



The Impact of Family Environment and Family Management on Early Childhood Care and Education in the Estate Sector of Sri Lanka

Samitha Udayanga

Abstract

The family is responsible for shaping children to perform well in education and secure basic health care standards by crafting an enabling environment. Since the introduction of a comprehensive ECCE policy in 2004, families have been enabled to access quality early childhood care and education services in Sri Lanka, but the progress in selected estate communities falls short. This research thus explores how does family environment influenced by unique sociocultural determinants of estate communities (as a disadvantaged community) in the country affect ECCE provisions and their outcomes. Drawing on data from forty-four interviews, four focus group discussions, and empirical observations in six estate communities selected from Nuwaraeliya, Badulla, Kandy and Rathnapura districts indicates the failure of family management and uncooperative family environment are detrimental to the provision of ECCE services and obtaining intended outcomes. Estate dwellers are less likely to continue a managed-happy-family life as informed decision-making is left out unconsciously due to certain subculture determinants. The lack of age-appropriate experiences about childcaring responsibilities can lead to failures of family management; this in turn negatively affects ECCE in the estate sector. Thus, reinforcing an enabling family environment through contextualised policies is essential to ensure good and quality early childhood care and education for children in studied estate communities of the country.

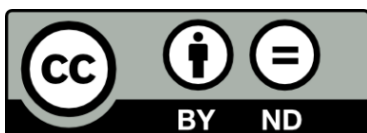
Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, Estate Sector of Sri Lanka, Family Environment, Family Management, Sociocultural Determinants

Department of Sociology,
University of Ruhuna,
Matara, Sri Lanka

*senithsrisami@gmail.com



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9826-691X>



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INTRODUCTION

Young minds are likely to be endangered if not given effective and appropriate guidance. Therefore, effective and proper guidance are established through ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) policies in several countries, even though their approaches are different (Vargas-Barón, 2015). Moreover, the way appropriate and effective guidance is given to children can be influenced by socioeconomic and cultural determinants, including the family environment (Baldock, 1999; Coyne, Hallström, & Söderbäck, 2016). The family environment is the closest social sphere where children are growing up, and hence its influence on child development is critical. The essential capabilities are inculcated within children with the help of significant others of the family environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chaiklin, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Family as a primary socialisation agent is important for children to absorb necessary skills during their early childhood (Dillon, 2014; Mead, 1928; Newman & Grauerholz, 2002). As a priority social policy area, ECCE can facilitate countries to elevate child development outcomes, particularly for the most impoverished and disadvantaged, but the policy implementation is likely to be

disrupted due to the negative sociocultural influences (Harkness & Super, 2010; Woodhead, 1999). This study thus explores how the family environment and family management influence early childhood care and education in a mostly impoverished and disadvantaged community (the estate sector) in Sri Lanka.

ECCE refers to a “range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development during the early years of life” (UNESCO, 2012). Health, nutrition, sanitation, hygiene and protection from violence are considered core aspects of Early Childhood Care (ECC), while early stimulation, education, guidance and development are regarded as core aspects of Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Rao & Sun, 2015; UNESCO, 2012). Although early childhood can include years from birth to the age of eight years, it has been reduced to five in Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2014). Early childhood care and education aim to make the children independent while creating a positive and well-balanced self-image (Garcia & Neuman, 2010). However, early childhood care and education policies are not implemented in a vacuum, meaning policies are implemented where sociocultural influence is significant (Nsamenang, 2007).



Original Article

Early Childhood Development encompasses the physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development of a child from the prenatal stage to the age of eight (Garcia & Neuman, 2010). However, this development happens in various settings such as houses, schools, communities; this involves a wide range of activities, from child care to parental education. Since ECCD occurs in multiple locations, it is clear that the ECCD is influenced by the societal setting, including the family environment (Sattanno, Swisher, & Moore, 2003). From a development point of view, as Garcia and Neuman (2010) argued, children who come from more vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds need good-quality services and care the most, including the children with special needs.

Studies show that ECCE is a powerful source to help break poverty in the developing world (Vargas-Barón, 2016). Investing in early childhood care and education would bring about significant progress in children's later lives, one of which is poverty reduction (Hufkens, Figari, Vandelannoote, & Verbist, 2019). Proper and well-administered ECCE provisions have also been recognised as a practical pathway to social inclusiveness if programmes implemented are accessible to all segments of society without any discrimination (Miyahara & Meyers, 2008). Those who have participated in

good-quality ECCE demonstrate a considerable level of achievement in their lives from others who have not participated in ECCE programmes. In addition, it is noteworthy that some are well-off with holistic development even without participating in ECCE programmes, provided that they are given proper guidance by their surrounding environment (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003). However, formal ECCE programmes are directed at improving child wellbeing, and hence, ECCE can assist governments in achieving their overarching sustainable development goals. Heckman and Carneiro (2003) assert that the highest rate of return on investment can be possible when very young children are taken into priority through ECCE programmes.

Early childhood is critical as it sets a strong foundation for a child's future life (Vargas-Barón, 2015, 2016). Proper child care in early childhood plays a crucial role in brain development and child wellbeing (Pettengale, 2020). Both physical and psychological development is equally important so that children can acquire proper education with good quality. Therefore, it is clear that early education is closely related to early childhood care and development (ECCD). Without access to quality ECCE, many disadvantaged children fall behind their more advantaged peers before they even begin primary education (Korintus, 2012). As they get older, social gaps will widen, meaning



Original Article

that they are less likely to perform well in schools, earn less as adults, and are highly likely to engage in antisocial behaviours (Wheeler et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the cultural imperative in implementing ECCE policies can impact brain development positively in terms of a neurological perspective (McCain & Mustard, 1999). In addition to some basic competencies that should be achieved during early

childhood (UNESCO, 2018), some socio-emotional capacities and habitual ways of responding to generic social events are developed during early childhood, and cultural sensitivity in that regard is crucial (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Rogoff, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates the sensitive periods in early brain development and the influence of environment during the early childhood.

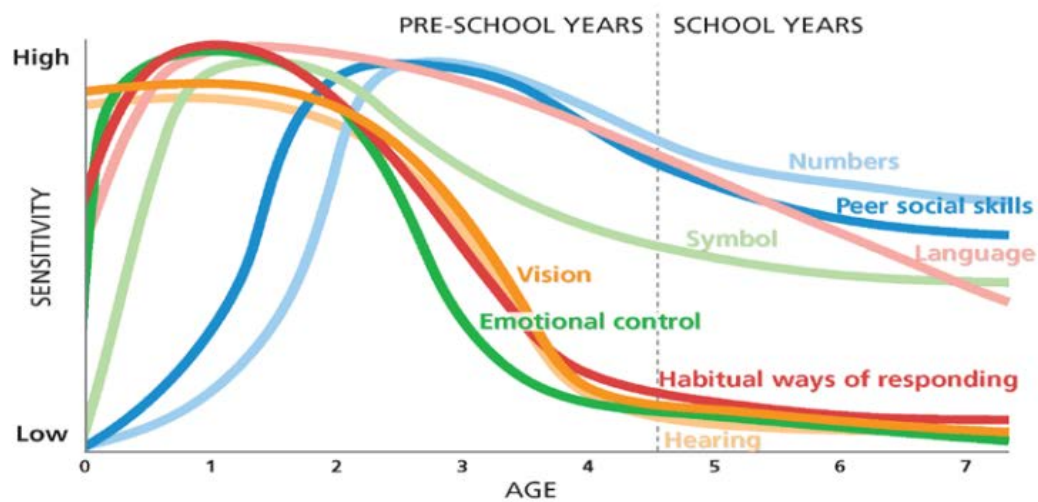


Figure 1: Sensitive periods in early brain development

Note: This graph illustrates the sensitive periods in early brain development and the influence of the environment. Source: Graph developed by Council for Early Childhood Development (2010)

The graph depicted in Figure 1 demonstrates that from the conception of a child until the age of five years, development in social, emotional, cognition aspects is sensitive to and dependent on contextual specificities of family, neighbourhood or community. Interactions between the

developing child and the environment are important, as interventions on ECCE are likely to be influenced by those environmental conditions (Council for Early Childhood Development, 2010). This study has thus strived to understand how the environment enables children to reach their fullest potential.



Original Article

Brain development occurs exponentially in the early years of a child, during which children are greatly influenced by their surrounding environment and significant others (Rogoff et al., 2003; Wachs, Gruen, Wachs, & Gruen, 1982; Whiting & Whiting, 2013). The importance of intent participation through which children take part in understanding essential values and socio-emotional skills was thus recognised while asserting the importance of family and community care from that of imposed policies of ECCE on communities (Rogoff, 2003). In that sense, the implementation of ECCE policies can be jeopardised if the surrounding environment responds negatively to the established policies and regulative mechanisms.

Children's education and health are significantly influenced by how they are grown up (Howes, 2011). Thus, fostering an enabling environment for education and care, particularly in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, has become a prioritised ECCE policy arena in many developing countries (Vargas-Barón, 2015). Although the impact of early childhood on later lives and social development has been well documented, how most vulnerable and excluded communities reflect upon their experiences with regard to ECCE received less attention. The influence of social experiences on neuronal development and social wellbeing has been studied (McCain &

Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2006). But how the family environment influences conscious interventions and policy responses in improving child wellbeing in the estate sector of Sri Lanka has received considerably less attention (Quennerstedt, Robinson, & I'Anson, 2018).

Therefore, this study intends to explore how family environment and family management influence early childhood care and education-related services provision and their outcomes in the estate sector of Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sri Lanka has made significant progress in improving child wellbeing through innovative approaches (World Bank, 2014). It has the lowest child mortality rate compared to other countries in South Asia (SAARC, 2009). Besides, considerable progress has been reported in exclusive breastfeeding, antenatal care, and immunisation (Hanefeld, 2008; Sayre, Devercelli, Neuman, & Wodon, 2015). Education access is granted practically to every child, with no considerable gender disparities (Sayre, Devercelli, Neuman, & Wodon, 2015). Child poverty has declined significantly during the past few years in Sri Lanka, but the sectoral difference persists (Gunatilaka, Wan, & Chatterjee, 2009). Studies indicate that there are some disparities in how children are cared, often as a result of where they live (World Bank, 2014). Studies show that



Original Article

many children in Sri Lanka still live in low-income families, which is worst in the estate sector (Gunetilleke, Kuruppu, & Goonasekera, 2008; Periyasamy, 2018). Therefore, addressing child poverty for children to benefit from ECCE programmes equally like their peers in other sectors has been prioritised in Sri Lanka's child welfare policies (Children's Secretariat, 2014).

In Sri Lanka, 17 per cent of children under the age of five are stunted, and 22 per cent among them are under the age of two years. Wasting affects 15 per cent of children during their early childhood (World Health Organization, 2017). Malnutrition is severe in the estate sector and other most disadvantaged communities compared to rural or urban sectors (Ranathunga & Gibson, 2015; Vijayakumar & Brezinova, 2012). In addition, an array of evidence from research shows that low income and marginalisation are associated with behavioural challenges among young children, which can prevent them from quality early childhood care and education. UNICEF (2020) recognised that even though children are attending schools, low-income families (in the estate sector) find it difficult to foster a conducive environment for learning with pleasure. Ironically, low income and subculture-related disposition increase domestic violence largely, which negatively impacts child wellbeing. This signifies the urgent need of establishing a

contextualised policy in the estate sector to elevate child wellbeing.

Although UNICEF and other international organisations generally use "ECCE" to denote programmes for early childhood development, Sri Lanka more broadly conceptualises it as "ECCD", of which ECCE has been considered a subsection. ECCD includes every support extended to health, nutrition, education, social services, care, and protection, emphasising the most disadvantaged communities. A comprehensive policy on early childhood care and development was adopted in 2004. It recognised five areas of action: Health and Nutrition, Early childhood Education, Child Care and Protection, Parents, Family and Community and Investment in ECCD. Therefore, early childhood care and education have been considered two subsections of the ECCD policy in Sri Lanka.

The World Bank (2004) found that while health, nutrition, social and child protection services are advanced, early childhood education policies and provisions are limited. Especially, Sri Lanka has made significant progress in health care, nutrition and social security; sector-specific policy development has been highly imbalanced (Udayanga, Herath, & Ekanayake, 2021). The World bank thus signifies that from a policy perspective, enabling early child development in the country requires addressing gaps and disparities in



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ECE policies and provisions (World Bank, 2014).

Although in 2012 (the latest data provided in 2012), 65% of children have access to ECCE, regular and continuous attendance has become an issue, particularly in the estate sector (World Bank, 2014). In 2012, of 1,087,680 children from 3 to 5 years of age, 551,576 regularly attended preschools and ECD centres, even though the quality of learning was limited (Warnasuriya et al., 2020). Nevertheless, as the world bank indicates, access to ECE is lower than that of access to formal education (97%), even though the reasons behind it are unclear. Poor parental awareness, geographical difficulties, and extreme poverty were some of the reasons preventing children from regular attendance in ECE (Udayanga, 2018; Udayanga et al., 2021).

The establishment of a National Child Protection Authority in 1998 is another effective policy initiative to address issues regarding child welfare through which child protection is ensured and forced relevant laws in the country. In 2004, the government approved a comprehensive national policy on ECD. This document depends on several international policy frameworks because Sri Lanka became a member of the world declaration for education for all, more commonly known Jomtien declaration (UNICEF, 1990). In addition, Sri Lanka was influenced by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

– Colombo Statement on children of South Asia (SAARC, 2009). Furthermore, Sri Lanka recently became a part of the sustainable development agenda (2015), under which ECCE has been given considerable attention.

Sri Lanka adopted a national policy on ECD in 2014. This national policy on ECD provides a holistic and integrated vision for early childhood development (Children’s Secretariat, 2014). In addition, it highly concerns children with special needs. This initiative (2014) introduced a well-planned policy framework based on eight guiding principles, which focused on children’s right to life, survival and development as the foremost guiding principle. All kinds of equality, respect for child interests, holistic and consistent approach to development, equal access to learning, the importance of social environment are some of the stances upon which the guiding principles rest. The vision of this policy is “to create an enabling environment that ensures every child’s right for optimal development” (Children’s Secretariat, 2014).

According to the National Policy interpretation on ECD, child care refers to a set of actions that ensure child health, nutrition, protection, and psychosocial development. In contrast, education in early childhood refers to the organised provision of the developmentally appropriate learning experience within a child-friendly



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environment (Children's Secretariat, 2014).

Provisioning early childhood education ensures that all children have equitable access to quality learning experiences, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. To this end, the national policy presents eighteen strategies that focus on different areas to be focused. For example, infrastructure development, improving equitable access, promoting awareness on ECCE, strengthening local authorities, developing a national core curriculum, elevating quality standards of ECD centres, capacity building, early detection of children at risk, promote community-level involvement are some of those strategies. On the other hand, in order to assure all children have access to quality care and protection, the Nation Policy on ECCD advocates establishing ten strategies. For example, promoting and facilitating the expansion of existing care and services, searching for alternative childcare mechanisms, promoting prevention networks to protect children are some of those strategies that come under Child Care and Protection.

The estate sector and ECCE in Sri Lanka

The total population of Sri Lanka is little more than twenty million as of 2012, of which 4.4 per cent of the population (901,647) dwell in the estate sector (Central Bank of Sri

Lanka, 2020). Many plantation sector people were recorded in Nuwaraeliya district (53.5%), following Badulla district (18.9%). The country child population under the age of five years is 8.6%, and it was reported to be a slight decline compared to previous years, and a considerable number of children come from the estate sector. As far as multidimensional poverty is concerned, the estate sector shows a significantly higher rate at 0.1134 than urban and rural sectors (Vijayakumar & Brezinova, 2012). In that, 11.3 per cent of the estate population are multidimensionally poor. Vulnerable to the multidimensional poverty index is 0.2242 among the estate population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). The highest number of multidimensional households (12.4%) are in the estate sector. Therefore, the progress of ECCE programmes is highly likely to be downgraded in the estate sector compared to the other sectors of the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020).

The estate sector (commonly known as the plantation sector) in Sri Lanka can be distinguished from other social sectors (urban and rural), owing to its unique subculture and social organisation. The estate sector comprises tea or rubber plantations managed by the state, plantation companies or individual families. The estate sector is defined as land over twenty acres with ten or more indentured resident workers (Bandarage, 1982; Wesumperuma,



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1986). The majority of hill country Indian origin Tamils reside in the estate sector where tea plantations are established. The plantation population consists of about 902,000 persons, of which 72% live in Nuwaraeliya and Badulla districts. Furthermore, due to several reasons, the estate sector remains one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities (Gunetilleke et al., 2008; Ranathunga & Gibson, 2015).

The exclusion and marginalisation in the estate sector were considered a result of systematic discrimination by the state, even though some argue that discrimination against the estate sector has been a consequence of cultural identity contestations (Udayanga, 2018; Wesumperuma, 1986). These communities are often dependent on plantation companies because their very presence is attributed to indentured or bonded labour in plantations. For example, to obtain a house or a living place, plantation labourers must provide their service to the plantation company unless they cannot claim a place of living (Piyarathne, 2008; Wesumperuma, 1986). Thus, even though the estate sector has been considered an integral part of the political landscape in the country, it reflects distinguishingly important structural characteristics from those of urban and rural societies in Sri Lanka. These structural determinants affect development interventions in the estate sector.

The estate sector emerged as a separate social sector once South Indian Tamils migrated to Sri Lanka, and this has been incorporated into their culture and continues to exist. 'Plantation Employment' has often been referred to as the "Semi-Feudal System" characterised by low wages, bonded labour, gender pay gap and poor working conditions (Bandarage, 1982; Guilmoto, 1993; Jayawardena, 1984; Piyarathne, 2008). Plantation labourers were abided by rigid formal and informal regulations. They were exploited unconsciously and characterised by debt bondage and rigid hierarchies of the *Kangany* System (Piyarathne, 2008).

Although the welfare of plantation migrant labourers was out of concern during the mid-nineteenth century, the British colonial government introduced several legislations related to the welfare of plantation labourers (Ferguson, 1999). Under the state-driven laws and regulations, private plantation companies were advised to provide transportation, shelter and primary health care facilities in addition to food and temporary lodging (Bandarage, 1982). Thus, South Indian origin Tamil immigrant labourers were rarely claimed for their rights, which compelled them to create a unique identity contesting with mainstream social norms and values (Piyarathne, 2008; Wesumperuma, 1986). During the 1880s, the British government established medical care facilities to



Original Article

reduce death rates among immigrant Tamil labourers and elevate their health to contribute to the plantation labour force. For several decades, the government and private plantation companies contested welfare service provision and policies in the estate sector (Arunatilake, 2000).

The plantation sector was introduced some basic education facilities under the purview of the government, even though the implementation of this policy was recognised as a responsibility of plantation companies. Thence, a few hill country schools were established, but early childhood education and care were neglected and even not supported through family-based services (Senavirathna & Senavirathna, 2019).

After 1911, hill country Tamils were officially classified as “Indian Tamils” (Wesumperuma, 1986). Following British constitutional reforms, they have been exposed to some regulations with regard to national development, universal suffrage etc., but due to a lack of recognition and narrow definition, ‘Indian Tamils’ have been excluded from the mainstream subsequently (Piyarathne, 2008; Shastri, 1999). It was only in 1984, Indian Tamils were granted citizenship (Shastri, 1999). However, Indian Tamils in the plantation sector continue to develop a unique identity without thinking about assimilation. The state thus identified the estate communities as a separate social sphere characterised by a unique

subculture. Therefore, when social policies are implemented in the estate sector, how estate communities respond to them differs from responses in urban or rural sectors.

METHODOLOGY

Informed by constructivism and interpretivism epistemological position, a qualitative research strategy was employed in this research. The framework for data collection and analysis was based on an explorative-case study design. The constructivist grounded theory with an embedded single-case design was employed in this research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Yin, 2003). A case study for constructivists is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not evident, multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Among several case study designs, an *embedded single-case design* was employed in this research. Embedded single-case design provides an avenue to understand a particular case as embedded in the social context (Yin, 2003). It may consist of a study area encapsulated in a social context.

The main focus of my research was on the complex relationships among family management, family environment and ECCE provisions in the estate sector as a marginalised and most vulnerable community. Studies



Original Article

show that estates are extremely susceptible to poverty and health hazards and are also characterised by a unique culture (Gunetilleke et al., 2008; Piyaratne, 2008). Because the major intention of this paper is to explore the influence of family environment and family management on the implementation of ECCE policies, the estate sector was considered as the *principal context being studied*.

The embedded single-case design is effective when the principal focus case consists of several units or subcategories with distinguishing features (Yin, 2003). Moreover, the external validity of the study can be ensured when multiple cases are considered. Although the overall focus in my research was on the estate sector dynamics, different estate communities (units) were selected. The estate sector in Sri Lanka includes both tea plantations and rubber plantations communities. A significantly larger population lives in tea plantations, particularly in Nuwaraeliya, Kandy, Ratnapura, and Badulla districts. Therefore, six estate communities were purposively selected from those districts as *units of the principal case context*.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with forty-four participants recruited through theoretical sampling, including midwives, parents, children, young adults, and some officers working on estate communities. And four focus group

discussions were conducted with estate community members and plantation sector management. Empirical observations were conducted, in addition. Data were collected from purposively selected six estate communities from Nuwaraeliya, Badulla, Kandy and Rathnapura districts. The sample was recruited in line with theoretical sampling principles, wherein key informants were first interviewed. And then, informed by the first phase of interviews, other participants were recruited while close attention was given to emerging theoretical concepts. Once data were saturated, sampling was terminated.

The collected data were analysed phase by phase while adhering to the principles of grounded theory. The analysis approach presented by both Charmaz and Bryant was used in this study (Bryant and Charmaz, 2019). It was started with line-by-line coding and then moved on to incident-by-incident coding. Regardless of the stage at which the coding occurs, constant comparison was carried out. Once the initial coding was completed, focused coding was carried out to synthesise large segments of initial codes. During this stage, initial codes were compared to select those that consist of the most analytic power. Through focused coding, final concepts (categories) were identified. And the analysis is presented through the story-lining technique (Birks & Mills, 2019).



Original Article

ANALYSIS

More than any other social institution, the family is considered deeply responsible for early childhood care and education, as it is the closest social environment where children learn essential social skills and improve basic socioemotional capacities (Frongillo, Kulkarni, Basnet, & de Castro, 2017). Therefore, any service provided for estate communities on ECCE can only be realised only when the family supports them. Family conditions of estate communities are distinguishably unique; therein, the historically evolved estate sector identity potentially influences how the family of the estate sector is organised (Ferguson, 1999). The structure and the organisation of family in the estate sector are thus different from its urban and rural counterparts. This unique nature of the family seems to disrupt the ECCE services and awareness of ECCE in the estate communities, as analysed in this paper.

Public health officers and child development officers claim that sustained and stable family relationships are important for overall child wellbeing and effectively implement ECCE programmes. Stable and informed relationships between family members can be considered a guiding rule of a “stable family” that has positive implications for early care and education. However, this seems to be interrupted in the estates due to some subculture characteristics such as excessive alcohol consumption,

teenage marriage, fewer experiences, and low education levels among parents. Therefore, getting into family life has been considered a mere and simple lifeworld task. Moreover, as midwives and child care officers describe, many estate dwellers tend to marry as a customary practice (in their teenage), which in turn prevents effective family management while neglecting early childhood care and education.

“Many young girls and boys tend to marry at their teenage years, even though they are not mature enough to form a stable family life. As a result, many families are likely to break apart soon after the marriage because newly married girls and boys are not mature enough to face family issues. In addition, many estate dwellers are relatively less educated. Hence, no adequate concern is given to reproductive health care so that they are often unable to maintain an adequate gap between children.” (Female, Midwife, 38-Year-old)

“Alcohol consumption is a general practice among men in this estate, but women too tend to drink local alcohol in some cases. When families are broken and unstable, both men and women tend to consume liquor excessively as a stress releasing mechanism. Domestic violence is closely related to excessive alcohol consumption. Because of excessive alcohol consumption, certainly financing early health care and education would be difficult.” (Male, Hindu Priest, 42-Year-old)



Original Article

As the above narratives of community participants indicate, the estate dwellers in the studied communities tend to marry at their early ages, even though they are not mentally prepared and matured to form a stable and well-informed family life. As a result, married couples are often likely to break apart when they encounter several problems in terms of income and daily survival once they have given birth to children. Therefore, early child care has been deeply neglected. Moreover, family support for early care is disrupted because parents are not well aware of reproductive health and keeping sufficient distance among children. Besides, some inappropriate behaviours emerge due to the instability in family life, interrupting ECCE in the estate communities.

The absence of age-appropriate experiences among parents is another determinant that prevents estate families from thinking prudently about ECCE. Even though men are equally responsible for child care, women's contribution to child care and education has been recognised as more important (van Polanen, Colonnese, Tavecchio, Blokhuis, & Fukkink, 2017). Care work (including child care and education), as Folbre (2006, 2018) explained, is a moral responsibility of women. Even though child care and education have been recognised as a moral responsibility of women in the estate sector, women are unable to attend

care work due to the absence of age-appropriate experiences. A midwife (49-year-old) explains that even though young girls are married because they are physically (biologically) mature, they are not psychologically mature enough to bear children. Moreover, they do not have relevant skills and experiences to socialise a child, and on the other hand, these girls are prevented from obtaining age-appropriate experiences. Furthermore, the following narrative implies that family stability is likely to be interrupted because of psychological immaturity at the age of marriage, which can reinforce extramarital relationships among parents whilst ECCE is deeply neglected.

"I experienced over the past two decades that the age of eighteen is not an appropriate age for women to get married because they are not mentally matured to face some family issues and to bear a child. They are just like children. **How can a child bear a child? How a child can take care of children?** Even young men are not mentally matured enough to build a stable family life. That is why many are having extramarital relationships." (Female, Midwife, 49-Year-old)

Because families are just formulated as a result of mere means of marriage, but not as a result of a prudent decision to live a "managed happy-life", parents are less likely to understand child care and child protection properly.



Original Article

“A woman from this estate will probably marry a person from the adjacent estate when they become physically mature. They do not think much about age. Parents too want their children to be married as soon as they can. When a girl reaches her maturity (puberty), she is likely to marry a person very soon. Intimate relationships are always promoted within our estate, as it is an enthusiastic experience for many youngsters. They do not think much about managing a family and continuing a happy family.” (Male, Manager- Plantation Company, 32-Year-old)

“What they want is sexual relationships, but not family life. Therefore, when we advise on reproductive health and family planning, estate dwellers seem to neglect it and continue their existing lifestyle. So, how can they bring a healthy child to this world?.” (Female, Midwife, 38-Year-Old)

Parents must support child care and education services provision; otherwise, their outcomes can decline as often identified by midwives. They identify that the growth of children supported by parents shows a positive trend compared to those who are less supported even though they are facilitated through primary health care

and education services. This is an apparent result of the instability and less-managed family life in selected estate communities. As the above quotes indicate, early age marriage is promoted, but future childcare and education needs are not focused on when the marriage decision is taken. Bringing a healthy child to society is a major objective of certain health care services provided, but the estate dwellers do not think much about this promising achievement of bringing a healthy child to the world, and their focus is restricted to marriage and having sexual relationships. Consequently, they are often unable to maintain an adequate gap between children in the family, which disrupts providing sufficient support for children in terms of protection, care and education.

Effective family management is always promoted to bringing a healthy child to the world (Plantation Human Development Trust, 2020), which is lacking in the estate sector, as the above narratives indicate. Sometimes, family planning can be effectively incorporated, but it is difficult to keep estate communities informed about other aspects such as family financial management; and this will cause interruptions in ECCE.

Table 1: Early Stimulation and Responsibilities of Parents

Age Category (by Months)	Responsibilities of Parents
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Original Article

0-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for children to see, hear, move freely and touch parents • Talk to the baby • Providing a child-friendly room • Intimate care and protection
7-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give the baby clean and appropriate household objects and building blocks to hold, bang and drop • Call the baby by name and aware of the response received • Play a little with the baby
13-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help push and pull toys • Let the child scribble • Tell simple stories/ fairy tales • Respond positively/ and correct if something goes wrong with the child
25 onwards until the age of five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the child count, name, compare and share • Improve sharing, caring, tolerance, appreciating with others • Teach songs and stories • Facilitate building block games • Help make simple toys

Note: Table shows responsibilities of parents should be attended at different age levels.
Source: (Family Health Bureau, 2015; UNICEF, 2013)

Another important determinant that prevents parents from facilitating ECCE is the lack of experiences with regard to age-appropriate childcaring responsibilities. Until a child reaches the age of five, parental support is mandatory, as Table 1 demonstrates. Parental support for child care and education varies according to the age category and requires specific training and guidance for parents to perform such activities with their children. Training and facilitating children under the age of five by parents is difficult because it requires constant focus and preparation. However, estate mothers and fathers are not ready to perform indicated activities with children since their concern for childcare and education is considerably low. When parents are engaged in many other essential

activities (such as earning for daily living), age-appropriate child-parental relationships are difficult to expect.

From birth to six months, the mother should facilitate the child to see colours, objects, and the surrounding environment. This is where the requirement of a **child-friendly room** comes. However, estate dwellers are less aware of creating a child-friendly room because no adequate rooms are available within the line house. Creating a child-friendly room is an expensive task, which further discourages parents from creating such a specific environment for children. Even though mothers' contribution during the first six months of a child is attended, overall parents' support is weakened after the first six months when mothers resume



Original Article

work on estates and struggle with poverty instigated daily concerns.

“Mother should talk to their babies so that children can improve their listening abilities and learn basic stories. However, mothers of estates are not talking to their children often. Therefore, children show some deficiency in basic socioemotional skills”. (Female, Midwife, 49-Year-old)

“Miss (midwife) said to me that it would be better to have a child-friendly room. I also feel that it would be good. But because we do not have much money to invest in, we cannot create such a room. We have two rooms, but only one room is available for my family.” (Female, Parent, 26-Year-old)

Attending to some emotional needs of children is a pre-condition for ECCE, but as midwives and some parents describe, mothers are less attentive to some essential emotional needs of children, such as talking and listening to the child. Playing with the child to inculcate basic executive capabilities is important, but mothers and fathers do not pay attention to this because no conducive environment can be provided owing to poverty. Besides, after the baby turns six months, many women resume their work on estates with the child left to their older parents or young children. They are often unable to attend some specific early childhood care and education requirements.

Moreover, the early childhood care and education in the estate communities receive less attention because of the failures of **Family Management**. Family management is an inevitable element of a “stable family” that involves clear and transparent communication, clearly defined routines and roles, shared responsibilities and felt affection and sustained respect for family members. Focus group discussion and in-depth interviews reveal that ECCE is negatively affected in the estate sector because some of the main family management features are disrupted.

“Because my husband migrated to Colombo as a contract worker in a construction company, I am living with his parents in this tiny line-house. I have to take care of those parents and three children simultaneously, which is extremely difficult. Because of the excessive care work, sometimes my elder child (daughter) is assigned to take care of young children.” (Female, Parent, 30-Year-old)

“Often, men are not listening to women. They take family decisions even without the consent of their wives. Moreover, men are really silent for many family related functions. Generally, men think that their one and only responsibility toward the family is financing family functions; that mentality prevents them from involving in support for child care and child education.” (Male, Gramaseva Officer, 33-Year-old)



Original Article

These excerpts indicate that certain features of family management, such as clearly defined roles and routines, shared responsibilities and felt affection receive less recognition. The excessive workload of women prevents them from attending child care and education. Especially, even though child care and protection are generally well attended to due to the country's well-functioning public health care system, education among children is often disrupted as education is considered more expensive. In some cases, young girls are assigned for child care because of the excessive workload of mothers, and it is devastating for girls in terms of lost education and lost age-appropriate experiences, which has long-term impacts on ECCE. When these girls become mothers, they often lack age-appropriate experiences to nurture a child at an early age. In addition, the stability of family life can

be jeopardised since men's responsibility toward childcare and education has been low. Men often think that their predominant responsibility is financing family chores and are unlikely to attend some care work in the family. This causes an excessive burden on women and girls in the family so that ECCE receives a lack of attention.

While reviewing axial codes, family management activities can be categorised into risk mitigation, family planning, family financial management, and relationship management. The estate sector shows a deficiency in some family management functions, partly because of the neighbourhood influence. As focus group discussions reveal, the neighbourhood of line-housing schemes often propagates inappropriate behaviours among estate dwellers that lead to declining the overall wellbeing of life.

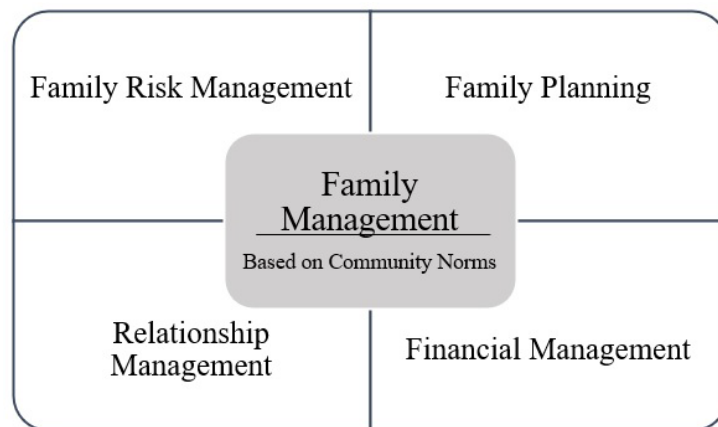


Figure 2 Family Management Processes



Original Article

Note: This figure shows different aspects of family management in selected estate communities. Source: Constructed by the author in line with the axial codes

All domains of family management depend on commonly accepted norms, which are affected by the historically evolved community identity. By 'Family Management', I mean the way in which different functions of the family are decided and performed. Norms of family maintenance have been developed in line with the culture of the estate communities, including the blended religious identity. Even though estate dwellers were believers of Hinduism, a significant number of estate dwellers have been converted into Christianity by missions in recent history. Therefore, the meaning of life has been developed responding to a blended religious identity, which has not been given prominent attention in this study. However, it appears that Christianization has promoted childcare and education, as estate dwellers were compelled to send their children to mission-driven child care centres.

A dominant belief among estate dwellers is that families just happen, and children's birth is beyond their control. Some believe that it happens as a result of the will of God or nature. This cultural belief supports the idea that there is nothing that can be done about chaos in family life, and no proper family-management process is appropriately incorporated. This initial

belief embedded into the estate dwellers' lifeworld can disrupt the stability of family life, which in turn prevents proper care and education of children during their early childhood. When the stability of family life is disrupted, some strange types of family risk reduction mechanisms are likely to develop. For example, child marriage can be considered as a family risk reduction mechanism developed within the estate communities so that estate dwellers can get away with the burden of childcare and education. Estate dwellers strongly believe that marriage is one of the main lifeworld targets that secures life-care and protection. Since the main concern of the family is to separate children of marriageable ages from the family, but not to take maximum possible care of them, the interest in ECCE can decline; and the services given to communities to improve ECCE outcomes are likely to be disrupted as parents are not prepared for ECCE.

"I got married to a person from the same estate at twenty. Now I am twenty-one-year-old. My wife is eighteen-year-old. We have a small kid of eleven months now. I decided to marry because I thought that it would be interesting and fun. I fell in love with a girl, but no plan was available for our future life. My parents too agreed on my marriage".
(Male, Parent, 21-Year-old)



Original Article

“Our parents always spoke about marriage ever since we had attained puberty. They talk about finding a good match all the time. The main purpose of our parents was to marry me off soon because we had five siblings altogether. I am the third child, and my parents wanted me to get married soon like my elder sister. Rather than taking care of students, what they want is to separate children from the family as soon as possible. But now I am thinking about my children’s future”.(Female, Parent, 25-Year-old)

As two estate dwellers emphasise, teenage marriage is promoted within the estate subculture so that young girls and boys do not think much about planning on the sustainability of family life before marriage. As a 21-year-old father explains, he got married even without any future plan. This is common for many young estate dwellers. Because no plan is available at the time of marriage, no proper and effective plan will be there for early childhood care and education. In addition, parents often encourage girls to marry ever since they attained puberty as a community relevant strategy to reduce the economic burden of family life. However, this has negative implications for childcare and education because immature parents (teenage mothers and fathers) do not have the necessary experiences to nurture children effectively. As midwives and some public health officers describe, the age of marriage should not be measured in terms of

biological/physical maturity, but psychological readiness is an important determinant of marriage that reinforces a happy-family life, including effective childcare and education. However, the experiences among young parents reveal that psychological readiness is not given attention when they form their family relationships. Consequently, early childhood care and education receive less attention.

Early stimulation is an essential early childhood care and education process where family facilitation is required (Frongillo et al., 2017). Early stimulation includes facilitating children to observe, talk, sing, read and play. Brain development is closely related to early stimulation, and parental support in this regard is highly essential (Tierney & Nelson, 2009). However, I observed that early stimulation among estate children is jeopardised due to low recognition given to child development through family support. The lack of family readiness for child development, in turn, prevents them from accessing and receiving some ECCE services. For example, some programmes for early stimulation among estate children are implemented but are less likely to succeed due to the lack of family support. During early childhood, parents’ support and facilitation for stimulation are essential, even though estate parents are diverted from this focus. (This can be further aggravated



Original Article

due to multidimensional poverty) as the following mother explains:

“We should work in the plantation often, and sometimes we go for daily paid jobs in vegetable plantations. However, work on the estate has been one of the major income sources for us. Therefore, we do not have much time to think and reflect on child development and child education rather than their mere survival. When we attend to some important and primary concerns, we will not often focus on childcare and education.” (Female, Parent, 30-Year-old)

Intergenerational support within the family is another essential requirement of child care and early stimulation, which is lacking in the estate sector. Even though more than two generations are living in the same line house, the intergenerational support for child care is considerably low. For example, grandmothers sometimes support child care and protection, but they are unable to facilitate children’s early stimulation. Because older adults are less educated and less experienced with regard to ECCE, estate children cannot be properly socialised by those older adults in the estates. Even though grandmothers sometimes help their daughters to take care of children, proper knowledge and skills in child caring and early stimulation are not transmitted. Therefore, midwives encourage and empower mothers to get involved in the early stimulation of children. However, it is

difficult to involve estate mothers in such programmes.

“Now those two children are left to their grandmother and father. They are very incapable of childcaring. Parents of those children have separated, and the mother eloped with a person from another estate. Nobody is there to take care of those children except for their grandparents. Sometimes, their aunt helps them, but not always. They have been neglected, and nobody supports them too.” (Male, Gramaseva Officer, 45-Year-old)

In the above case, the children are left to the grandparents, who are incapable of providing required early childhood care and education. Grandparents also work on the estate, and hence they are unable to attend children’s needs adequately. When innovative approaches are implemented at local levels to elevate ECCE standards, it is not easy to obtain grandparents’ support, partly because they are not attentive to new approaches introduced for estate communities. As the Gramaseva officer explained above, intergenerational support is limited to childminding in the family sphere but is not conducive to effective childcaring and education.

Moreover, collecting firewood is an essential lifeworld activity of the estate dwellers, particularly of women and children, that can indirectly impact family management. Men do not generally engage in collecting firewood, but children, even under the



Original Article

age of five are involved in collecting firewood. Firewood is essential for a household for both cooking and heating purposes. Because estates are located in the cooler regions, estate dwellers often heat their houses by firing tea-wood. Cooking is almost done using firewood and kerosene, and the use of electricity and gas are limited because they are expensive. The firewood available at forest areas and tea plantations are thus being collected by estate women and children as the main source of cooking fuel. Because it has become an essential life world activity, people usually go for collecting firewood even without any urgent need. Estate women and children go out to collect firewood and store it at houses for future use. This is sometimes noted as dangerous, as line-houses are very often fired because of stored firewood.

The practice of collecting firewood disrupts the constant attendance at CDC centres, as women accompany children under the age of five to fetch firewood from plantations and nearby forests. Since this is a kind of joyful activity, small kids like to be accompanied by their mother to such activities. This disrupts their progress at CDCs. However, as Rogoff says, being accompanied by parents to collect firewood may facilitate students' intent participation through which they are enabled to learn context-specific capabilities.

Collecting firewood is one of the main activities among lifeworld chores, and

some awareness programmes cannot be conducted when women and children are not participating as they consider collecting firewood important as much as attending awareness programmes. Girls are often assigned to this activity and are highly likely to be devoid of school education too. Collecting firewood takes longer during the day, and they fail to utilise the time spent collecting firewood for productive activities.

Furthermore, the neighbourhood generally influences parents, children and significant others, and it has a unique and multidimensional influence on ECCE within the estate context because this is a closely-knit community. Hence, the neighbourhood characteristics impact both the delivery of ECCE and its outcomes. Not every family in estate communities faces such challenges, but generally, families prioritise concerns such as hunger, domestic violence, caring for older adults and poverty while ECCE is less concerned. Furthermore, any intervention to establish ECCE policies in the estate sector is less likely to be supported by parents due to the less concern on the importance of the ECCE.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood Care and Education has been considered a strategically important social development policy priority of Sri Lanka. The investments in ECCE bring about long-lasting



Original Article

benefits, particularly for the most impoverished and disadvantaged, whilst contributing to alleviate multidimensional poverty. However, ECCE service provisions for the estate dwellers are disrupted due to several sociocultural, economic and political reasons. The family environment as children's immediate environment deeply influences the level of awareness of ECCE among parents and both delivery and outcomes of ECCE. As part of the sustainable development agenda, strengthening the ECCE provisions for the estate sector through well-stabled and strategically planned approaches would ensure that the estate sector of Sri Lanka receives adequate support toward child wellbeing, ultimately contributing to elevating the social development standards.

More than any other social institution, the family influences how ECCE services are provided. As the analysis indicated, because the formulation of the family within the estate culture has been recognised as merely part of lifeworld functions, but not as an informed decision, the support received from the family toward childcare and education is highly likely to decrease. Even though the estate subculture encourages early marriage and family-building, no informed decisions are formulated reflecting on future childcare and education. Therefore, less attention has been received from both community members and parents toward ECCE.

Among many reasons, teenage marriage causes family instability whilst preventing parents from supporting ECCE adequately. Teenage marriage leads to teenage pregnancy, which is not conducive for receiving age-appropriate experiences and facilitating childcare and development. Supposedly, an unstable family environment prevents children from obtaining ECCE services and family-based child care.

Failure in some of the core functions of family management is another determinant that interrupts the delivery and outcomes of ECCE services in the estate sector. Family management activities can be categorised into four domains: risk mitigation, family planning, family financial management and relationship management. The estate sector shows a deficiency in some family management functions, partly because of the neighbourhood influence. Family planning, risk mitigation, and family-financial management are often disrupted due to community members' cultural beliefs; hence, children can be neglected even from ECCE services. The neighbourhood of line-housing schemes often propagates inappropriate behaviours among estate dwellers that lead to declining the overall wellbeing of children.

Early stimulation is one of the important childhood development activities the family should intervene. However, early stimulation among



Original Article

early children is profoundly disrupted within the selected estate communities owing to the lack of awareness among parents about ECCE. Besides, intergenerational support is required for the early stimulation, even though this is lacking in the estate sector, as described in the analysis. Even though several reasons affect the delivery and outcomes of ECCE in the estate sector, the main focus of this research was given to understand the complex relationships between the family environment and ECCE. Through partnership interventions, some services are provided for the estate sector to elevate ECCE standards. This study argues that any ECCE intervention has to be supported by the family. However, when families fail to support ECCE services, the outcomes are likely to be downgraded. Therefore, ECCE policies should focus not just on providing mainstream ECCE services, but the policy must contextualise even incorporating community reflections to shape the family environment positively. This creates a conducive environment so that children can engage in ECCE services effectively.

Several partnership interventions have been established to ensure child wellbeing in the estate sector, even though some sociocultural barriers prevent them from being implemented. I argued thus that having an enabling environment is vital for establishing any ECCE policy to obtain favourable benefits,

particularly in disadvantaged communities. As there is no enabling environment initially available in underprivileged communities to implement ECCE policies and conduct ECCE programmes, the affecting sociocultural determinants must be taken into careful consideration first.

Acknowledgements:

I pay my deepest tribute to the people who have contributed to my research whilst sharing their stories with me without hesitation. Also, my postgraduate supervisors, Prof. Dhammika Herath and Dr Prabath Ekanayake are acknowledged for their fullest support. And this paper is written based on a thesis submitted to the Postgraduate Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Peradeniya for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology in the year 2021.

Disclosure Statement:

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Notes on the contributor

Samitha Udayanga is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka. He is also a postgraduate student at the Postgraduate Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Peradeniya. His research interests include medical anthropology, Southern theory, migration and identities in the developing world,



Original Article

religion in Asia, social development, child health and education in developing countries, and issues in South Asia.

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