to the outbreak of World War II created a lot of setbacks in the educational sector in Cameroon. The reasons for these setbacks, they argue, are linked to the conflicting interests of the colonial administration, which affected the policies that could have propelled a sound and sustained system. The structures and institutions put in place in the educational sector were all colonial-based. The inherited system continued after the country gained independence in 1960. Though some reforms have been made, a lot is still to be done because many areas, especially rural areas, lack educational institutions and even when they exist; they are under-staffed (Mbua, 2003).

### **1.5. Statement of research problem**

Developing countries when compared with developed countries are faced with more challenges when it comes to social, economic, political, cultural and environmental issues. Poverty is one of the challenges that have, over the years, affected the social lifestyle of the greater population in developing countries. In Cameroon, there are more people in the rural areas than in the urban centers. An estimate of about half of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. There are few educational structures in the rural areas and most schools are under-staffed (Leke, 2000; Tenikue, 2010).

The income level of parents in the rural areas is low and their dependency ratio is higher due to larger family sizes in those areas. Child labour in rural areas is a common necessity, and this gives children little or no time to study after school. In the urban areas, the situation is different because there are many educational centers but the income levels also differ, not everyone can pay for private teaching after school for their children. Those who can pay have little or no time to follow-up what their children are being taught (Tenikue, 2010).

Children from poor families are more likely to become a source of labour for their families than to attend school, which might not be the case for wealthier families. In Cameroon, 14.7% of children aged 5 to 14 years in the lower income quintile carry out economic activity without any schooling compared to 1.5% of children from the higher income quintile (Cigno et al., 2006). Though the problem is not limited just to income and child labour, the literacy level of parent's education is another contributing factor. Place of resident also contributes to the problem of lack of early childhood education because not all communities have pre-schools and some schools are far away from some of the rural areas. This strategy by the government to locate schools in a central point that can serve many communities has an effect on early childhood education. Parents do not have the income in some cases to provide for transportation and even if they do, some rural areas are not negotiable during the wet season.

Rural-urban migration is another problem that affects early childhood education in Cameroon. The average family size in the rural areas is relatively high (an estimate of between 5-7), many parents give up their children at very young age to those who have moved to urban area for a better future. Some of the 'new guardians' might be direct family members or family friends or well known and trusted members of the same community. Some studies have revealed that, these children taken to urban area, often end up as housemaids engaged in domestic activities such as cleaning and taking care of children. As a result of the expensive nature of living standards in urban area, after their domestic activities in the house, such children are often engaged in petty trade such as selling fruits, water and food for their new guardians. An estimate of about three out of four children who find themselves in this situation drop out of school (Tenikue, 2010; Cigno et al., 2006).

Socio-cultural factors also contribute towards major problems in early childhood education in Cameroon. The country has over 250 different tribes and local languages with each having a slightly different culture to that of its closest tribe. Child labour is engrained in some cultures in the West, North, Far North, Northwest and Southwest regions of the country (Forje, 1998). In 2003, more than 22,000 children were found in the Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC) plantation as labourers. Some were there to assist their parents while others worked in the tea, cocoa, oil palm and banana plantations. As such,

children who live in the rural areas are more likely to drop out of school and participate in generating income for themselves and their families. In Cameroon, 80% of children in the cities receive early childhood education as compared to 50% for those in rural areas (Tenikue, 2010).

The role of human capital in socio-economic development has received little attention in Cameroon and for most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. A major trend in developing countries and Cameroon in particular is that, many children dropout of school after primary education. This is a common problem in the countryside and females are affected more than the males as most cultures in Cameroon consider women as housewives. In addition, the level of education of the parents remains a key problem because many parents especially in the countryside usually find it difficult to value the importance of formal education (Sackey, 2007).

## **2. Theoretical framework and literature review**

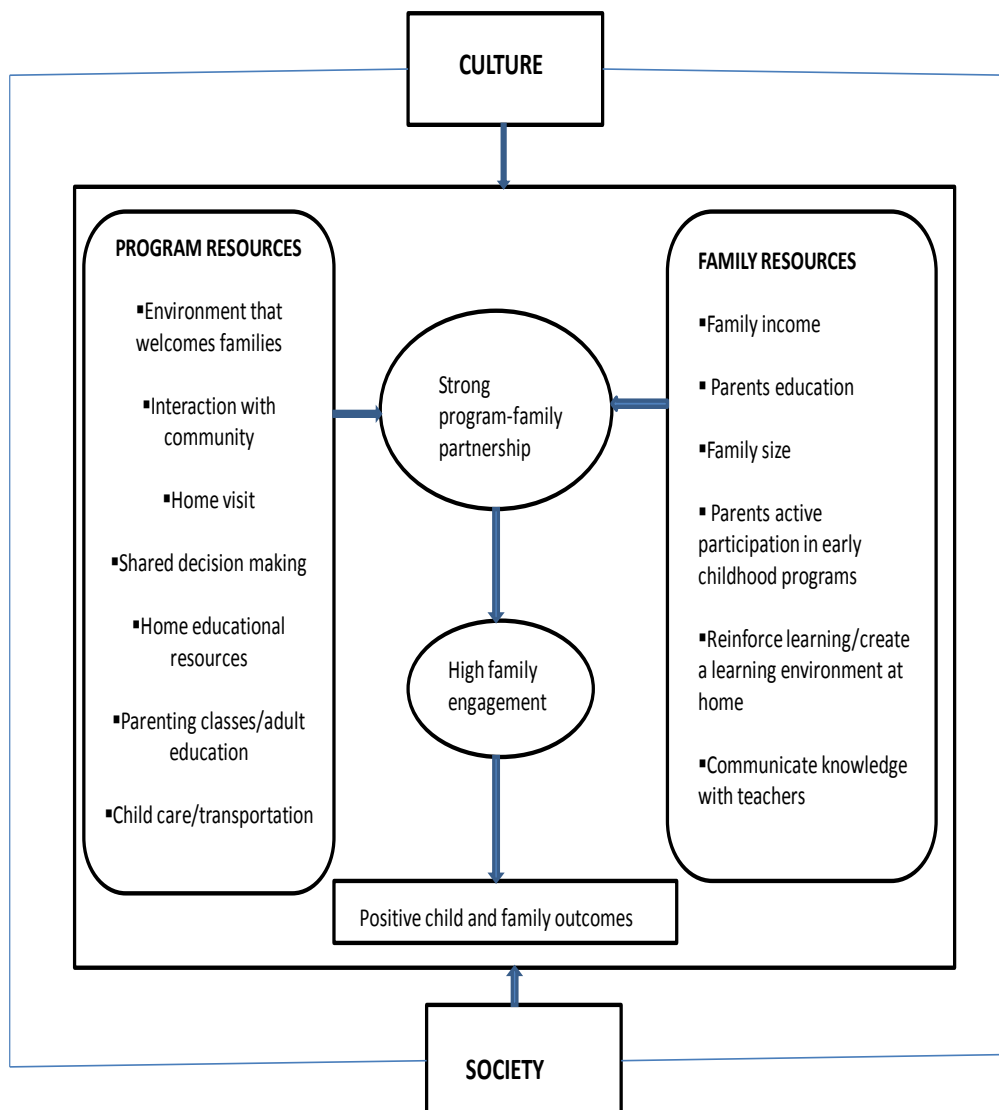
Most studies on early childhood Education have focused more on the attendance and the level of educational attainment (Sackey, 2007), child labour and education in Cameroon (Tenikue, 2010), gender and increased access to schooling in Cameroon (Johannes and Noula, 2010). The role of parents in early childhood education, public-private cooperation remains an invaluable dimension in meeting the demand for childhood education in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general. The rights accorded to children differs a lot because laws are easily violated in most parts of Africa, but this is not the case in developed countries though with some exceptions such as New Zealand and Australia in which children rights have a different meaning (Melton, 2005; Rogers, 2004). The constitution of Cameroon makes provision for education of children without distinction of race, religion, sex or belief. The 1972 constitution was amended in 1996 and 2008 thereby affirming to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by promoting economic, social, health, education and cultural development (Tenikue, 2010).

The theoretical framework for this study is a combination of two models, the social exchange model of family engagement and the home investment theory (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995). The social exchange model puts forwards that, in order to foster family engagement in early childhood education, the programs put in place must be perceived by



families as beneficial to their children (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Emerson, 1976). Society's perception plays a major role not only in education, but also in the overall development of a country through capacity building. That notwithstanding, the role of parents also plays a major part, especially when we consider how, what and when parents invest in their children education.

The social exchange model is applicable in Cameroon because the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) provides an environment for discussion between parents and teachers on children's education. This creates strong social ties and teachers develop a more cordial relationship not only with the children they teach but also with the parents of those children. The PTA meetings that are held four to five times in an academic year often address issues concerning what is expected of the teachers towards the children they teach. Another issue is what is expected of the parents in assisting the teachers especially at home and during holiday periods. The PTA has been considered as a social environment that creates opportunities ~~even~~ for the local communities. Some studies have revealed that parents who belong to this association can easily get to know how well their children are performing in their education. The association also raises funds for the construction of classrooms, toilets, bore hole/taps and pays salaries for private teachers who are not on the government payroll (Johannes and Noula, 2010; Tenikue, 2010).



**Figure 2.** Theoretical framework of the study. Source: Adopted from Haveman and Wolfe (1995) and Emerson (1976).

The home investment theory explains the linkage between parental education and household resources on the one hand and children's education on the other hand (Figure 1). According to Baker and Tomes (1986), parents' concern for their children to succeed prompts them to invest in children's education, this investment builds human capital that is vital for economic development (Thomas et al., 2003) but a universal application of this straight-forward relationship might be misleading in some cases. In New Zealand and Australia (Melton, 2005; Rogers, 2004), too many rights are not accorded to children though education remains a priority. In Cameroon, investment in early childhood education

goes beyond the importance of education because socio-economic, cultural, political and even environmental issues are major barriers to it.

In the above model, program resources must interact with family resources to produce a positive outcome that is beneficial to children, their families and the society. Politically, empowering the rural population poses a supposed threat to governmental control over its people. Most rural areas have the potential for development, but in most cases it has not been utilized. Schools are created by the government for political reasons, to satisfy the people especially during periods of election. After such periods, the school may just exist on paper and no budget is allocated to construct classrooms and provide learning resources. Some areas are not easily accessible and it makes it difficult for the government to create schools in this region because there is the need for creating infrastructure, which they are not prepared to do. The schools created by Non Governmental Organization and the churches appear to be more effective, but are expensive and with many living on less than \$1 dollar/day it is hard for such institutions to be available for all.

The above model shows that family resources and program resources will determine if the outcome of parents' role in early childhood education will be positive or negative. In most cases such relation/partnership will produce positive outcomes for children and it should be noted that parental education lays the foundation for their children's academic success. The amount of family income, allocation to children and their education, time invested for children and their learning environment affects the schooling attainments of children (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Sheldon, 2002; Sackey, 2007; Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009). Child labour has become the outcome of low socio-economic and cultural considerations, especially when there are limited opportunities for livelihood improvement (Amin, 1994; Leke, 200; Tenikue, 2010). The role of parents and other family members remains a major influencing factor in the early childhood education of children. Families decide how the child grows and develop and the society/community also plays a role in terms of culture and income level of individuals (Baker et al., 2002).

Parental involvement in early childhood education can vary from general to individual levels. This is due to beliefs and expectations that are considered important in some cultures and less in others, or which are not respected by everyone. The more educated families often reject traditions and beliefs that affect children's education. This can be

seen in the education of female children, which is rejected by many traditions in the north and northwest of the country. Since 1990, the enrollment of females in primary education in most regions in the country has exceeded that of males (Johannes and Noula, 2010). Relationships and interaction amongst family members, the community/society, children and the government must be in agreement (Epstein, 2001). A family-centered approach is applicable to most developing countries, especially Cameroon. In this model, the child's growth and development is nurtured through the interaction of the parents, family, community and the child (Dunst, 1990). Dunst's studies have been supported by others scholars in Cameroon especially on issues related to gender and child labour which affects most families (Amin, 1994; Johannes and Noula, 2010; Tenikue, 2010).

The laws of nature often act as the 'invisible hand' that controls the system in which humankind lives and function. This theory (figure 1) reveals that, resources that affect early childhood education are both tangible and intangible. They include creating a welcoming environment for children and parents, interaction with community, promoting communication between children, parents and teachers, provide opportunities for parenting and adult classes, providing resources for extending learning experiences at home and offering resources such as child care and transportation. Though this list is not exhaustive, the challenges for Cameroon, in comparison to developed nations (e.g. Finland) is that, the social structures and institutions needed, are not in place (Leke, 2000).

The Cameroon constitution of 1972 that was amended in 1996 and 2008 states that primary education is compulsory for all children. The constitution failed to make provision for support to enable families achieve this goal. Those from poor homes with large family sizes cannot afford even the basic education for their children. That is why the home investment theory is used in conjunction with the social exchange theory of family engagement. Children in developed countries and their parents can not get support from the government even when they are unemployed. In Cameroon and in many other developing countries, some children stop their education when their parents are out of job or when then suddenly die. The issue of corruption also makes the situation more difficult because the resources are mis-directed and often end up being used for individual rather than public use. Human rights are violated and the rights of children are ignored, causing a lack of trust in the system and even when external support is available from international donors, it does not filter down to the grass-root-level (Leke, 2000).

Home visits are another vital tool for building stronger relationship between parents and teachers as shown by the theory above. This creates an informal environment in which parents and teachers can work together towards finding solutions to the challenges faced by both parties. Some of such challenges, according to the theory, might be cultural difference and language barriers, which might give a misconception about families' participation in their children's education (Sander, 2008). Education programs for children can limit such barriers by involving the community and striving to learn about the different cultural backgrounds of children and by hiring staff with similar cultural and language backgrounds to teach the children (Ferguson et al., 2008).

Hover-Dempsey and others (2005) have further emphasized that the role which parent's play in the education programs for their children, are determined by an enabling environment for dialogue. Constantino (2008) on the other hand suggests that 'a welcoming environment implies that a program has focused effort on maintaining an atmosphere that is inviting to families and welcomes their presence'. Both scholars further state that in order to ensure that all families feel welcomed, programs can incorporate role models from diverse backgrounds and celebrate the cultures of all members of the program community. This will reduce the occurrence of biases, which might be made unconsciously by teachers and administrators, which might harm the partnership between programs and families and discourage participation.

### **2.1. Early childhood education program resources**

The establishment of a strong family engagement requires that early childhood education resources that have been found to promote children's learning and perceived by families to be beneficial should be promoted. These resources as illustrated in the framework in figure 1 and include, amongst others; a welcoming environment, interaction with the community, home visit, two-way communication with all families, incorporating families in the decision making process, provide opportunities for adult education and parenting classes and providing resources for extending learning experiences at home. The resources in combination when offered by programs to families, will aid in creating a reciprocal partnership, which will benefit the children, parents and society. The parents will develop

new skills; create social networks and thereby reduce obstacles for family engagement (Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009).

According to Constantino (2008) a welcoming environment implies that a program has focused efforts on maintaining an atmosphere that is inviting to families and welcomes their presence. He further mentions that programs can strive to become more welcoming in a number of ways which range from having staff greet families at the door, to hanging signs so that families can navigate the building more easily, to establishing a 'parent room' where parents can mingle, find information on child development or educational programs. That notwithstanding, cultural differences, illiteracy and language barrier may act as obstacles. The language of communication must be fully understood by all the families present. Home visits should complement the partnership process because it creates an informal environment in which some important issues might be discussed (Sander, 2008).

Home visits are part of the two-way communication between educators and parents and those running early childhood programs should make an effort to train local staff who can easily communicate in the local language with the families. Marcon (1999) states that, communication with families is often the first step towards increasing the engagement of parents in early childhood education. Though providing an advantage, the programs should use communication practices that are sensitive to the diverse language and cultural backgrounds of the families they serve. To ensure effective communication with families the programs should implement the following as suggested by (Constantino, 2008); ensure that all written communication be translated into the native languages of the families, ask parents preference on the best form of communication and childhood programs should not only focus on providing information for parents, but should pay equal attention to listening to parents and gathering their feedback.

Shared decision making is a process which is often overlooked, especially when it comes to decision making between early childhood programs and parents. Early childhood programs need to provide families with an opportunity to voice their opinion and share in the decision making of the program practices and policies that affect their children. The Head Start model by Cochran (2007 p. 165) creates an opportunity for families to participate in leadership and decision-making roles. This model demonstrates that parents'

opinions are valued and generates a sense of parent ‘ownership’ and pride in the program. Leke (2000) is of the view that some programs offer opportunities for parents to be involved in the decision-making but which proves difficult to exercise, as in Cameroon, with the limitations parents are faced with. Some of the limitation faced by parents, apart from getting involved in the decision making process of their children, is the lack of home educational resources. Not only can schools provide children with instruction and learning opportunities during the school day, but by understanding their role in the family-program partnership, they can also help families enhance children’s early learning at home. There are several ways in which early childhood programs can support the learning of children at home and strengthen the family-program partnership. According to Bracken and Fischel (2008), programs can provide families with activities and materials to use at home or in the community. They can also support the emerging literacy skills of young children by offering family members tips on reading aloud and providing ‘literacy learning kits’.

## **2.2. Family resources**

Just as the early childhood education programs can provide resources to families in an effort to improve children’s learning, families have equally important resources that they can contribute to the partnership. The link between families and programs can be more fully established if the following are taken into account; communicate knowledge with teachers, create an environment at home that reinforces and complements classroom experiences, volunteer or participate at the early childhood education program and participate in the program’s meetings. Family resources are not limited to the above because other issues such as the family size, the level of education attainment of the parents, their income level and their perception about early childhood education must complement the above issues (Sackey, 2007).

Parental education is considered to be a decisive factor in the educational attainment of their children though this might not hold true in all cases. In considering the determinants of children’s educational choices, some scholars noted that the fundamental economic factor is the human capital of parents (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995). Usually measured by the number of schooling years attained, parental education reflects a type of intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status. In terms of household economic

resources, the magnitude of family income is influential in educational choices because family income is positively associated with the educational attainment of children. Attendance levels vary considerably and are often low in rural areas especially during the farming season and on occasions such as market days.

### **2.3. Relevance of the theoretical framework to Cameroon**

The theoretical framework for this study is a combination of the social exchange model of family engagement and the home investment theory (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Emerson 1976). Both theories are based on two main ideas: maximizing educational program resources on the one hand and utilizing family resources on the other hand. These resources interact by forming a strong program-family partnership to produce positive outcomes with society and culture as a determining factors as to whether the outcome might be favorable or not. The program-family partnership is a form of public-private partnership/relationship. In Cameroon, program resource providers can be the government, NGOs, community associations, etc. Those program resource providers owned and managed by the government are considered as public while those not owned by the government are considered as private (Leke, 2000).

The program resources provided by the government concerning early childhood education are through the Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon. This ministry has the power to create schools in any region in the country and to provide a budget for the structures and resources for those schools. Apart from the public program resource providers are those in the private sector either as NGOs of local community initiatives. NGOs are able to provide resources for early childhood education from external sources of funding from international organizations and some times from internal sources from other private bodies or even the government. The local community initiatives provide program resources such as construction of classrooms, toilets, tap water supplies and salaries for private teachers with parents and the local communities as funders (Amin, 1994).

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is an association of parents and teachers where both teachers and parents come together to help educate the child or children. The PTA is a recognized association by the government, because the support given by this body is complementary to government initiatives in local communities where the government



creates schools but lacks the budget to provide efficient resources and services. An environment that welcomes parents has been created through the PTA and there is interaction between the teachers and parents. During their meetings that occur around four to five times a year, there are shared decisions made and parents get more information on child performance. The schools own and managed by NGOs, operate independently but follow some of the guidelines laid by the government ministry of education. The NGOs are a better program resource provider because most schools owned by NGOs provide transportation for children. However, in the area of collaboration between the NGOs and the government, there is a weak relationship but between the NGOs and the local communities there exists a strong relationship (Tenikue, 2010). Alemanji (2010) points out that the PTA fee is compulsory for every student below university level. As a result parents have to annually pay this money for their children over 15 years depending on how far the child attends formal education. Such payment has the potential of affecting the family negatively in terms of poverty as this makes them poorer.

The program resources do not work in isolation, but with other factors of the community, one of which is family income. Those who do not have money to send their children to school are not part of the PTA and as such they feel somehow rejected by their own community. This study reveals that, there is a strong partnership between the local communities and the government through the PTA and also a good relationship between the schools owned by NGOs and the local communities. The local communities always give land for free whenever a development project is to take place in their community and this explains one of the reasons for the cooperation. But not everyone in the community benefits from these initiatives especially the establishment of educational institutions for early childhood education (Leke, 2000).

In the rural areas of Cameroon, the family sizes are often larger, with some families having seven children and above. It cannot be ignored that a greater proportion of the rural population lives on less than 1 dollar a day (Amin, 1994). With the large family size and lower income, child labour is no longer an option but imperative especially in a rural environment in which about 95% of the population depend on agriculture for livelihoods (Johannes and Noula, 2010). The level of illiteracy is much higher in the rural than in the urban areas and preference is given to other activities such as learning a trade, farming, etc.

than education. Culture also plays a major role, in that in most cultures, even when the family has sufficient income, like those in the north of Cameroon forbid education of the female child. Between the age of 11 and 13, most female children are given for marriage and for families with male children in this region implications are that their parents do not participate actively in early childhood education programs.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter focuses on the research method chosen for this study, following a discussion of some of the research paradigms used in the social sciences, justification for the chosen methodology is given. The author of this study has chosen a qualitative approach, using open ended, and semi structured interview questions. Ethical issues are discussed as well as the materials used and selection process of participants and the challenges and limitations of those choices.

According to Ranjit Kumar (2005), types of research can be viewed from three perspectives, namely: the application perspective, the objectives perspective and the inquiry perspective. From the application perspective, there are two types of research namely, pure research and applied research. From the objectives point of view, there are: descriptive research, correlational, explanatory and exploratory research; and finally, from the inquiry mode perspective, there is the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. This research will be a qualitative research as it intends not only to understand the phenomenon of early childhood education in Cameroon, from the angle of parents and the role it plays in education in Cameroon.

This qualitative research relied on the views of participants, which is in line with the view of what Creswell considers as qualitative research. Qualitative research asks participants broad general questions, collecting data, which consists of the words of the participants and which is later transcribed and analyzed in a subjective manner. (Creswell 2005, 46) In conducting qualitative research, variables and the research problem are not foreknown but need to be exploited. Creswell (2005, 53-54) further suggests that the qualitative paradigm is a multi-faceted method of carrying out research. Researchers are free to use all methods to 'find answers' and some of those methods can be; questionnaires, case studies and research paradigms, which favour a small number of participants. For this study, interviews were conducted with respondents through interactive online conversations. The main reasons for using this method of data collection were: the lack of funding to travel to Cameroon to collect data in the field and to enable interviews with participants from widespread regions of the country, which would not have been possible to carry out in

person without funding. Therefore, this method provided a convenient way in which to facilitate the collection of data from a cross section of respondents within Cameroon.

The interviews involved only one group, that of parents. The parents were asked to answer the following open ended questions; what did they understand as early childhood education, what are the difficulties they face in sending their children to school, what can be done to assist them, what they expect from the government and their local council/community, why the PTA was created and their feelings about it, how big is their family size, does it affect childhood education, what do you think about child labour, what are their feeling about the 2008 reform from seven to six years in early childhood education?

This study is will employ elements of phenomenography in the analysis of the data. Phenomenography is a qualitative research method used when exploring any social concept. Marton and Booth (1997) suggest that

In order to make sense of how people handle problems, situations, the world, we have to understand the way in which they experience the problems, the situations, the world, that they are handling or in relation to which they are acting. Accordingly, a capability for acting in a certain way reflects a capability experiencing something in a certain way (111).

The main idea of phenomenography explores how people (research subjects) perceive reality with regards to a specific concept. The concept in this study is early childhood education.

### **3.1. Primary data collection**

During this research, both the theoretical and empirical data will be collected and use inter-relatedly. The theoretical base of the study will provide a firm foundation towards the empirical angle. A review of wide range of literatures will constitute the key element of the theoretical background. According to Mouton (2001), literature review provides the researcher with a good understanding of issues and debates in the area one is working in, current theoretical thinking and definitions, as well as previous studies and their results. In

this research the literature review will help me to ensure that I am not solely repeating or duplicating reflections already done to identify, but rather, that I interpret and evaluate various relevant theories.

Primary data collection was through interviews of respondents from the Southwest region of Cameroon. A stratified random sampling method was used because it was not possible to cover the whole country. Three out of the ten regions in the country were selected for the interview: from the North, Southwest and Northwest regions. I choose participants from these regions because both the Northwest and Southwest regions are English speaking. I also got a few English speaker from the North through a friend who also works in that region. In this light the interviews were carried out in English language. In each region three respondents were chosen with two from the rural areas/countryside and one from urban area. However, within these categories, there are differences between those living in the rural areas of this region and between those living in the urban areas, which also has implications for their literacy levels.

The interviews were conducted as a discussion between the author, an intermediary, and the participants, as suggested by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, 354). Nine participants were selected (three from each of the three regions and out of these three one came from the urban area) to participate in the research. The questions were open ended questions, which were intended to give the participants the freedom to make known their own perceptions and understandings of early childhood education and in what ways they can contribute to support their children's education. The participants consisted of six women and three men. The marginalization of women in Cameroon was considered as an important factor in involving more women in the interview process.

The interview was conducted in English and in pidgen English and is considered as a limitation of this study. Patton (2005) suggests that it is always preferable to use local language and that respondents should be allowed to respond in their own ways and their own words (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007). In this case, due to language restrictions, participants were somewhat guided through the interviews. This would then be contrary to Patton's (2002) opinion, which states that open ended questions (*appendix 1*) give freedom to the participants to take whatever direction and words they want. The open ended questions were however, flexible and allowed participants the opportunity to fully express

their views in relation to their role, that of the local community and the government's involvement in their children's education.

To ensure a much reliable record a tape recorder was used during the interviews. The data was first transcription and later interpretation. This task consists of structuring, clarifying and analysing the interview material. Natural units of interviews were condensed into smaller units of meaning. These condense units will be the presentation as the results of the study. This will be done with reference to the research questions bearing in mind the theoretical background of the research.

### ***Limitation of open ended interviews and challenges encountered during data collection***

Although open-ended interview questions are considered as one of the most effective methods of gathering data in qualitative research, this flexibility can also serve as a disadvantage to both the researcher and respondents. The additional time required to complete open-ended questionnaires or interviews as opposed to closed questions, can result in a lower response rate. Further, difficulties for researchers in structuring open-ended questions well can result in 'closed' responses from participants. (Patton 2002) Further, open-ended questions can lead to unexpected answers, which have no correlation to the research content. (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2007) Data collected from open-ended question interviews can differ greatly from one respondent to another with the same interview questions (Patton 2002), which might prove problematic in transcribing. While considered as an effective means of data collection for qualitative analysis, open-ended interviews are time consuming both in relation to data collection and the transcribing and analysis of data.

With regard to this study, wide ranges of answers were given to most of the questions asked. Responses contained information and opinions that were both relevant and not relevant to this research. Still this method was considered as preferable over closed question interviews, where questions such as 'salary bracket' may have intimidated participants, or led to collection of misleading data. Questions were constructed in such a way as to provide optimal information that might be related to income, family size and culture. The data gathered from the respondents was plentiful, but often went out of the

context of the topic or steered into the political situation of the country, corruption and poverty of the masses.

Challenges involved during data collection range from – poor internet connection, getting women involved in the interview, failure to respect time for the interviews, It was very difficult to get the interviewees online at the time agreed upon prior to the interviews. Some interviewees complained that they could not get to the internet café on time because of reasons like other commitment. There encountered diverse difficulties in terms of their transportation to the place where there was an internet cyber café.

Moreover, internet connections in Cameroon were very poor. Most of the times, it was hard to hear what they said. Other times, there were power failures in Cameroon that resulted to a break in the process of data collection. In one case, I had to continue the interview two days later. This I think had an effect on the data in some ways. In addition, in one case, I had to call the interview through my mobile phone as she could not return to the cyber days later to continue the interview. This was also very financially demanding. Also in these distance situations it is difficult to re-arrange the interviews when I realized that I may have needed more data.

Also, it was a little bit difficult to get female participants in the rural areas since most of them are really dependent on the husbands'. Most often rural women are not enthusiastic about participating in issues where their voices are brought up to focus. Most often they prefer doing things in a group and singling these women out to talk about these issues was not easy for them. It was also a little difficult for them to understand why am doing this study and why I am choosing them as my participants.

### **3.2. Secondary sources of data collection**

Secondary data for this study was collected from textbooks, articles, journals and related works in the University of Oulu library. The secondary source data included scientific articles that have been published concerning Cameroon and other countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania and also some concerning China, Europe and the United States of America on early childhood education, attainment levels, gender and child labour. During this process of data collection, most of the information was retrieved from the

library resources of Helsinki University library and also from working papers from the Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon concerning the structures and resources for education of children and the responsibilities of both parents and the government.

### **3.3. Method of data analyses**

My informants who are mostly parents from the local community provided data in the course of the interview. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to choose the best method which suits this research of which content analysis to transform the collected data to the final result was the best option. Patton (2002) suggestion on the use of tape recorder and notes taking during the interview process was considered. The analysis process used the following methods; data transcription and data reduction as stated by Creswell (2002, 7).

### **3.4. Data transcription and data reduction**

The first phase of the data transcription from the interview from the first three respondents was completed within two weeks. Recorded interviews were listened to several times to check and confirm that the interviewer words were accurate with the transcribed data, which follows the guidelines of Patton (2002). The recorded interviews were listened to over various times to ensure the interviewer had a fullest and accurate understanding of the views of the respondent. When it was felt that further clarification was needed, reference was made to the written notes that were taken during the interview process.

Data reduction was the second step in the data analysis process; this was in order to reduce respondent's answers to the given questions to issues that were important to the research study and to eliminate those responses, which were considered to be beyond the scope of the research area under investigation. This reduction process further simplified the data while transforming the data collected into written data in the form of notation or transcript. From the data, two categories were classified and were grouped according to those concerning the family resources (parents; those parents in the cities and in villages formed two categories) and the program resources that included the NGOs, government and local community initiatives. The collected data was analyzed based on the parents perception,



the perception of the head teachers and the PTA. Miles and Huber (1994) suggest that data display is a resume of information that shows themes that emerges from the interview and such guidelines were also followed in this research.

### **3.5. Content analysis**

Content analysis was used in the analysis process after the data had gone through the transcription and reduction process. As a researcher, I tried to respect the research code of conduct governing research in education and social sciences. I needed to follow the ethical procedure and as an international student, I needed to respect the community where I selected my participants, I therefore needed to maintain a good relationship with the various quarter heads of the various communities. (Manion and Morrison) suggest we should be clear when discussing with them the type of research and aims of the research. Again, I guaranteed the anonymity and confidentiality of the names of participants. (Marion & Morrison p64 – 65; John W Creswell 2005 p178). My participants all agreed after I assured them that the research would be carried out according to ethical procedure in educational and social science research. My participants drawn from various small communities took part freely in the interview but were reminded of their rights and powers in the course of the interview process. Also with permission from the quarter heads my intermediary, in Cameroon it was possible to fix a suitable day and time for online interview conversations between the researcher and the research participants.

The research data is also reliant on the reliability of the intermediates interpretation and relaying of participants responses, however they were also assured of their confidentiality and anonymity (Marion & Morrison) of their information throughout the research process. During the process of the interviews, the study participants' identity was further protected by coding the communities as "*U V W and X*", substituting place names to avoid any invasion of privacy. Marion & Morrison (2003) suggest that names could be replaced or substituted with pseudo or other names. All these measures helped to assure participants that data collected would only be used for the research purpose intended. In the beginning it was quite difficult to conduct the interviews in the various local communities, as most of them understand this research to be a censor organized by a Non-Government Organization (NGO) from the western world and thereby needed some clarifications. My intermediary in

Cameroon helped in explaining the purpose and nature of the study as purely academic and the freedom of choice to take part or not.

Having been outside of the country for 3 years, much consideration was given (to focus more on open-ended questions) not to infringe on their culture and draft the questions reflecting their culture. In the North of the country, in which females do not go to school according to their culture, questions like what can be done to improve the lives of female children were asked. Out of the three respondents in this region, two were women to enable better understanding of the female perspective on what can be done on the issue of female education. Most of the participants responded in English but mixed it with Pidgin English, local dialects and some French phrases in preliminary online chat before the oral interviews commenced. All interviews were conducted in the presence of an intermediary, who accompanied participants during the interviews. The author was responsible for the questioning and recording during the interviews.

The interviews were the main source of the data collection for this study using open-ended questions. This was to give parents the free will to express their perception about the role they play in early childhood education. It was for them to tell their experiences and mostly in their own words, to gain an insight of their understandings of childhood education and their personal challenges in becoming involved and how education is perceived in affecting the socio-cultural and economic development of Cameroon. Three research questions that were used to establish this were:

- What are the challenges you face as parents in the process of taking part in early education of your children
- How is early childhood education in Cameroon affected by the socio-cultural and economic issues?
- In what ways does the public-private partnership affect early childhood education?
- Does literacy level of parents affect their contribution to childhood education?

From the transcripts of the interview data the following recurring themes arose as common themes perceived by the parents. The information in the analysis is derived from the respondents.

### **3.6. Parents answers to the research questions**

#### **3.6.1. Share decision**

The respondents perceived the relationship among parents and children's education program not to be conducive for them as parents. The reason for this, was that they believed the other stakeholders of education or related to education do not often consider their opinion. Parents believed they should be included in the drawing up of school curriculum activities and matters related to textbooks, fees and other classroom decisions. They also believed there should be a common ground for parents, teachers and school leaders for dialogue.

According to the respondents, the only area where parents and teachers come together and make their voices heard is only at the level of the PTA meetings, and even when parents are included there is always a secondary motive behind it. The respondents described this shared decision as '*being too poor*' and uncollaborative. They see the association to be very exploitative and corrupt and parents consider that their voice is not heard. One of the respondents said *they need us only when they are in need of money* and that because of the corrupt and exploitative nature of the association they no longer respect the teachers and head teachers involved.

#### **3.6.2. Support**

Parents perceive their relationship with teachers, head teacher, NGOs and the government as non-supportive. According to the respondents, one area of importance is the need for support which would enable them to learn and speak the language of instruction in school as this would enable them assist their children and manage their homework at home hence improving their communicative skills. Most of the respondents commented on the fact that language is a major barrier to communication and also that, the lack of supportive materials to improve home literacy levels is lacking.

Another area where parents think they need support is to break with the older cultural traditions and beliefs that girls' child should not be sent to school but rather they should be trained as good future 'wives'. As such, most parents were of the opinion that, education should be free for girls. The community and other stakeholders of education should also encourage families to participate in children's education. According to most respondents girls are now leading in some countries and why not in Cameroon.

### **3.6.3. Limited resources**

Parents feel that the government neglects them, especially those respondents living in the countryside. For most of them, lack of transportation to ease access to school is a major problem, young children especially would be unable to make daily journeys to and from school, which may sometimes be as long as 30 kilo metres. Most of the schools are understaffed and lack adequate facilities for learning and thus parents prefer their children to stay at home and help with the farm work, despite their awareness of the benefits that comes with early childhood education.

Again, respondents talked of limited resources in relationship to their income and expressed a desire for their children to acquire sound and good education. Their low levels of income prevent them from sending their children to good schools in urban area. According to one of the parent

*my monthly income cannot even feed my entire family and education is not a priority.*

### **3.6.4. Cultural toleration**

Parents claimed that the society and culture tend to discourage them to consider the idea of early childhood education as a compulsory area of education, as some cultures encourage young children to help with household work. There are many children who work in plantations and most girls are discouraged to start school at a young age or not to even attend school at all.

*I am motivated today because I know, I can voice out what affects society due to culture. When I went to Europe I found out that they no longer have [that kind of] culture and there is freedom as boys and girls go school as well as both young and old*

said one respondent.

### **3.6.5. Expertise**

A common theme brought out up by parents or participants was that of expertise. Parents feel the educational system lacks enough experts in the field; hence enough care is not given to the children. Most schools can only provide a well trained head teacher and the PTA also supports the schools to hire untrained teachers on a private contract bases, as most of the PTA teachers have not received formal training from a teachers training college but have attained a higher education qualification. One respondent commented,

*Those children of my friends in the kindergarten are not different from these ones at home.*

For some of these parents, the unqualified teachers are the problem.

## **4. Results and discussions**

Two out of the three parents interviewed, who lived in urban area, are of the opinion that their level of education is a determinant of the level of educational attainment of their children. Out of all those who were interviewed in the cities, 66.7% of the respondents had been able to attain an advanced level of education; while only 33.3% of those who have acquired advanced education were living in the villages. This is a clear indication that even basic educational services are lacking in the rural areas (countryside) in most parts Cameroon. All six respondents from the rural areas were of the opinion that, the schools are under-staffed and lack basic structures like classrooms, toilets and a good source of water supply.

Parent A was of the opinion that

*for my children to go to school they have to walk on foot for 30km to the nearest city were the government has established a school and we have been calling on the government to give us a school that can serve out village. We have a big population and most of us can afford to send our children to school because our cash crop farms of cocoa give us good money. Some of my friends who have relations in the cities send their children to them so that they can attend good schools and have a better future but I do not have any relation in urban area and my children are very young and need to be close to me.*

### **4.1. Parental perception on the impart of early childhood education for their children**

The data revealed that even though 88.8% of the parents interviewed in the countryside had not received any form of education, they were still of the opinion that their children will benefit from preschool education. One of the respondents from the countryside further explained,

*Parent A: I have not been to school and throughout my life I have lived in the village and work as a farmer but my son who lived with his uncle in urban area will soon go to college. He started to live with my brother when he was three years old and went to nursery school and then to primary school. In the village we don't have a school and if you*

*don't have someone in urban area, your child will not go to school and the government doesn't care about us and the future of our children.*

Another parent added that

*Parent B: early childhood education is good for our children but it has become an additional cost on us the parents. The government creates school in our villages just for political reasons for us to vote for them during elections and after that no money is given to construct classrooms and other facilities for our kids. Because we want our children to have a better future, we have formed the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and all the parents have to raise money to construct classrooms, toilets and provide good water to our children and teachers. Our school that was created by the government in the year 2002 has just three teachers from the government. Most teachers refuse to come when they are posted because some complain of bad roads and lack of good health facility and no electricity. We have to hire private teachers who are paid by the PTA and at the moment we have six teachers under the PTA payroll. Three classrooms are under construction because most of our children are of the age to go to school and out of the ten classrooms, only two was constructed by the government and the rest by the PTA budget.*

Further information from the respondents reveals that, two out of the three who have acquired higher education in the countryside were retired from civil service and preferred to live in the countryside. In relation to those who had no form of formal education in the villages (88.9%) might have some form of informal education about the importance of education from other parents. The problem faced with early childhood education in Cameroon and most parts of Africa is that the countryside provides employment for about 90% of the population in the agricultural sector (Baland & Robinson, 2000; Bhalotra & Heady, 2003; Amin, 1994). This figure has implications for Cameroon because with more than 70% of the rural population living on less than \$1/day, child labour to assist parents in generating income, which affects participation in early childhood education (Tenikue, 2010).

Parents were also of the view that the initial preparation of their children should be a combined effort between the government and themselves. According to them, the government should provide kindergartens with qualified staff to educate their children.

When asked what the reasons were for most of the people in the countryside having just basic education, the respondents explained that teachers sent to most of their schools in the countryside refused to come and teach. This point is also highlighted in Alemanji (2010) as he pointed out that as a result of teachers failing to show up to their post in rural sectors of Cameroon, many schools remain unstaffed and this affects students' learning process, learning outputs and learning outcomes. A few reasons why rural sectors do not attract these teachers is because they lack infrastructures like roads, electricity, and pipe-borne water. Fan and Chen (2001) however, support the view that preschool education is a means to develop early literacy skills among children.

#### **4.2. Family income as a determinant of early childhood education**

Just as early childhood education programs can provide resources to families in an effort to improve children's learning, families equally have important resources that can contribute to the partnership. One such family resource that was considered in this analysis was the income level of the family, which took into consideration the income of the parents. In urban areas, 77.8% of the parents had a monthly income that was above 100,000 frs while just 22.2% of the parents had monthly income of above 100,000 frs in the rural area. This is coupled with the fact that, the families in the rural area generally have low income, but with large family sizes of between 5-8 children per family and with extreme cases where some families have up to 10 children.

Though the results revealed that 33.3% of the parents had an income of 50,000 frs and below in urban areas while a majority in the villages (66.7%) earn a monthly salary of less than 50,000 frs, however, there are some exceptional rich farmers in the countryside (those engaged in cash crop cultivation such as cacao, coffee, oil palm and rubber). Self-employment is common in the countryside as over 95% of the population is self-employed and depends on the land for their livelihoods. Agricultural systems, especially food crops, have seriously been affected by the impacts of climate change. Approximately 55% of the respondents in the rural areas complained of a drop in productivity. According to another parent,

*Parent C: two years ago, my children were attending one of the best primary schools owned by an NGO: United Action for Children (UAC), but because of poor harvest from my farms*



*I cannot afford to pay the high school fees. I decided to send them to a government school but since then my children have been complaining that they prefer UAC because they go to school by bus and the school bus brings them home after school*

In most situations when the parents do not have an above basic education background their children it is usually more likely that their children do follow in their like by dropping out of school during or after graduating from basic education. Firstly, agricultural households may face higher opportunity costs of agriculture and may view agriculture as an alternative to education (Bhalotra and Heady, 2003).

Parent D was of the opinion that *I want my son to be a farmer and he will make more money as a better life as a farmer. It is a tradition that my first son should follow my trade and since I inherited it from my father he too must do so.*

Secondly, agricultural households may be more exposed to income reductions due to bad weather, price fluctuation and lack of storage facilities (Bracken et al., 2004). Parent D further explains that

*most of our vegetables and fruits go bad when we fail to sell them all in the market and we do not have storage facilities.*

These additional challenges in the countryside do not mean the situation in the urban areas is much better. Despite the higher income of families living in the urban areas, the living costs are much higher than in the rural areas, and other costs such as transportation, further the problem as most parents and children live far from work places and their schools.

The supply of early childhood education has a significant effect on children's education. The further the distance to school, the lower the likelihood to enter or complete the corresponding schooling stage. The findings from this study reveal that the countryside has larger family sizes as a social security system in terms of child labour. According to five out of the six parents interviewed in the villages, they have a family size of between 7-9 children. Parent E was of the opinion that

*My children are a source of security because during the faming season it is very expensive to hire labour. We depend on agriculture to survive and my two wives also cultivate vegetables and corn very close to the riverbank all-year-round. Our nine children provide*

*the labour we need and because we have our buyers from urban area who come three times a week, we make good money. After the planting season we engage in hunting and fishing and also in craftwork.*

### **4.3. Gender consideration in early childhood education**

Gender issues are often rooted in culture and it affects females in their participation in socio-economic development in most parts of Cameroon. Gender and increased access to schooling in Cameroon by Johannes and Noula (2010) provides an insight into gender disaggregation. The issue of gender was considered during the data collected from households in which parents were asked how many children they have, their gender and how many of those are in school and why. Out of the 9 parents interviewed, with three from urban area and six from the villages, analysis revealed that 5 out of the 6 families in the villages were headed by men while 2 out of the 3 families in urban area by women. The families with a female head of household in urban area indicated a greater preference for education than those in the villages. According to parent F who is a female living in urban area,

*I want my child to go to school because I know the importance of education. I am a teacher by profession and I want my child to be a medical doctor.*

While parent G, who is a female living in one of the villages, said

*My daughter helps me in the farm and she is my source of strength and though she is just 8 years old, she also helps me with domestic activities. She is just like a husband, a child and a sister to me.*

This has implications for early childhood education of children in Cameroon, as traditional issues are stronger in the countryside than in the cities. Preference is given to the male child in terms of education especially in those families headed by a man. This is because the men make most if not all the decisions concerning their families and the female children assist the mother at home with domestic activities and also in the farm and female children are often given for marriage at a very young age (between 10-14 years). The analysis revealed that 3 of the families (33.3%) in the village, were headed by women and

this figure represents those who had been widowed. The rate of divorce is very low in the countryside but a much higher in the urban areas.

Cultural issues remains a major deterrent of female involvement in the family decision making process as women are marginalized by social structure and by most men. The varied activities that families engage in at home have an impact on children's access to education and on the overall family-school partnership (Tenikue, 2010). The male child is given priority for education, as expressed by parent H

*according to my tradition, my female children are assigned to a man at birth and when they between 11 to 13 years of age I give them for marriage officially. My male children go to school and manage my business when I am old.*

The female children often assist their mother in the kitchen from the age of five years, while the male children have enough time to study after school. This view is supported by Fan and Chen (2001) who state that beliefs / culture family members share with children at home regarding education can influence their success.

The women in the cities demonstrated more of awareness in relation to early childhood education than those in the countryside. Though some of the female-headed families in urban area complained of the expensive nature of early childhood education, most of them preferred their children to enroll in private schools. When asked why, they said that they considered the government schools to be too relaxed and the performances of children are not as good when compared to some of the private schools. Almost all the families in the cities give equal opportunities to both the male and the female children and the influence of culture on gender is much weaker in the cities than in the countryside. When asked of their perception towards adult education, the women showed more interest, while the men were not in support.

Family factors related to lack of female literacy and educational achievements, have been identified by Cotton (1996). These factors includes the social class of parents and attitudes towards formal education as it affects their cultural values, demand for child labour, division of labour along gender lines, selective education of children based on perceived cost and future benefits of schooling, the need for perpetuation of the family name, and religious beliefs. Parents' education and income levels have been found to have significant

positive correlation with their daughters' education. This could explain why there is a difference in the access which boys and girls have to the education system, these differences in levels of access between male and female children are significant as they contribute to gender differences later in life.

#### **4.4. Family size and investment in early childhood education**

Lloyd and Blanc's (1996) assessment of children's schooling in sub-Saharan Africa identified the possible effect of other children's presence as an obstacle to early childhood education. In their study that included Cameroon amongst other country in the sub-Saharan region, they observed that the presence of young children in the household increases the time needed for childcare. This is a responsibility often shared amongst older children and family members because family support is an important social security system in most parts of Cameroon and Africa in general.

From the data collected, it is clear that the family sizes have a direct relationship with the location of the family; those living in the cities and those in the countryside. The family sizes in the cities are often small with 77.8% of the respondent having between 1-3 children while just 11.1% of the respondents have family size with 6 children and above. The reverse situation occurs in the village in which 22.2% of the families have between 1-3 children while 88.9% of the respondents have 6 children and above. Given the fact that family (parents) income and level of education are important determinants of early childhood education, this relationship represents a negative impact to those living in the countryside.

Education becomes a prioritized, in terms of family siblings, in situations of limited family resources and some respondents were of the view that they prefer to encourage male education especially when a choice has to be made. Butcher and Case (1994) observe that sibling composition and educational attainment in a family with limited financial resources creates possibilities for opportunity cost. In this situation they further explained that, the presence of one child, might alter the opportunity cost of investing in the education of another.

Parents who intend to maximize the sum of their children's income but are limited in their ability to borrow will stop short of investing until the rate of return to each child's education is equal to the market rate of interest. In such a situation, children with the highest perceived marginal return to education would receive the most education. Even in families with weak or no competition, there are other possibilities, which could affect access to education. For example, a girl with only sisters would receive more education than a girl with brothers.

Though a female child might have priority in some cases if she is the first child in the family (Tenikue, 2010). That notwithstanding, this tendency can result in a gender gap in education as most parents place a higher premium on the education of boys, which is part of the culture in the north and northwest region of Cameroon (Johannes and Noula, 2010).

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Early childhood education is of great importance not only for children, but their parents, families and society because of the significant role it plays in perpetuating the desirable changes in children, which affect positively upon society. Preschool is the first step that provides an opportunity for early childhood education and lays the foundations for a child's intellectual development capacity, interpersonal skills, social behavior and personality. According to Rogers (2003), early childhood education goes beyond the limits of the acquisition of knowledge to the development of abilities, skills and qualifying characters that are geared towards capacity building. In Cameroon, early childhood education at the level of awareness is on the positive side but implementation of such programs remains questionable (Amin, 1994; Tenikue, 2010). This is due to a lack of structures and institutions to support both parents and children and the wide disparities that exist between those living in cities and the countryside, corruption and the violation of human and children's right.

The findings of this study indicate significant differences in the perception of parents in relation to early childhood education . A dividing line exists between those who are educated and less (or no education) education, those living in the countryside and those living in cities, those with larger family sizes and those with smaller family sizes, those with higher income and those with lesser income, those who place more importance on male education and who are not in favour of female education (gender issues in early childhood education) and vice versa. Despite these dividing lines, which have created mixed feelings regarding early childhood education, families in general are in support of preschool programs. It was argued that when children received education at an early age, in an interactive manner supporting by a learning environment conducive to education, they would be better equipped with skills needed in the later part of the life.

Bracken and Fischel (2008) corroborate the view that positive parental perceptions towards preschool education benefit children in multiple ways. These children easily develop early literacy and communication skills, especially when local languages in very strong cultures in most parts of Cameroon might act as a limiting factor. Parents were also of the opinion that, early childhood programs help children to cultivate good habits. That

notwithstanding, the role played by parents remains a bigger challenge to a majority of families because parents participation in early childhood education is affected by home literacy levels, income levels, culture, family size, community influence and various other factors. Some cultures in Cameroon support male education while others do not, and families with low-income levels are more likely to make education for male children a priority, rather than female.

Finally, the role played by parents in early childhood education must be considered at two levels; at the level of preschool education (preparing children ready for kindergarten) and the early stages of primary education. Some parents (7 out of 9) were of the opinion that it would be better for children to attend kindergarten before their enrollment in primary schools. The reason given was that between the ages of two to four years, the children will build a better foundation in kindergarten and given greater support because of the facilities that are offered there. According to parent I

*I have three children and one attended kindergarten and I had more time to work during that period but with the first two children they stayed at home till the age of four before they were of the right age to enroll in primary one and before then we had no kindergarten in the village.*

In Cameroon, most children from families with a better income situation provide children with learning kits, rhyme books, games and other learning resources that support preschool education. The PTA have also contributed greatly in improving the learning environment in schools by providing funds for the construction of play grounds, organizing events for kids such as sporting activities and also prize awards to the best pupil at the end of each academic year. Those in the countryside are faced with many challenges because children are considered social security to parents and as providing assistance with farming activities. Less than 5% of children in the countryside receive any form of pre-schooling (Tenikue, 2010), which makes them weaker workplace competitors than their counterparts in the cities.

Early childhood education requires not only family resources but also program resources and at this point, developed nations are better equipped with such resources and in producing human capital than compared to developing countries. This can be seen in the

standards of some primary schools owned by NGOs that are supported by international organizations. An interview with the founder of a school considered to be one of the best primary schools of an NGO in the country says

*United Action Convention (UAC) is a good example in which Peace Corps often visit Cameroon from countries like the Netherlands, Finland, Germany and Belgium to assist in teaching and improving the school curriculum. The performance of children in this school is evident to be amongst the best in the Southwest region of Cameroon in the competitive government common entrance examination in which they scored 100% in 2009, 2010 and 2011 and I believe in July 2012 we will keep the records. Our partners have made an invaluable contribution to our success and last year we had 50 children travelling to Germany. Most parents bring their children to our school not only for quality education but to enjoy the foreign culture of our staffs.*

## **5.1. Recommendations**

The following recommendations are given, based on the identified problems faced by parents and programs in early childhood education and how it might be possible to improve on the current situation. More information needs to be made available to parents, highlighting the importance of pre-school education and the positive impact it can have on the future life chances of young children. Rural areas in particular should be prioritized here as traditional cultural attributes still hold much more strongly in such areas and have much greater effect on the educational opportunities of the children living there. Work still needs to be done on promoting gender balance and equal opportunity within educational systems in Cameroon. Education for female children can be used as a means to try and reduce inequality and to end the continues marginalization of females and female children.

Parental involvement in early childhood education needs to be encouraged. This might be achieved through the development of parent- program partnerships, which provide parents with greater opportunities to be actively involved in decision-making processes. Further development of the PTA, which is already in place, could help to increase its effectiveness as a public-private partnership. The training of local staff, from the same cultural background would also serve to increase parental involvement and promote understanding and a sense of belonging through community participation.



Finally, it could be beneficial to develop family planning programs for the rural areas, with large family sizes. If current thinking in these areas is that a large family size is needed in order to provide a source of labour and provide security in old age for their parents, educating people on the advantages countrywide of a smaller population could help in overcoming the counter productiveness of large size families. With a smaller population, the government would be better able to provide better educational provision and health services. In turn, an increased participation in education, through increased government investment in educational structures and institutions, helps build human capital resources for the social and economic development of the country.

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#### Appendix A: Cover letter to parents (participants)

Good day and welcome to the interview session of my research. Thanks for taking off your precious time. My names are Felix Brandon Ashu, a student at the University of Oulu, Faculty of education. The purpose of this letter is to inform you about my Master Degree thesis research base on 'the role of parents in early childhood education in Cameroon. I wish to ask your permission if you can be among my target group. Information from you will be strictly treated unanimately.

Your role as a participant's will involve your opinion as a parent, what you think is best for your children to improve his or her education. How your contribution can influence early childhood education as parents. Without any hesitation, you have the right to withdraw or acknowledge your participation by simply saying 'yes' or 'no'.

Thanks for understanding.

Appendix B: Interview questions for Parents.

1. What is your opinion about the idea of sending children to school at the age of 5?
2. Are in favor of the idea for females not to attend school at tender age?
3. What age do you think is best age to send children to school, why?
4. What is your contribution about organizing Parents teacher education (PTA) Meeting?
5. What do you think of parents, teachers and administration relationship?
6. What can you say about those parents who focus their interest most on economic activities than with their kids?
7. What do you think about parents who push the cause of economic hardship as the reason for not sending their kids to school?
8. What in your opinion can be the main reason that could hinder girls not attending schools at their tender age?



Appendix C

Cameroon.

