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Analysis of the Structural, Historical, and Socioeconomic Issues of Preschool Education in Haiti between 1912 and 2000

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ABSTRACT

Preschool education in Haiti, although crucial for a child's development, has long been marginalized in public policies. From 1912 to 2000, its development was primarily driven by private, community-based, and religious initiatives due to a failing state institutional and regulatory framework. The state's involvement in early childhood education remained limited, and initial attempts at structuring the sector were hampered by a lack of resources, weak intersectoral coordination, and insufficient political commitment. This situation led to a fragmented and unevenly distributed system. This study traces the historical milestones of preschool education in Haiti and analyzes the continuities and disruptions that have shaped its trajectory. The goal is to provide a critical understanding of past developments to inform future policy directions, thereby contributing to a more structured and inclusive preschool education system in Haiti.

KEYWORDS: Preschool education, Haiti, Education policies, Inequalities, Governance.

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Análisis de las cuestiones estructurales, históricas y socioeconómicas de la Educación Preescolar en Haití entre 1912 y 2000

RESUMEN

La educación preescolar en Haití, si bien es crucial para el desarrollo infantil, ha estado marginada durante mucho tiempo en las políticas públicas. Entre 1912 y 2000, su desarrollo fue impulsado principalmente por iniciativas privadas, comunitarias y religiosas debido a un marco institucional y regulatorio estatal deficiente. La participación del Estado en la educación de la primera infancia siguió siendo limitada, y los intentos iniciales de estructurar el sector se vieron obstaculizados por la falta de recursos, la débil coordinación intersectorial y el insuficiente compromiso político. Esta situación condujo a un sistema fragmentado y con una distribución desigual. Este estudio rastrea los hitos históricos de la educación preescolar en Haití y analiza las continuidades y interrupciones que han marcado su trayectoria. El objetivo es proporcionar una comprensión crítica de los desarrollos pasados para fundamentar las futuras políticas, contribuyendo así a un sistema de educación preescolar más estructurado e inclusivo en Haití.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación preescolar, Haití, Políticas educativas, Desigualdades, Gobernanza.

Introduction

Preschool education is widely recognized globally as a crucial phase in the comprehensive development of the child. According to UNESCO (2021), the early years, particularly from birth to five years old, play a fundamental role in shaping children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical capacities. Aware of these stakes, OECD member countries are increasing their investments in early childhood due to its beneficial effects on long-term educational success, the reduction of social disparities, and the strengthening of social cohesion (OECD, 2020). Thus, countries like France, Finland, and South Korea offer free or subsidized access to preschool education from the age of three as part of well-structured public policies. In Africa, despite persistent inequalities in access, several nations such as Rwanda and Senegal have included preschool education in their strategic education plans, aiming for universal coverage by 2030 (UNICEF, 2022).

However, in Haiti, this educational level for children aged 3 to 5 has long been marginalized within general public education policies. This marginalization is reflected in

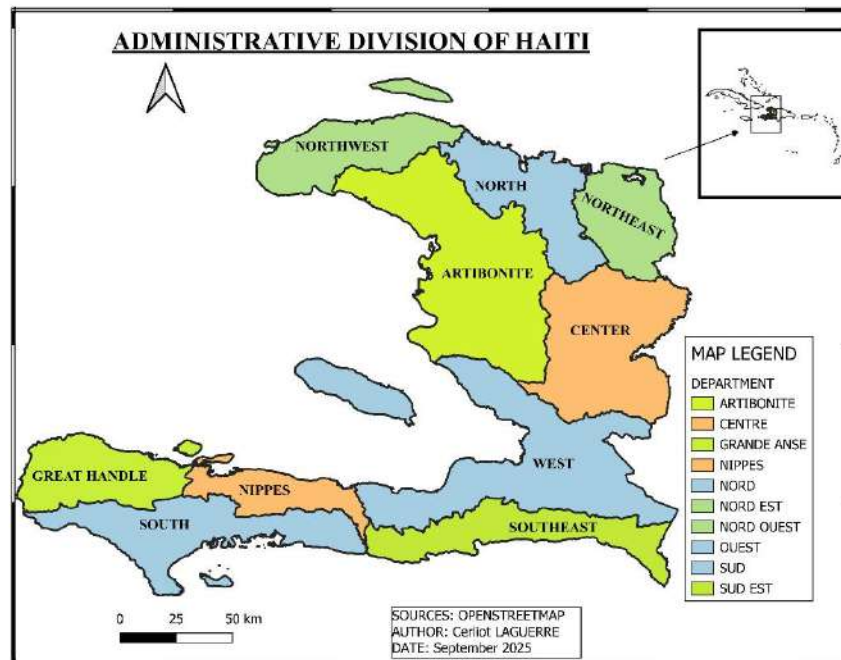
limited access, uneven quality of services offered, and a weak state presence in structuring and regulating this training sector (MENFP, 2012; UNICEF, 2018). Yet, numerous studies show that attendance in quality preschool programs significantly promotes later academic success (Heckman, 2011; Sylva et al., 2004; Yoshikawa et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2016).

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the integration of preschool education into the national education system officially dates back to the Bernard Reform decree of April 4, 1982. However, between this date and the early 2010s, no clear policy for the regulation or development of preschool education was coherently implemented. The Education and Training Working Group (GTEF) highlighted as early as 2010 the need for strengthened institutional oversight. Despite some progress, such as the initiative to integrate two preschool classes into public fundamental schools (BID, 2016), structural and socioeconomic shortcomings remain significant: lack of teacher training, insufficient infrastructure, absence of supervision, and marked territorial inequalities (MENFP, 2014).

Adding to these constraints is the economic incapacity of many families to finance quality preschool education in a context where supply remains dominated by the private sector. This imbalance exposes the limitations of educational plans such as the Operational Plan (2010-2015) or the Ten-Year Education and Training Plan (2020-2030), whose ambitious goals struggle to be realized on the ground (MENFP, 2020). In light of this situation, this study aims to analyze the structural, historical, and socioeconomic issues of preschool education in Haiti between 1912 and 2000.

1. Methodology

This study was conducted in the Republic of Haiti, a Caribbean nation that serves as the analytical framework for this research. To understand the evolution of Haitian preschool education, a qualitative documentary analysis was used. Rather than collecting field data, the methodology involved critically examining a wide range of secondary sources. These included reports from national and international organizations such as the MENFP, UNESCO, and UNICEF, as well as academic publications like articles and theses. This approach allowed us to trace the historical milestones and analyze the structural and socioeconomic factors that influenced the development of this educational sector between 1912 and 2000. The following map shows Haiti and its administrative departments.



Map of Haiti and its administrative departments.

2. Documentary Analysis

For this study, a documentary analysis was conducted using secondary sources on the evolution of preschool education in Haiti between 1912 and 2000. This approach mobilized a variety of documents, including scientific articles, academic books, university theses, as well as institutional reports produced by national and international organizations. Data were primarily extracted from official texts of the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MENFP), reports from international organizations such as UNESCO (2006) and UNICEF Haiti (n.d.), and recognized research in the field of Haitian education (Brutus, 1979; Joint, 2006; Merisier, 2001).

3. Chronological Analysis

The first decisions supporting the Early Childhood Education Policy (PEPE) in Haiti date back to the early 20th century, with the law of September 3, 1912, which made primary education compulsory and required a room to accommodate five-year-old children. In 1932, the Minister of Public Instruction ordered the reform of the normal school curricula for

teachers to include scientific disciplines aimed at improving teaching methods adapted for young children. Between 1950 and 1953, driven by Jacqueline Turian Cardozo, a kindergarten meeting psychopedagogical standards was established, encouraging the state to open nursery classes in some national schools. In 1966, Marie Thérèse Colimon Hall and Lucienne Rameau Leroy founded the first preschool educators' training center, thereby strengthening the professionalization of the sector.

The growth of preschool education was further supported by the creation of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) in 1967, which positively influenced the recognition of young children's education. In 1971, the Simone Ovide Duvalier home was inaugurated to care for disadvantaged children. However, the official legal recognition of kindergartens only occurred on September 27, 1974. Finally, in March 1982, a decree-law established a structure within the Ministry of National Education dedicated to managing preschool education, granting it directorate status, marking an important institutional turning point for PEPE in Haiti.

4. Institutionalization and Evolution

Since the 2000s, the Haitian state, supported by international partners, has initiated reforms to structure preschool education, notably through the creation of the Bureau of Preschool Education Management (BUGEP) and the development of adapted curricula (UNESCO, 2023). Initially, in the 1970s, preschool was primarily based on private and religious initiatives, limited to an urban elite and without an official framework. In the 1980s, the MENFP began recognizing the importance of early childhood and considered its integration into the formal system, despite limited resources. Institutional recognition was consolidated with the Ten-Year Education Plan (1997–2007), which aimed to expand access and standardize programs. In 2015, a new national curriculum focused on the child's global development was adopted, marking a major step toward unifying pedagogical practices (MENFP, 2015).

5. Early Institutional Milestones

Since the 1980s, the Haitian state has progressively acknowledged the importance of early childhood in the education system, notably with the Bernard Reform of 1979 and the 1982 law that officially integrated preschool education into the national system (MENFP,

2010; François, 2010). Despite this recognition, allocated resources remain insufficient. The creation of the Bureau of Preschool Education Management (BUGEP) in 1995 marked progress in structuring the sector (MENFP, 2010). However, the absence of effective governance led to partial state disengagement, strengthening the dominance of the private sector, which now provides over 80% of preschool services (FONHEP, 2018; MENFP, 2019).

6. Integration into the Ten-Year Plan

Official recognition of preschool education in Haiti was affirmed with the Ten-Year Education and Training Plan (PDEF) 1997–2007, which integrated preschool for the first time as a key element of the national education system (MENFP, 1998). This plan aimed to expand access for children aged 3 to 5, develop an adapted curriculum, and professionalize educational staff while regulating the dominant private sector (MENFP, 2010). This approach marked a shift from previous policies by emphasizing early stimulation's importance for school success and overall development (Charles, 2014). However, implementation was hindered by limited resources, weak leadership, and insufficient institutional coordination, particularly affecting rural areas.

7. Legal Framework of Haitian Preschool Education

Preschool education, a key stage in the child's overall development, plays a fundamental role in the Haitian education system by preparing children for primary education while promoting their cognitive, socio-emotional, and psychomotor development (MENFP, 2015). However, this sector remains fragile, facing significant access inequalities, insufficient institutional support, and a lack of human, material, and financial resources (UNICEF, 2020). Legally, preschool education is governed by several articles of the Haitian Constitution and legislative texts that establish the basis for its organization and promotion. The table below contains the constitutional articles.

Table. Constitutional Articles

Articles	Content
Article 17	Preschool education aims to contribute to the development of the child's personality in all its forms (physical, emotional, intellectual, and social). Preschool education thus promotes equal opportunities throughout subsequent schooling.
Article 18	Preschool education generally lasts two (2) years. Children enter at the age of four (4) and usually leave at six (6).
Article 19	Preschool education is provided in kindergartens and nursery schools, as well as in Integrated Nutrition and Community Education Centers (CINEC).
Article 20	Preschool education does not include initiation to reading or writing.

In 2015, the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MENFP) adopted a new national preschool curriculum aimed at improving the quality of education for children aged 3 to 5 (MENFP, 2015). Developed with the support of technical partners, this framework is based on a child-centered approach that integrates the cognitive, language, motor, socio-emotional, and moral dimensions of development (MENFP, 2015; UNESCO, 2021). It defines key learning areas such as language, mathematics, scientific awareness, practical life skills, and artistic expression, relying on active pedagogical strategies adapted to the child's development (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). The use of the mother tongue as a medium of learning aligns with international recommendations for inclusive and contextualized education (UNESCO, 2007; Ball, 2011). This curriculum also serves as a central tool for educator training, combining pedagogical theory, developmental psychology, and the realities of the Haitian context (Charles, 2018).

8. Involvement of International Partners

International organizations such as UNICEF, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the World Bank have supported preschool development in Haiti for several years, particularly through community school projects targeting disadvantaged rural and urban areas (UNICEF, 2019; IDB, 2018). These initiatives aim to reduce access inequalities, train qualified educational staff, and strengthen local capacities. In collaboration with the MENFP, they have enabled the creation of flexible care structures, often attached to fundamental schools or managed by community committees (World Bank, 2020). These programs include educator training, provision of teaching materials, infrastructure improvement, and regular technical support.

9. Socioeconomic Approach

The preschool education sector in Haiti operates within a context of significant structural vulnerability. Economic inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and the lack of effective public policies compromise equitable and quality access to education for children aged 3 to 5 (UNICEF, 2017). Although 63% of children in this age group attend a preschool facility (MENFP, 2016), stark disparities remain, particularly between urban and rural areas, where supply is limited and precarious economic conditions represent a major barrier to access (MENFP, 2019).

The dominance of the private sector, which accounts for over 80% of preschool institutions according to FONHEP (2018), exacerbates exclusion dynamics. The high cost of tuition fees renders these services inaccessible to a large part of the population, especially the most vulnerable families. Moreover, many facilities operate without adequate infrastructure or teaching materials, often in poor sanitary conditions, thereby compromising children's well-being (GTEF, 2010). Despite the creation of the Bureau of Preschool Education Management (BUGEP) in 1995, resources devoted to this level remain limited. Preschool education is still viewed as a low priority by some ministry officials (FONHEP, 2018), contrary to the objectives of the 2010–2015 Operational Plan, which advocates for equitable expansion of public offerings to promote inclusion from early childhood (MENFP, 2010).

The proliferation of private preschool institutions, mainly concentrated in urban areas, reflects the state's inability to provide a sufficient public alternative (PHONEP, 2015). This situation creates new forms of exclusion, especially in rural areas, where public schools enroll only about 7% of preschool children nationwide (MENFP, 2019). Thus, access inequalities persist and undermine the goals of truly inclusive and equitable education.

In rural areas, access to preschool remains particularly limited due to the absence of public facilities, long distances to travel, and fees charged by private schools, often unaffordable for many families (FONHEP, 2018). This situation exacerbates social and territorial inequalities from early childhood. Furthermore, the unregulated proliferation of private institutions has led to serious quality deficiencies: over 70% of these schools operated without legal authorization in 2014 (MENFP, 2014). The lack of clear standards regarding curricula, staff, and care conditions has also been criticized (GTEF, 2010). Thus,

the unregulated growth of the private sector, although it compensates for the public supply deficit, contributes to the fragmentation of the education system and hinders the universalization of equitable and quality preschool education.

The evolution of preschool education in Haiti reflects a growing commitment to structuring the sector amid socioeconomic constraints, relying on the involvement of the state, international partners, as well as inclusive policies and strengthened coordination (MENFP, 2013). The adoption of the National Curriculum for children aged 3 to 5 represents a major step forward, as it establishes a common pedagogical framework and provides for the training of school principals and inspectors to ensure effective implementation. This system also highlights the importance of local stakeholders' engagement in improving educational services, moving preschool education from scattered initiatives to institutional recognition.

Despite these advances, equitable access to and quality of preschool education remain severely limited by financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of suitable teacher training. According to MENFP (2005, 2017), approximately 85% of preschool teachers have not received professional training, and nearly one-third have not completed the ninth grade, resulting in significant disparities in teaching quality, particularly within a dominant and poorly regulated private sector.

Internationally, several low-income countries such as Rwanda and Bangladesh have demonstrated that targeted investments in educator training, community-based strategies, and improved equity contribute to notable improvements in preschool access and quality (UNICEF, 2019). Moreover, OECD countries like Norway, Japan, and South Korea emphasize the importance of a clear institutional framework, ongoing professional development for practitioners, and stable funding to guarantee quality preschool education (OECD, 2020).

In Haiti, despite the gradual integration of preschool into public policies (Haiti Libre, 2013; UNESCO, 2015), several obstacles persist. Weak institutional coordination, the absence of clearly defined public policies, and social perceptions that regard preschool as a low priority limit family and community involvement (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, the significant shortage of material and financial resources undermines the quality of infrastructure and teaching tools (MENFP, 2013).

To address these challenges, it is essential to continue and intensify efforts to structure and professionalize the sector. The implementation of the 2020–2030 Decennial Education and Training Plan (PDEF), as well as the national campaign to register preschool centers, are promising initiatives likely to profoundly transform the reality of preschool education in Haiti. An integrated approach, combining increased funding, effective governance, continuous teacher training, and heightened family awareness, is indispensable to ensure inclusive, accessible, and quality preschool education, thereby promoting the child's overall development.

Conclusion

Preschool education in Haiti has made significant progress, notably through the adoption of a national curriculum and stronger institutional recognition. This evolution reflects a commitment to structuring the sector, supported by the growing involvement of educational stakeholders. However, despite these efforts, the sector still faces many challenges that hinder its harmonious development.

The historical analysis of preschool education reveals a complex journey: from a system long dominated by isolated private initiatives, it has gradually moved towards an attempt at public oversight. Nevertheless, this structuring remains incomplete. Lack of funding, the absence of effective regulation of the private sector, and the low professionalization of educators have limited the effectiveness of the reforms undertaken.

This gap between political intentions and the reality on the ground has helped perpetuate deep inequalities in access to and quality of educational services. In this context, the most vulnerable children remain largely excluded from quality preschool care, compromising their overall development and future success.

To address these challenges, a systemic and integrated approach is essential. Implementing inclusive policies, strengthening public investments, professionalizing educational staff, and mobilizing communities are fundamental levers for sustainably improving the preschool sector. Only through coherent and lasting actions can preschool education fully play its role in building a more equitable society that is better prepared for the future.

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Conflicto de interés

Los autores de este manuscrito declaran no tener ningún conflicto de interés.

Declaración ética

Los autores declaran que el proceso de investigación que dio lugar al presente manuscrito se desarrolló siguiendo criterios éticos, por lo que fueron empleadas en forma racional y profesional las herramientas tecnológicas asociadas a la generación del conocimiento.

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