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Early childhood education quality indicators: Exploring the landscape of an African community perspective

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Abstract
While more effort is being geared toward implementation of quality early childhood education programs, there is still debate on what quality entails. While the education officers believe they are providing quality education, some communities who are the target beneficiaries see it as meaningless and keep away from it, affecting the "Education for All" slogan. If education has to be meaningful in a manner that addresses Sustainable Development Goals 4, quality must be addressed in the perspective of the beneficiaries. This study focuses on a local community perspective of quality indicators for early childhood education and provides advice for implementers.

Keywords
Culture, early childhood education, quality indicators

Introduction

Consensus has now been built in many circles about the need to have quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) services brought to all children, especially those in marginalized communities to even out likely disadvantages that are caused by social or economic disparities. The debate, however, has moved from access to quality. While all sides agree that we need to have quality ECCE services for our children, the debate on what constitutes quality still rages on. Quality in education is notoriously difficult to define, the reason, among others could be why in many cases it is rarely monitored (UNICEF, 2012).

A number of studies, especially those conducted in Europe and America have been able to define a set of ECCE quality indicators that have been consistently passed on to third world communities

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as the benchmarks for quality (UNICEF, 2012). While all these efforts are appreciated, what passes as quality standard in the Western context may actually not be a quality indicator in some rural African communities. Communities, therefore, struggle to understand the "quality" being offered to them simply because the description of that quality is based on "foreign" parameters. The plausible way forward would be to engage the communities to identify what constitutes the quality that they need to see in the centers. Doing this will be one way of responding to advice that has always been given which proposes that early childhood education (ECE) interventions in Africa are more successful when built on local knowledge (Hyde and Kabiru, 2003).

The above argument is based on the strength model. This framework emphasizes discovering, affirming, and enhancing the capabilities, interests, knowledge, resources, goals, and objectives of individuals (Cederbaum and Klusaritz, 2009). From the perspective of the client, being the expert of his or her situation, he or she is able to access one's strengths effectively and contributes not only to solving an immediate problem, but may also augment the client's ability to deal with future problems (McQualde and Ehrenreich, 1997). If we use the strength of communities enshrined in their funds of knowledge, we are more likely to tap into their unreserved support for ECCE centers (Ejuu, 2013). It is upon this background that this study was developed.

Purpose of the study

This study was an exploratory one, focusing on quality indicators in the perspective of communities that can be the focus in ECE centers.

Objectives

Specifically, the study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To assess the nature of the cultural landscape in rural Karamoja that pertains to ECCE;
2. To establish communities' perceptions on education quality indicators they treasure and would want for their children;
3. To identify the caregiver/teacher quality indicators that communities prefer to see in the persons they trust as teachers of their children.

Methodology

This study followed a case study design that formed the basis for collecting exploratory information from participants on cultural values that communities treasure should be upheld and inbuilt into the school system. Specific focus was on one community that was taken as a case study. Our entry to the community was through the local leaders who made it easy for us to speak to the purposively selected participants. Observation of cultural childcare practices was also done. Key informant interviews were conducted with parents and elders to identify cultural practices and their values in their perspective. Finally, focus group discussions with caregivers/teachers and UNICEF project officers was done to establish their perspective on cultural practices being employed in the education of children in the programs being implemented.

Findings

Findings in this study are presented thematically to capture the essence from the participants' perspective. Their stories and lived experiences bring to life their feelings and desire to see quality

education for their children to help them live and survive in their challenging environments. The names used are pseudonymes to protect the identity of the participants.

The nature of the cultural landscape in rural Karamoja that pertains to ECCE

Karamoja is one of the most marginalized regions in Uganda. It is a region that will always bring the country's average statistics lower due to low adherence and uptake of initiatives aimed at improving them. In an attempt to understand the community perspective, we decided to first explore the Karimojong rural landscape that pertains to ECCE.

Karamoja region comprising seven districts is located about 560 km North East from Kampala Capital City. Karamoja is a semi-arid region that experiences drought most parts of the year. Rainfall is usually received once a year in the months of March to May. All the food that families will depend on for the whole year must be planted in the rainy season. Thus, in the rainy season, all other activities including school must stop to let families plant crops if they are to survive the drought period that will follow. In the case of inadequate food and water supplies, some resort to begging for food in the streets, where young children are the ones sent out as foreign people easily give them handouts, cash, and food items as opposed to adults or youths. Thus, families as survival strategy would rather keep their children in the streets as beggars to get food than send them to school, where they do not see an immediate reward for being in school. An education intervention in this area that does not have a school feeding component that allows children to have meals while at school will fail to keep any child in school.

The greater Nga'karimojong communities are pastoralists who still practice nomadic lifestyle. These communities either move from one place to another as a whole or get able bodied youth and men to move their livestock to distant areas in search of pasture and water. While on the move, children usually at the age of 5–16 years are employed as shepherds to look after the livestock. In this regard, communities need their children to be with them to carry out their shepherding or food gathering role for the girls that will ensure family survival rather than simply "wasting time" being in school the whole day.

When the Karimojong people decide to stay in one place, they usually live in small, medium sized or large communities in enclosures. These enclosures or homesteads are locally known as manyattas. One manyatta can comprise several households that can range from 50 to 200. The manyatta arrangement is in such a way that each household constructs a circular fence made of thorny shrubs and reeds and joins it to the fence of the next household. Entry to each household is by a small narrow gate that can only be accessed when you bend very low or simply crawl in. Crawling into the household enclosure is a safety measure that makes it easy for an intruder to be hit on the head as he or she tries to gain entrance to the compound. Besides the household fences, there is also another perimeter fence that encloses all households within the given manyatta. This fence has in many cases one disguised access point that is not obvious to all people. At the center of the manyatta, there is another circular fence that keeps the livestock commonly known as "atomonawii." Therefore, if you wanted to get to the livestock, you must first go through several household thorny fences to get there. If there is need to meet as a community, all members would come out and gather in the meeting place that is located outside the manyatta. It is at this meeting place that the ECCE centers are established. Should there be a situation of insecurity, the children can easily slip through the fences and go back to their homes for protection.

Magnitude of support to the region

Karamoja region is one of the regions in Uganda that has got the largest number of donor projects. By 2016, a total of 142 projects implemented by 59 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and

are supported by bi-lateral donors, both national and international with a projection of spending €89 million (approx. 380 billion UGX) during 2017 (Karamoja Resilience Support Unit (KRSU), 2016a). These funds are channeled through local and central government, UN agencies, and civil society organizations, with Department for International Development (DFID) providing the largest share amounting to 28% of the total estimated donors' spending in Karamoja followed by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), World Bank, and Irish AID with 25%, 14%, and 10%, respectively (KRSU, 2016b). A total of 16 sectors supported by these donors include: conflict mitigation, crop production, disaster risk reduction, education, environment, food sector, governance, health, livelihoods, livestock production, market system, nutrition, water and sanitation for health, social protection, water for production, women's rights, and gender justice (KRSU, 2016a). Despite all these investments and interventions, the region continues to lag behind the rest of the country.

ECCE quality indicators from the community perspective

ECCE center quality indicators

Communities need to see quality centers before they can accept to take their children to such schools. In these communities, unlike in the West where quality indicators have been developed by experts and schools are expected to abide, here the communities dictate the quality. From our observations, we saw two schools that are of quality in the perspective of education experts that are largely empty, while two that are of poor quality in the perspective of education experts had many children. When in this region, as way of delving into the quality issues, we started by exploring the genesis of rejection of formal education in the area.

Genesis of rejection of formal education in the region. One would wonder why this region despised formal education despite all the promises of better life entailed for those who are educated. In finding answers to this question, we met one elder called Nangiro (not real name) who narrated to us the genesis of the rejection of formal education in the region. He explained that in the 1960s, the government brought law enforcement persons who forced communities to enroll children in school. When the communities refused, a fight broke out leading to the death of many local people in the area. Arising from these deaths, the communities held a ritual in which they buried the pen that symbolically meant formal education. While the deaths were in one community, the whole incident was a binding factor for the whole region, ensuring that every generation learnt it by heart and despised those who tried to go to school considering them to have betrayed the community. If there is need for education, parents from the sites we visited take their children to community initiated centers where lessons are conducted under trees, supervised by teachers nominated by the community.

The teachers in the community center do not have any formal education, and by formal standards are actually illiterate. A male teacher we found in one of the centers had never attempted to go to even grade one. The community, however, found him to be the teacher of choice for their children. At this point, we got more interested in talking to this teacher to learn what qualities he possessed that made the community nominate him to be the teacher in the center. This teacher was called Mr Akol (not real name).

The ECCE center we refer to here is a community makeshift center. It is usually set up under a large tree that also acts as a community meeting place. While children are in "class," other community members come around to do their work while keeping an eye on what goes on in the center. Once in a while, they can join the lesson to give more information or simply keep order among the children. The particular center we visited was located about 50 m away from a government

supported ECCE center. The government center has concrete floor and walls, iron roof, metallic slides, outdoor play materials, and trained teachers, yet it had no children. In contrast, the community ECCE center that was overflowing with children studying under trees with no sanitary facilities in site was considered a better option than the well-built structures in the Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) centers.

Exploring further, we decided to find out what constituted quality in their perspective. We got to know that these people did not put much emphasis on the kind of buildings or structures that are in a given learning center. Since they stay in makeshift houses, a make shift school actually resonates well with them. Some of the parents even come to listen to the teacher to see whether what is being taught matches what they identify with. The issue of a relevant curriculum used at school becomes critical to them in that they want children to learn things about them and not about other people. This feeling is expressed by Akol, the local teacher seconded by the community to teach in the center as follows:

> ABEK should start teaching community practices like how marriage ceremonies are conducted, how different foods can be prepared, how naming ceremony is performed and which millet is best for making local beer. As long as they keep teaching things that are not here, the parents will not send their children to those schools. I teach what is here that is why parents like me and keep me as the teacher for their children here.

In terms of the pedagogy to be used, the people are particular about skills development in children. They are interested in making children learn from the environment and be able to manage it. The ABEK classes were accused for making children sit most of the day writing and reading, yet when children went back home, the reading and writing did not help them to manage small problems they encounter at home. This feeling was strong among the seconded teacher who intimated as follows:

> There are many things that should change in the ABEK School. Children should go to school to learn and not to sit the whole day. We need taking children out in the field to look at the animals, take care of them, get to know the plants and insects. We should teach them why those things are there and how they help us when we need them.

The above excerpts start to show that issues of quality may be relative. In that what one group considers being quality may as well be despised by another community as not being quality (Ng'asike, 2014). In establishing and sustaining quality ECCE centers, communities need to be part of the quality process so as to do it in their perspective.

The teacher quality indicators

In the center, we were privileged to meet two teachers from different backgrounds: one of the teachers was Akol and the other was Sagal. While Akol is an "illiterate" cultural man, dressed in cultural clothes, and has never had any formal education, Sagal, on the other hand, is a "refined" lady in the Western sense, who largely communicates in English, although not fluent in it.

The introduction of the two teachers became our entry point to discuss the teacher quality indicators in their perspective. Unlike in the Western perspective where a teacher applied to be a teacher and later trained to be one, in this community, a teacher does not apply to be one. Instead, the community chooses who should be the teacher based on what they see from the person. These communities are also suspicious of persons who come from other cultural backgrounds as not fit to be teachers for their children. They believe that when a teacher is from another culture, he or she is most likely to teach their children another culture. Acceptability, therefore, becomes critical if

parents are to entrust their children to the care of a particular teacher. This suspicion was strongly expressed by the community teacher as he explained his experience as follows:

> But what I know is that life in this place is not easy. Our children need to be trained to manage the life we live here. I am from this place and I know all things that take place here. I am not someone bringing other things here that is why parents trust me.

Coming from the community does not make you become the preferred teacher. You have to earn it through dedicated work to your own family and the community. You must show total discipline when dealing with community members so that with time, they get to know that you are a good person who cannot misguide children. Akol explained to us that discipline is paramount for one to be a teacher in their community. He had this to say,

> I am a disciplined person. The people see me as their role model and want their children to behave like me. I did not go to school, but am better than those other teachers who went to school. I behave well among the people, so they want me to teach their children how to behave well too.

This discipline is also closely associated with respect as another cardinal quality of teachers in the community. Akol explains respect as follows: "I teach the children by example. I greet them with respect and then I ask them also to greet me with respect." Respect, according to this community, is a key quality indicator that must be enshrined in the life of all people.

Besides the respect, teachers must show that they are knowledgeable and can impart skills to learners who are brought to them. Knowledge and other personal skills that teachers possess will only be useful if those skills are translated into daily problem-solving episodes. This is because parents keep interacting with children on a daily basis to evaluate whether the teacher's pedagogy is appropriate. One of the community teachers, Mr Akol, described his pedagogy that has worked for him as follows:

> I show children how to do things and they do it themselves. I take them out in the environment and teach them about different plants that are useful to them as food or medicine. I show them how to get them and if they have any accident, I show them which herb to use and how they can administer first aid.

The above excerpts show the quality indicators communities look for in a teacher they can nominate to work with their children. Those qualities need to be observed in the person over a period of time such that all members come to a consensus that the person is fit to be a teacher. Thus, being a teacher places one in a position of high esteem where many cannot reach.

Child quality indicators

In pursuit of child quality indicators from the communities, we visited one manyatta to meet Sarah Longole (not real name) who had a child in the ECCE center in the community. We asked Sarah to explain to us what she considered quality she wished to see instilled in her child at school. She had this to say, "as a mother, I need my child to be successful in her home." We probed further to understand what success meant to her. She continued to explain to us her expectations of her children as follows:

> You see, now we live in poverty. We want to get out of this poverty and live a better life. So, we send our children to school expecting them to learn knowledge that we as parents have not had. That knowledge should help them to improve our life as well from home. They can buy more animals, build a house or make you stay well at home.

The above excerpt shows that the quality indicator being proposed here is being knowledgeable. Parents have great expectation of school for their children as a source of knowledge that can be used to improve standards of living. Once a person has a good life, he or she is expected to share it with the community as Sarah explained in the following excerpt:

> My child should be able to get along with others easily. She has to learn to live among others and make friends. She should help others so that tomorrow if she has a problem, she can also be helped by others. So, I am happy when I see my child helping people in the community. It gives me pride to see that people speak well about my child and say I did a good job educating my child.

From the above statement, we learn that quality meant one's ability to make friends, help other people, and living among other people in the community. In this perspective, quality education should help a child to be part of the community, living in it, and helping others. This brings in view the issue of communalism as opposed to individualism. It also brings in the values of altruism and the need to live for other people.

Besides the altruism quality, another quality that comes out vividly was intelligence quality, which is packaged as innovativeness and sometimes sense of responsibility (Jukes et al., 2018). In this community, children are expected to act mature and start taking on adult responsibility even when they are still young. A child has to show that he or she can do some things on his or her own without seeking guidance from adults. Parents will keep looking forward to a time when a child will innovate something or be able to manage an activity out of his or her own initiative. In exploring this quality, Sarah explained to us intelligence as follows:

> A child who is educated should show signs of intelligence. I want to see intelligence in them. A child should see a problem and be able to quickly find a solution to it. I remember as a child growing up. My mother used to insist that I have to do something without being told to do it. That if I have a responsibility, it is my duty to continuously remember to do it at the right time without anybody reminding me.

Intelligence on its own was not enough. To them, intelligence had to be shown in one's day-to-day activities. Interestingly, they also note that intelligence cannot be taught at school only, but it is taught everywhere where opportunity presents itself. When one demonstrates skilled use of the environment, it also means that the child has mastered a life skill that they will use later when need arises. Sarah explains this quality as follows:

> I know that school cannot teach children everything, so, we as parents have to come in and help. For my girls, I have to teach them how to mix and make bread. That means, I have to teach them how to identify the right tree branch to make the mingling stick, how to prepare flour and later the complete process of making bread. For the boys, they have to learn to take care of the animals. They have to learn how to make the ropes that are used to fasten the cows, he should know all the animals we have from their colour for easy identification and how to milk or get blood from the cows.

The same view on using intelligence to manage the environment that translated in life skills was also echoed by the community teacher. He particularly criticized the formal school system that kept children "idle" in one place the whole day memorizing foreign content and not making use of the environment. This teacher explained how he developed practical life skills in children that made parents trust him with their children abandoning the formal school system as follows:

> For the case of girls, I teach them how to collect fruits and other wild food stuffs and preserve them. So, every day the girls take something home to show they learnt something from school. In the ABEK

> School, the children went there to sit for the whole day and come back home with nothing. I also show girls how to grind flour, brew the local drink and process the milk. Those are the things a girl is expected to do when she goes back home. If she does not know these things, then what did she go to do at school?

The above excerpt brings in the idea of relevant learning that matches the social realities in the communities. As children grow, there are expectations they ought to meet in order to belong to a particular social class. As Mr Nangiro revealed, the children are expected to learn and be proficient in duties and skills that pertain to a given age group. He had this to say,

> Parents here want their children to possess skills that help them fit in their age group because each child has a role he/she must play within their age group. For example, young children up to the age of 7 years have a duty of herding calves. If you stop them from herding calves, then you are directly making them disobey their parents. When I am with the children, I teach them how to best care for the calves, teach them the best way to recognize their individual calves and how to make the calves recognize them. That is why you see each child here is sitting near his calves. The calves know them and they know their calves. They are all friends, and the calves will always want to be where the children are, making it difficult for them to get lost. The parents like this that is why they send their children to the teacher who can help them be friendlier to the calves.

The elder brings in the perspective of knowledge and mastery of roles that are culturally passed on to children. These roles are supposed to be emphasized by the school system. Any school system that ignores to teach such roles to children makes it harder for parents to maintain their children in such a school. The community centers are having higher enrolment because parents see a cultural connection to them as explained by the community teacher:

> I teach children cultural practices that they are to do as youth when they reach initiation time. For example, I teach them how to handle a bull, demonstrating with the calves. This is because later they are expected to each on his own kill a bull as elders watch to show that he is a man. We also have many taboos and cultural practices that parents need us to teach the children.

Culture and cultural practices become a central point of teaching in the communities. This is because culture is at the heart of community identification because it shows their uniqueness. There is no one else who can teach children the culture of a given community except the members of that community. The schools that bring teachers from other regions risk being rejected because parents start having a feeling that their children will not be taught any of their culture by the foreign person. For example, respect is one of the cultural expectations of children in many of the communities. Children are expected to respect elders, irrespective of the elders' education or socio-economic status. This aspect of respect is emphasized by all older persons in the community, but allocated as a cardinal duty of family members to instill it upon their children as Sarah, one of the parents explained,

> I think children should learn things that match what we want. Going to school should not make them have no respect for us who have not gone to school. My daughter, just like my mother emphasized to me as a young child should be respectful. I feel bad when people come to me to say that my child was disrespectful to them.

In all the above excerpts, parents, teachers, and community elders emphasized socio-cultural quality indicators. There was almost no mention of schooling-related qualities like numeracy and literacy as independent qualities. The nearest we came to hearing the mention of literacy and numeracy was from the community elder who was narrating his experience of learning while he

was a child at school. He still feels proud about it and sees it as one quality that has helped him to be a leader in his community. He recounted his experience as follows:

> I never studied much, but I am better than many of my peers in my community who never went to any school. It is partly because of my education that they now entrust me to manage the school. They did that because I can speak and understand what people who have gone to school say. When I come back, I explain to them what we discussed and they listen to me. When I say, tomorrow take your child to school, they listen to me and they take the children to the centre.

We probed Nangiro further to try to understand what he feels he learnt while at school, he had this to say,

> I learnt many things at school. What I remember most is reading and counting 1, 2,3,4,5 and so on. I liked counting because it helped me to know the number of cows we had. Even writing was good, but I did not get it well. Right now I can write my name, but writing other things is not easy. Mostly that is what I think I learnt from school.

Nangiro's experience of child quality indicator is being able to read and write. However, he does not place much emphasis on them besides using it as a strategy for boasting. The boasting, however, make the community members hold him in high esteem as an educated person, although he stopped in primary three. Also, the literacy and numeracy is used in context, which is for counting the animals they have, keeping records, and communicating with members who are not from the community. Otherwise, within themselves, Nangiro's position is less important.

Discussion

The findings in this study reflect a departure from the ordinary and normative practice in the way we arrive at quality indicators for children, teachers, and centers that work with children in the early years as seen in the Western world. While most child indicators defined in the West focus on schooling-related quality indicators, the communities here focus on indicators that prepare children for life in the community.

In the communities, assessment of key competences is done by observing children while at task in a real life situation. This assessment is authentic and has no room for cram work or cheating that is sometimes witnessed in the schools that are largely academic oriented following the western design of teaching.

Intelligence in the perspective of the communities is seen in the way the child solves problems that he or she meets, social interaction with others, and innovativeness. Absence of such qualities in a child, at whatever age, is seen as lack of education on the part of the child.

Respect for others and altruism are common child quality indicators that most parents want to see in their children. It is a common belief that such qualities are contagious. That is why they have to look for teachers who have such qualities to be with the children for some time. It is expected that the teacher will be able to impart those desired qualities in the children over time. This way of thinking also sets these communities apart from the western approach that emphasizes independent living where a person has freedom to do as he or she pleases which is enshrined in the right of every individual.

When it comes to teacher quality indicators, in the western perspective, much emphasis is put on the person's ability to work with parents, kindness, and knowledge of literacy and numeracy. In these communities, the teacher quality indicators are how well the teacher treats his or her family, personal behavior away from school, and knowledge of life and environmental management skills that the teacher has shown over a period of time.

The communities here also do not put more emphasis on the nature of the learning environment or learning center, instead, they focus on what opportunities the center can offer the children away from the school. The communities believe in learning for life by taking children out to experience real life situations so that they can learn from it as opposed to sitting in class "memorizing foreign content."

Conclusion

In this study, we establish that there is a difference between communities and early childhood centers in the way they define quality indicators for children, teachers, and centers. While the schools focus more on schooling quality indicators, the communities focus on life indicators. While the schools focus on teachers who have excelled in literacy and numeracy to work as teachers, the communities focus on the cultural background of the person and exemplary life in the community to make one qualify to be a teacher. In the Western perspective, the quality indicators for the center include facilities, child teacher ratios, and parent engagement activities (Ejuu, 2015). In the communities, they do not focus on any of those. Instead, they focus on accessibility of the center to the community, how well the center teaches cultural practices, and flexibility of the school to allow children perform their normal responsibilities prescribed for each age category.

These differences make communities go against the established school systems that largely follow the Western model of thinking. Continuing along this path will always encourage animosity between the schools and communities leading to increased dropout of children from school, rejection of trained teachers posted to support established schools, and wastage of resources as communities leave supported school initiatives to collapse when funding stops.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested to help bridge the gap between current practice and the desired goals of education in the communities:

In working with children, schools should adopt the apprenticeship pedagogy in which the children are taught in real life situation so as to ensure acquisition of practical skills. Working in the environment, solving challenges that affect the community should be the dynamic pedagogy that will ensure that all children remain in school. This approach has helped communities not to have job seekers, yet urban areas have well educated youth who still cannot find or keep any job.

The school system needs to start adopting child quality indicators from the communities. Such quality indicators include respect, intelligence, innovativeness, socialization, and altruism as opposed to putting more emphasis on schooling-related quality indicators that have limited place in the communities.

The centers need to start adopting a flexible school routine that allows children to perform their normal routines as expected by the community while continuing to go to school. Such routines can be inbuilt in the school lessons so that communities start seeing the school as teaching their cultural practices to reduce school dropout.

The teachers need to be carefully selected based on consultation with communities. In the event that the teacher does not show the desired qualities in the perspective of the communities, they will always reject such teachers or simply abandon the school that maintains such a teacher.

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