Is this Early Childhood Development Ours? Deciphering what African Parents want their Children to Learn in Early Childhood Development

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ABSTRACT

As modern Early Childhood Development begins to gain prominence in African communities, questions are beginning to emerge as to what sort of Early Childhood Development is being promoted as 'best practices'. Thus, the discourse for and against western Early Childhood Development as opposed to indigenous Early Childhood Development, and the scope of each in a culturally 'contaminated' African society continues to rage on. This article highlights some of the issues and provides insights into what African Early Childhood Development researcher can do to lead the way in owning, redefining and rebuilding a more culturally relevant Early Childhood Development in the African context.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is continually receiving increasing attention in the developing world due to its potential effects on child development and subsequent school enrolment (Zuilkowski, Fink, Moucheraud, & Matafwali, 2012). This acknowledgement has been based on research that has been conducted in the developed world (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Ludwig & Miller, 2007) and in East Africa (Malmberg, Mwaura, & Sylva, 2011). In response to this trend, some African governments have tried to adapt best practices from the western world that follow normative western ideologies about child development (Pence & Hix-Small, 2009). Thus, the misconception is ripe in many circles that ECD came into being in Africa in late 1970s and developed further in the 1990s during the time of the popular international conferences and World Bank publications on importance of ECD. Much has been expected from this drive to institute Early Childhood education on Western lines, though a perception seems to be building that early childhood stimulation and development is still not well understood nor widely practiced in rural communities.

Some communities have not been keen to adopt the new ECD initiatives being introduced in their communities partly due to the fact that these 'best practices' have been found wanting in their places of origin for failure to address, among others, issues of culture, context, and perpetuate the limitations of a positivist approach (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). What

complicates the situation further is, while, some governments acknowledge the importance of early child care and development, little financial investment is provided for it. In rural communities, the form of ECD that is being promoted by governments is seen as 'wasting' children's time and teaching them alien practices when they could be doing 'better' things at home (Ejuu, 2012). Thus, while attempts are being made to start many ECD centres, many are closing. Not many families are very keen on taking their children to these ECD centres. By 2011, the enrolment of children in ECD centres stood at 6% of children in ECD age bracket in Uganda (UBOS, 2013). So, what is really happening in the 'modern' ECD centres in some Ugandan communities?

STATUS OF 'MODERN' ECD IN MOST UGANDAN COMMUNITIES

The proponents of modern ECD have done little to address ECD related concerns raised by communities. Some of the ECD centres that are being promoted as illustrating 'best practices' to be emulated are in a deplorable state, and lack the necessary facilities, equipment and materials that would promote holistic child development (Ndani & Kimani, 2010). In some rural early childhood development centres, children teach themselves as the lack of teachers, classrooms and learning materials continues to be a major problem (Ng'asike, 2011). In cases where teachers are available, they are seen to have simply 'wasted' children's valuable time doing nothing but 'playing' the whole day. The teachers on their part, criticise African cultural practices as primitive, suggesting that this culture needs to be exterminated (Ng'asike, 2011), leading children therefore, to hate their culture and themselves (Ntarangwi, 2003). This challenge is further worsened by the increasing number of 'best practices' graduates who have neither the skills to neither fit into the modern economy nor possess the traditional skills to fit into the traditional lifestyles (Ng'asike, 2011). Thus, some African communities are beginning to feel that ECD is being used by missionaries and NGOs as a means to terminate African culture (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008).

Whereas traditional communities feel that way about modern ECD, the elites in urban areas feel differently. These 'elites' feel they are getting the service they deserve. These elites make every effort to provide all they can for their children so that their children have nothing else to do apart from 'concentrating' on academics. These urban parents baby-sit children up to university level. The 'children' are never given any opportunity to face any life challenges throughout school time. It is common to hear parents say 'I do not want my child to suffer in the way I suffered'. What these parents forget is that their 'suffering' was training that gave them the skills they are using now to survive. If you cannot allow your child to do simple things, how do you expect such a child to live profitably in the community in your absence? Will the house help you are currently using be there when you are gone, to continue taking care of your 'child' who may be even older than the house help you are currently employing? The best these parents are doing is creating a big baby who cannot think outside the baby cot. The big baby will soon get married but has to rely on the parents for every decision he/she has to make in their own homes. Such a child is the classic example of failed parenthood in the African context. Thus, this ECD will be doing nothing but condemning Africa's children into an educational process where they increasingly gain unfamiliar knowledge

and skills so as to sink disturbingly into alienation and ignorance of cultural circumstances (Nsamenang, 2008). To some Africans, that system perpetuates questionable quality, relevance and high wastage (Abagi & Odipo, 1997; Sifuna, 2005).

These circumstances should now start to make things clearer for many out there who have always kept the view that children in rural African communities are not sent to ECD institutions due to poverty related factors. Instead, one of the reasons is that there is lack of trust in such centres to provide meaningful education for children at that age. What is evident in many ECD centres is the influence of the funding agency that is spearheading the reform instead of the people who are supposed to benefit from the reform. This contributes to the suspicion that some agencies are in Africa to introduce a form of ECD that promotes Western ideals as opposed to promoting African ideals. This partly explains why when funders for such ECD programmes pull out, the centres are left to collapse. This then creates room for another source of income to be brought to their community. The new ECD programme will also become another centre where children enrol with the aim that they should be fed and return home without gaining or receiving any form of stimulation from teachers (Ng'asike, 2011). Also, some of the parents take their children to these centres not because they want to, but, rather to avoid being in conflict with the law. Many parents argue that taking their children to these 'useless' schools is like standing with two legs (Krätli, 2001), meaning, you are more firm on the ground on both legs as opposed to standing on one leg. Thus, in the event that any parent who has a child in some of these centres has something 'better' for the child to do, he/she can withdraw the child during class time to do something 'useful' at home like minding a sibling, fetching water, keeping the home or accompanying the parent to the market. It is therefore important that 'modern' ECD programmes start identifying with communities by addressing some of the following practices which communities feel are contrary to local cultures.

PRACTICES IN ECD CENTRES THAT ARE CONTRARY TO AFRICAN CULTURES

In many modern ECD programmes, children are being trained to be 'independent'. Skills of selfishness are systematically developed in children by encouraging them not to share snacks, having each one sit on a separate seat, owning a personal school bag, and keeping personal property, such as cups and plates. Children who are unable to get personal items from home continue to be disadvantaged by a system that does not freely allow others to share what they have with those who don't have. This in itself conflicts with the African spirit of *Ubuntu*. In these rural communities, a person is only a person because of other persons. Having something that you cannot share with others makes you a lesser person. Thus, most African cultures emphasis the principle of communalism as opposed to maintenance of personal space. This is because the African philosophy is a philosophy of 'We' as opposed to the Western philosophy of 'I' (Ntumba 1985) as cited in Kimmerle (2006).

In the modern centres, children are encouraged to dress in shorts, or shirts irrespective of gender. The argument is that this allows children to be free to play or climb on anything without restrictions. To some cultures, this is not acceptable. Boys and girls must maintain their dress codes so as to have their

dignity. Dressing in gender-free styles, and doing activities that conflict with gender roles that is, practicing 'strange' life styles make some mothers keep their children, especially girls, away from such centres. Mothers are quick to withdraw their children because in these cultures, when a child is seen to be 'misbehaving' the mother is usually blamed for being a bad mother. What is disappointing is that not many attempts are being made to address the concerns of parents in these communities, as Hyde and Kabiru (2003) note, such efforts are relatively rare, and "centre-based programmes continue to be heavily influenced by Western culture that are not sensitive to the culture and needs of children and society" (p. 59).

Some ECD programme managers have continuously referred to African way of life as backward. Their mission is to eradicate the African backward tendencies and replace them with 'best practices' they have learnt from the West. What some of the managers have not clearly perceived is that most African communities in their teaching emphasise preservation of cultural heritage and will resist any attempt by any person to draw their attention away from it. If parents notice such attempts in a school, they usually withdraw their children from such centres and keep them at home where they can protect their children from the 'evil' influence. These parents believe that some of the ECD programmes being promoted in their communities by foreign NGOs are part of a broader modernisation agenda in which Western culture is promoted in opposition to African traditions that are seen as deficient or out-dated (Callaghan, 1998). It has also been noted that some parents deliberately keep away their children from ECD centres due to the perceived lack of ability of such centres to produce graduates who are independent in life. Many ECD centres have poor learning environments, poor hygiene, poor infrastructure, unqualified teachers and poor quality playing kits (Lal, 2012). In most communities, every child has to learn the basics of survival and independent living within the community. Thus, survival is the basic heart of African education (Ng'asike, 2011). Any education system that produces graduates who cannot live on their own or be productive in the community will be despised. We keep seeing many children drop out of school even where there is free education because they don't see themselves becoming independent when they continue in school. There are many examples of school graduates in the community who have wasted plenty of resources as school fees only to come back home as job seekers, with no skill to live profitably in the community. Up to 63% of the graduates in Uganda are 'half-baked', 'unfit for jobs' and 'lacking job market skills (Mohamedbhai, 2014). In the centres, parents have to dress children and serve them breakfast before escorting them to school, which is only a few meters away, because the child cannot walk alone. The parents, teachers or relatives also have to do the homework for them (Wairagala, 2015), since most of these children show gross lack of common sense when tasked with even simple basic things that anyone in the village can do. These experiences make some parents shun participating in ECD activities and call it foreign.

In some centres, increasing permissiveness is witnessed. Children are losing respect for their own parents and the law (Ndagano, 2011). As Atwikirize (2011) notes, "in Uganda, most parents lately are permissive and laissez faire and have left all their parenting roles to the school and peers" (p. 3). The 'qualified' teachers pamper the children, begging them to stop misbehaving as they attend to their never-ending, impolite demands for attention. Teachers

cannot discipline or even guide children on what to do. In this respect, the expectation of the community in this matter is for teachers to be decisive and take action including measures that border on corporal punishment to ensure discipline among children.

In most centres, children are constantly begged to work hard so that they can pass and leave their community. Going away is seen as success in the education process as a child goes to seek employment in a foreign land (Ssekamwa, 1997). Those who remain are considered failures. This phenomenon is continuously being seen as a strange practice that has got the sole purpose of milking children out from communities leading to brain drain. Thus, parents who have strong attachment to their children will withdraw them from school if they come to realise the motives of the teachers.

It has been a common practice in many centres to refer to parents as the first teachers. However, the same system suggests parents are not capable of teaching their children, justifying a need for such parents to take their children to 'school' so as to be taught by 'qualified' persons. Furthermore, if any parent or adult finds a child in the wrong, he/she is not supposed to 'teach' that child because such a parent is not a 'qualified teacher'. In the African perspective, every adult is a teacher who is not expected to simply look on while any child is misbehaving. So, the practice of adults watching children go astray without them having the power to correct such children is disrespect to the culture and conscious of adults in the community.

Another strange thing about the practice in some 'high standard modern' ECD centres is that children who have 'excelled' are given 'certificates' even when the child who has excelled has no idea about what he/she excelled in. In the attempt to try to produce 'excelling' children, 'expert' teachers provide coaching lessons and extra homework for children in kindergarten and day care centres for extra fees. In these 'high standard' centres, the teachers never use real life situations in teaching to give life skills. What the teachers have failed to realise about most homework they give to children is that they are actually assessing the parents and not the children since most of it is usually too hard for the children. Children simply pass the homework on to the parents who do it on their behalf and forward to the teachers for marking the following day. The parents cooperate in this sinister act because they want to show off that their children are 'clever' to avoid their children being eliminated from such schools.

This phenomenon of children excelling in examinations but without acquiring any productive skills for job creation runs through the whole education system up to university (Mohamedbhai, 2014). African cultures are used to seeing evidence of excellence from the children who must demonstrate skills that can be seen by all. The skills must be continuously exhibited in a wide range of situations in order for such a child to be declared excellent. This is however, the opposite in some of our modern schools. Teachers get involved in doing classwork on behalf of children (Wairagala, 2015) and when such children 'graduate', they cannot even perform basic tasks that are an everyday skill for those who have not gone to school. So, the question being asked, is, why do parents have to spend so much money and time sending their children to 'these modern' schools only to return later with no skills?

DECIPHERING WHAT AFRICAN PARENTS TREASURE FOR THEIR CHILDREN

Traditional ECD refers to non-formal home-based childcare, usually by a grandmother or trusted elderly person, while the parents are away, engaged in other activities. This differs from modern ECD where there is a formalised setting, trained teachers and a curriculum (usually developed elsewhere) to support the children. It should be noted that ECD in the African context is regarded as a special private family responsibility undertaken by women with remote, but powerful support, from men. While men are usually not evident in various ECD related activities, their opinion on what is done at the centre or home is usually followed as the law. The process of childcare in ECD in the initial stages is a secret affair, done out of the sight of other people who are considered strangers. Thus, whereas modern ECD are more explicit in their location and activities in terms of open days, African traditional ECD are not easily exposed. Also, while modern ECD opens its doors to all children, traditional ECD are particular about children sent to them. Therefore, if you are a stranger, you may not locate a traditional ECD because they do not operate in specific locations as regular schools do, but rather operate all over the community in different homes depending on the schedule of the 'teacher'. Therefore, if you as a stranger went out looking for traditional ECD, you will be immediately shown a modern ECD, because it is 'not for the community' and nobody cares so much to find the reason why you want to go to it, since they have less attachment to it.

In the traditional setting, the purpose of ECD is that of provision of food, training, education and health care for children to survive till they reach that stage of initiation. Actually, children are not expected to interact with strangers at this stage for fear of being 'contaminated' or 'bewitched' till they are ready for initiation. You will notice if you go to many homes, especially in rural areas, that children upon seeing visitors would run away to hide and remain there till the visitor left. In the ECD centres, the range of activities provided depends largely on the circumstances in the area but usually covering all the major areas needed for independent living. In traditional ECD, children are treated with great tenderness and love by both the parents and the community. They are also highly valued as a source of wealth and continuity for the community.

Traditionally, grandmothers were left to care for young children as parents went out for grazing, fetching water or collecting firewood. These 'teachers' cared for children in communal enclosures located under a big tree where the children could play and rest. Traditional values were passed on through storytelling, songs and games. Children had the opportunity to socialise and learn from peers, while parents used such sessions to monitor children's growth and development through a number of ways (van de Linde, 2005), including sibling minding (Mweru, 2005). These learning experiences are first done as simulations but with time the child is made to experience real situations in the form of fetching water, completing home chores, herding goats or cattle, from as early as three years. In this training, it is generally agreed that children are 'better together' within the free spirit and self-regulation of the peer culture where they inter-stimulate and mentor each other, disagree and defer to more forceful and competent peers (Nsamenang, 2008). In the training, adults only come in when they realise that the child has tried but cannot manage to

accomplish the given task. Reluctance on the part of the child to conform or perform as expected is usually met with harsh corporal punishments aimed at deterring reoccurrence of such behaviour. It is an open secret that corporal punishment for children is widely used and still accepted in many African communities. In the case of girls, motherhood training starts as soon as the mother conceives and delivers a baby. In this training, the girl is expected to care for the younger sibling, feed, dress, and run errands to support the wellbeing of 'her child'. Thus, children learnt work skills early in life that prepare them to live and fit in their community (Durojaiye, 1976) and also as a way of training them to take over family business when their parents pass on (Muheirwe, 2003).

During this training, learning and assessment is on-going, with no particular breaks or holidays. Do not be surprised to see African adults failing to show any appreciation for what a child has done even if in the eyes of other onlookers, the child has done wonders. Culturally, parents do not boast about children in their presence. This is because showing children that they have done very well will make them relax. Thus, African childrearing practices as compared to Western child rearing practices follow a more or less unstated agenda (Super, Harkness, Barry, & Zeitlin, 2009).

It should also be noted that in many African cultures, early childhood is an important prestige building mechanism. Like the common African saying that goes 'you cannot straighten an old tree', raising successful children can only start in the early years. If children are taught such community dynamics later in life, they will never understand, and like the tree, may just break. Success in raising a child increases one's ego as a better parent, while failure downgrades such parents in society. Having successful children in society enables parents to gain elder status in the community even though they may not have grey hair! Whenever such elders stand up to speak in public, they first enumerate the achievements of their children and explain in detail what those children do in society. Such explanations are usually marked by exclamations of approval and admiration. Persons who failed to have successful children look on with envy or regret depending on their perception of the role they played in the life of their children. They are also expected to leave their seats for the 'elders' to show that they are nobodies and the elders are more important than them.

With the understanding that success of children has the potential to raise the profile of parents in the community as elders, it becomes imperative to focus on ECD as a means of achieving this overarching goal. The question then, is what is ECD? Which ECD are 'we' promoting? Are we promoting yours or ours? The ECD we should promote is the one that does not alienate the members of the developing young generation, but prepares them to fit into their society (van de Linde, 2005). This developmental process in the African context extends till one enters adolescence, which is also loosely taken to be adulthood.

Having seen the context of ECD in the communities, it is important to acknowledge that the actual implementation of early childhood programmes should be carefully planned based upon each country's culture, rather than counting on the idea and belief projected by developed countries' research (Lee & Hayden, 2009). Emerging trends in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Brazil and Peru reveal that although pre-schools are termed formal, based on the hours kept and the curriculum and materials used, they are non-formal in character and remain firmly rooted in and controlled by the communities which are

responsible for building schools and employing Paraprofessionals (Myers, 1992). Thus, the use of standardised best practices will keep becoming more challenging due to the rich cultural blend and experiences that parents have acquired over the years. The experiences have created a rainbow of parents who no longer believe in the same thing, yet they all claim to be upholding African values. Therefore, if we are to redefine ECD and the values it should instil in our children today, we should first decipher what values are unanimously treasured in our communities.

Deciphering the values will be one part of the puzzle, the other one is to make the same rainbow of parents to adopt such values for their children given their varied backgrounds. Children need to be introduced to and helped to gain proficiency in cultures and values that are within their reach. The challenge here, which is also our pride, is that in terms of culture, Africa is one of the richest with hundreds of cultures within a small geographical scope. This rich blend of culture makes it practically impossible to implement a uniform syllabus in ECD. The option in this case is the use of curricular frameworks that guides different providers while leaving room for flexibility. This is because cross-cultural variability in the conceptions and conventions that shape human behaviour limits the generalisability of knowledge from one culture to another (Marfo, 2011). Also, as the framework gives teachers flexibility, the teachers must also be flexible enough to put learning in the hands of children. Thus, whereas African children 'have no mind' to decide what is right for themselves (Muheirwe, 2003), they must play a critical role in their own development, and have a responsibility for their own 'self-education' (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). It is probably time for us to trace our steps backwards and reflect on universal African values to be developed in children.

AFRICAN VALUES TO BE DEVELOPED IN CHILDREN

In the days of our grandparents, emphasis was on instilling values in children as early as possible, a virtue that we the 'modern' generation should emulate. Refocusing ourselves in this context is not purification or purgation of any useful foreign ideas (Okeke, 2005). It simply means refocusing ourselves to the values we are losing. Some of these values include: facilitating togetherness and implementing brotherhood in the spirit of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* brotherhood is based on the expression *'umuntu ngubuntu ngabantu'* (a person is a person through other persons). Thus, the African philosophy is a philosophy of 'We' and Western philosophy is a philosophy of 'I' (Ntumba 1985, cited in Kimmerle, 2006). In the case of those who have some form of wealth, it is expected of them to support equality, endorse sharing, express sympathy, redistribute wealth, practice empathy and promote happy living. Thus, the definition of happiness is summarised as follows: "A happy man is he who has wealth and is ready to share it with others. Even a poor man can be happy, provided he mixes with others and shares whatever little he has with them" (Odera Oruka, 1991, p. 99). It should also be noted that in Africa, all people are equal. There is an absence of material class forming. If a person is progressing materially and receiving more than others, the extras should be shared with the underprivileged brothers and sisters. Social classes based on wealth are unacceptable in African communities (Broodryk, 2006). Conditions where some eat while others go hungry or enjoy warm housing while others are left out in the

cold cannot be tolerated. This is why when two Africans meet, they have to enquire in depth about other's wellbeing including the wellbeing of their cows or chickens (Broodryk, 2006).

Generally, everybody is expected to be compassionate, maintain respect, be tolerant, obedient and promote humanness. Upholding humanness is particularly revered because one's humanness is constituted by the humanness of others, and vice versa (Kimmerle, 2001). Likewise, respect is to be shown for the other person's opinions and one should never directly say "you are wrong". Rather, one is expected to try to understand the reason for the opinions or actions of others (Broodryk, 2006). Thus, living by such values ensures that African societies exist as a network of relations that support each other.

If we truly treasure these values and need to see them in our children, then we must act fast before our children grow to an age where we can do nothing about the situation. Children continue to spend much time in formal schools where their activity is separated from daily life of the rest of the community (Cole, 2005). Schooling in these societies is generally perceived to be dysfunctional because it fails to guarantee the cultural identities of Africa's children, breaks intergenerational continuity in the core values and traditions that define the uniqueness of Africans as members of the family of human cultures, and denies newer generations the competencies and values necessary to function productively within their own local contexts and realities (Marfo, & Biersteker, 2011). The time is now for all of us to take the painful decision and redefine ECD to benefit our children.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is time to start rethinking and redefining ECD in the African context. If many attempts have been made to initiate ECD programmes in African communities by their foreign partners without much success, it is time to address the underlying causes. African communities greatly treasure their cultures and will resist any attempt to change them. Therefore, Africans need to identify progressive cultural practices and values so as to include them in different ECD programmes with the view to using these programmes to prepare African children to meet life challenges in the global arena. Thus, the imperative for systematic inquiry into all aspects of ECD interventions cannot be overstated (Nsamenang, 2008). It is also time for African ECD researchers to stand up and harness the rich cultural knowledge and experiences they are endowed with and lead the way in clarifying which ECD is 'ours' and continue with the struggle to promote and maintain Africanness, now and in the future.

WAY FORWARD

African researchers, specifically those within Africa and living in communities, need to come together and lead the way in redefining ECD from their perspective. In this perspective, they need to be cognisant of questions, such as whether and/or how indigenous socialisation processes prepare children adequately for 'modern' institutions like schooling (Marfo, 2011). They should desist from the practice of clinging to a research orientation that has exclusively been focussed on issues that are more pertinent to Western social

realities than to the harsh realities of life in African communities (Nsamenang, 1992).

Researchers need to develop community partnerships so as to carefully document ECD processes in communities that have not yet been over 'contaminated'. Knowledge from these studies can later be used to develop more inclusive ECD programmes that have full support of communities who can as well be included as resource persons. This perspective should help the African region to develop a unique body of African ECD epistemology that is comprehensive but also open to different paradigmatic and methodological approaches drawn from multiple disciplines (Marfo, 2011).

It is time for local researchers from different countries to come together and put up literature that addresses specific ECD related concerns in their regions. This literature can later be used to inform all other persons who have an interest in the development of ECD in a given community. Currently, researchers rely too much on Western literature on ECD due to the fact that indigenous literature is hard to come by.

After recognising that ECD is fundamental in determining the future of a child, family and nation, it is now time for all African education researchers to start advocating for policy reforms that will encourage their governments to recognise ECD as a compulsory step for all children before joining primary school.

In some communities, ECD related programmes tend to be more focused on childcare rather than on stimulation. There is need to interface with influential members of such communities to encourage them to initiate child stimulation activities that are consistent with their cultural belief to be integrated in their ECD programmes. In these communities, careful choice of caregivers should be done with the help of communities to identify persons they think have good knowledge and skills to be passed on to children. Also, as already noted, in many African communities, although men are not actively seen in the practice of childcare, whatever is done is usually with their approval. Initiatives that do not address concerns of men will always fail because they are the sole decision makers in homes.

As we focus on the development of ECD programmes that are relevant to the needs of children in the context of wider communities, there is also need to develop sets of culturally relevant ECD competences that primary schools should expect from children transitioning from ECD so as to allow them prepare children adequately. Currently, primary schools are expecting too much from children joining, thus, putting pressure on ECD centres to overstretch beyond their mandate.

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