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by Godfrey Ejuu

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Early childhood development (ECD), either as a process, program, or service provided to young children from birth to 8 years of age, has always existed in Africa, although not in the form that is recognized as ECD today. Reports describe novel African child-rearing and care practices that have nurtured children to a level where they have been able to outcompete their counterparts in other parts of the world (Harkness, Super, Barry, Zeitlin, & Long, 2009). Most of these child-rearing practices and their implications for children have either not been documented or have been refused dissemination by international publishing houses that may consider them as unusual, with no Euro-American worldview (Arnett, 2008; Pence & Marfo, 2008). In the end, African communities are always expected to continue learning “best practices” in the field of ECD from the West, even if they have better experiences.

As ECD professionals and practitioners begin celebrating the dawn of a new era for ECD, which started in 1989 with ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the launch of Education for All (EFA) in 1990, and a series of other conferences and publications, ECD in Africa continues along an uncertain path. Concerns that the African child is being tailored to be a “global child,” alongside other homogenizing and dominating projections, such as early learning and development standards (ELDS), have increased (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). African communities need to be assured that global standards and global indicators will not further homogenize nations and thereby risk devaluation of traditional African practices (Kagan, Britto, & Engle, 2005)

History of Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS)

Early learning standards, also known as “early learning guidelines,” are documents that outline expectations for what preschool-age children should know or be able to do (Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella, & Milburn, 2007). In the United States, ELDS development began in the 21st century, partly as a need to design standards separate from those for children in the early elementary years that are based on “research about the processes, sequences, and long-term consequences of early learning and development” (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009 & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education [NAECS/SDE], 2002). Initial early learning standards primarily focused on literacy and math (Katz, Inan, Tyson, Dixon, & Kang, 2010). Later, the focus kept changing as need arose to include physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, cognition, and general knowledge (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005).

By 2007, 49 U.S. states had developed early learning and development standards, although not all of them were comprehensive (Scott-Little et al., 2007). Increased interest came partly as a result of the Good Start, Grow Start initiative launched by President Bush in 2002. This federal initiative, designed to improve the quality of early care and education programs and promote children’s success in school, required states to develop voluntary early learning guidelines to address children’s language and literacy skills (Scott-Little et al., 2007). Many state standards focus on superficial learning objectives, at times underestimating young children’s competence and at other times requiring understandings and tasks that young children cannot really grasp until they are older (Neuman, Roskos, Vukelich, & Clements, 2003). Some of them, however, have shelved their ELDS in classrooms and state departments of education and social services, except for a few states like Connecticut (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003).

Despite the throwaway mentality, efforts have been undertaken to share these standards with other parts of the world. The process began through the Going Global Project, a six-nation initiative funded by UNICEF. From here, the idea of early learning and development standards spread out to the first beneficiary countries outside of the United States. These countries included Brazil, Ghana, Jordan, Paraguay, the Philippines, and South Africa (Scott-Little et al., 2003).

Context of Early Learning and Development Standards

Learning standards are statements that reflect the expectations concerning what children should know and be able to do. The main goal of the development of ELDS is to confer a common reference background for all early childhood development services (health, protection, and education) to approach the child with the same integrated perspective (Kagan et al., 2005). The expectations not only address what children should know and do by a given age, but also outline corresponding developmentally appropriate suggested practices that adults must do with children to enhance their development. These developmentally appropriate practices focus on “what and how young children need to be educated” and are based on the children’s developmental status (Katz et al., 2010).

The structure of ELDS revolves around the five thematic areas of physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, cognition and general knowledge (Scott-Little et al., 2005). Also, the standards emphasize the importance of offering children engaging classroom curriculum experiences, such as hands-on learning, inquiry-based activity, in-depth exploration, and cooperative learning, all of which support children’s active learning as well as the child’s development within the social context (Katz et al., 2010).

Consequently, use of comprehensive ELDS is supposed “to promote an effective kindergarten readiness experience no matter where children are enrolled” (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). This “best practice” is supposed to be used to change and reform the whole education system and integrate our approach to children across different sectors. Because ELDS must become a basis for curricula development, assessment, teacher training, and parenting programs must be aligned to it. This, to the Africans, means that they should throw away their “old ways” and adopt the “best practice,” despite warnings against “measuring other people’s corn by one’s own bushel” (Tylor, 1881, as cited in Pence & Marfo, 2008, p. 3).

Process of Developing Early Learning and Development Standards in Uganda

In Uganda, the Education Act of 2008 and the Education Sector ECD policy of 2007 mandate that the Directorate of Education Standards (DES) has responsibility for setting, defining, and

ensuring adherence to existing standards by all educational institutions. This mandate makes DES directly responsible for maintaining standards that it sets and disseminates to concerned stakeholders in the country (Ministry of Education & Sports [MoES], 2012). In the case of early childhood development, DES started by defining standards as competences, then changed its approach after the leaders attended a regional conference in Nairobi, Kenya, where the idea of developing ELDS was debated. The team then took it upon themselves to lead the country along the path of ELDS. Consequently, various consultative meetings were held with different stakeholders and experts at both national and international levels to forge a way forward. Since the idea of ELDS was new to the Ugandan group, they decided to identify an international consultant who could guide the process of ELDS development in Uganda (MoES, 2012).

UNICEF, as usual, supported this process and helped to identify and facilitate one international consultant and one national consultant to guide the process. National workshops oriented the core ELDS writing team to the scope of work, the process, and expected outputs. The writers' panel was paired with another team from Eritrea that was developing their own ELDS. Under the guidance of the consultants, the team put together the national goals and values that were used to compile expectations of children at the ages of 2 1/2 to 5 1/2 years from selected stakeholders at national and regional levels. This information, together with expert knowledge of child developmental psychology, early childhood education, social protection, and best practices, formed the core of the ELDS drafting (MoES, 2012).

The drafts were then presented to key stakeholders at the national, regional, and local levels for validation. They were asked to ascertain whether the standards were culturally inclusive, had the appropriate breadth and depth, were relevant, or were linked to other standards. Feedback from this process was used to improve the draft ELDS, making it ready for age validation (MoES, 2012).

The age validation was done to establish whether the set standards truly reflected what is expected of children at the given ages. Children were identified from seven regions in Uganda. The improved drafts were then given to the consultants for technical input. If approved, the ELDS will become a basis for far-reaching reforms in ECD and the country at large.

Issues

The development of these standards in Uganda is being guided by international experts, with funding from UNICEF. The project aims at "helping" Uganda adopt "best practices" that are working well elsewhere. It should, however, be noted that culture is the heart of Africans, which may not coincide with a large part of standards originally developed outside the region. Declaring a "best practice" only signifies that a program model is favored by a particular stakeholder group, such as the originators of the program (Ball, 2010). It also should be noted that even "best practices" have been known for their failure to address issues of culture and context (among others), and for the limitations of a positivist approach (Jipson, 1991; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Swadener & Kessler, 1991). Thus, importing early learning programs can interrupt the transmission of locally valued cultural knowledge and practices and undermine the diversity of voices, knowledge sources, ways of life, and support for raising children in local conditions in receiver countries and communities (Canella & Viruru, 2004; Soto & Swadener, 2002; Stairs & Bernhard, 2002).

The ELDS as it is being proposed in the development process will only have five thematic areas. These five areas reflect a Western style of thinking in terms of domains, yet Africans have more developmental areas they teach outside the classroom. If we adopt the ELDS approach and work with the five development areas, we may risk leaving out other important areas of our life that cannot be categorized under any of the five areas. Therefore, narrowing of curriculum scope can be a shortcoming of any set of standards. When standards are not comprehensive, the curriculum driven by those standards is less likely to be so, and any alignment will likely address only those few curriculum areas identified in the standards (NAEYC, 2009). In the United States, it has already been noticed that many state standards focus on superficial learning objectives, at times underestimating young children's competence and at other times requiring understandings and tasks that young children cannot really grasp until they are older (Neuman et al., 2003).

It also has been noted that some schools in the United States that are implementing ELDS are already curtailing valuable experiences, such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts (NAEYC, 2009). In high-pressure classrooms,

children are less likely to develop a love of learning and a sense of their own competence and ability to make choices, and they miss much of the joy and expansive learning of childhood (Wien, 2004). Many African children are deeply affected by different challenging conditions, such as disease, hunger, and poverty. To them, a school should be a place where they can relax, enjoy themselves, and play with friends. We cannot afford to extend their misery to school as a result of standards, if that is how it works.

Where ELDS are being implemented, they have been criticized for prompting teachers to adopt increasingly formal teaching approaches (NAEYC, 2009). In the United States, it has been noted that standards overload is becoming overwhelming to teachers and children alike and leading to potentially problematic teaching practices. It has been noted that teachers are adopting excessive lecturing to the whole group; fragmented teaching of discrete objectives; and rigid, tightly paced schedules (NAEYC, 2009). We Africans, on the

other hand, treasure a whole child who uses heart, hands, and head. Overly academic programs are a put-off for many. When they go back to their communities, there will be no room for them with their strictly academic content. Therefore, we must either go on and follow the ELDS or trace our steps back before it is too late.

The idea of discarding what we have been doing in favor of new ideas with no proper reason except that somebody does not like the old ways is disturbing. In the period of less than 15 years, after great lobbying and relying on a very tight budget, African countries have moved from one step to another in taking on the “best practice.” In Uganda, for example, we started by developing the Children’s Act in 2000, then the Curriculum for Children in 2005, the ECD policy in 2007, the Education Act in 2008, a thematic curriculum in 2008 for lower primary classes, ECD center establishment guidelines in 2009, revised primary teachers’ curriculum that focused on ECD in 2010, an ECD teacher training framework in 2011, and parenting programs. Now, if we adopt the ELDS, we will have to align all these documents, which already have cost a fortune for a poor country. Thorough alignment in itself means reviewing or rewriting all the above documents. Effective alignment and revision of standards consists of more than simplifying for a younger age group the standards appropriate for older children, but should be based on what is known from research and practice about children from a variety of backgrounds at a given stage/age and about the processes, sequences, variations, and long-term consequences of early learning and development (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2002).

In the United States, early learning standards are still relatively new, having been mandated by Good Start, Grow Smart in 2002 for the domains of language, literacy, and mathematics (NAEYC, 2009). Nevertheless, signs that Africans should attend to are already apparent. It is reported that standards have become more complex and confusing because of their accountability demands (Scott-Little et al., 2003; Scott-Little et al., 2007). Accountability requirements linked to assessment procedures increase external technical pressure over teachers, decrease their autonomy, and lead to an intensification of their work (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006). This means that teachers are leaving children to attend to these other additional demands, instead of doing their job freely. The situation can even be worse in an African context, where most institutions are not accustomed to accountability systems.

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The African uniqueness is largely derived from its rich culture. Therefore, any attempt to dilute culture must be rejected. Already, there is fear that global standards and global indicators will further homogenize nations (Kagan et al., 2005). “Cultural sensitivity” is common advice in the field of early childhood learning and development, and few would argue with it (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004). However, there is a great deal more rhetoric about responding to cultural diversity than evidence that we really mean it (Ball, 2010). Recognition of culture as important in ECD has not prevented the proliferation of brand-name programs touted as “best practices” based on the authority of Euro-western science to the Africans (Fleer, 2003; Kincheloe, 2000). After ELDS implementation, we shall continue to see western ECD tools playing an increasingly instrumental role to set government agendas, plan policy, and justify the transfer of early learning program goals and models from more to less developed countries (Goldfeld, Sayers, Brinkman, Silburn, & Oberklaid, 2009). Therefore, we must curb our enthusiasm for promoting uniform methodologies for international comparisons and exporting so-called “best practices” into cultural and national contexts that are fundamentally different from their source (Ball, 2010).

Finally, it is time for Africans to start standing against what they feel is oppressing them. Everywhere we turn, we are confronted with foreign child care and development approaches that are promoted in a manner that suggests Africans are incapable of producing a healthy adulthood due to their local inadequacies, rather than broader historic geo-political activities that have contributed to the impoverishment of the continent (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). The idea of being submissive and calling on western powers to solve our own issues has gone on for too long. A few people in academia are trying this battle and keeping the fire burning; we must work to protect our sense of being.

The Way Forward

Like the common saying “better to work with the devil you know than the angel you do not know,” we must take precautions as we work with the angel (ELDS) that has been brought to us. Attempts must be made to study the *lived* benefits of ELDS. We should learn from different U.S. states that have not fully embraced the ELDS despite being in close proximity to the origin of the “best practice.” Lessons from these states should help us decide whether to throw away our old and

trusted ways of doing things or adopt change.

Since independence, African countries have put a lot of resources into building their education systems. Although these education systems are not comparable to those in other countries in terms of western standards, they still show what we are and how far we have come. Careful studies must be done, especially in the area of ECD, to see the gaps in our child-rearing practices according to our own standards before we overhaul them in favor of “best practices.”

ELDS focus more on cognitive and language areas. On the other hand, the African system is holistic and puts emphasis on moral and social development, while promoting unity and communalism. The child is not supposed to be brought up as an intelligent robot, but rather as a gift to the whole community through his/her social obligations. The family of extended kin is the institution for the “gift of children” and, as the hub of sociogenic values and norms, it is the foundation for child care (Nsamenang, 1996). If we do not want to go away from these values, we can still improve our education systems in the way we feel is best and watch ELDS pass us unnoticed.

If Africans, and Ugandans in particular, agree to adopt ELDS, then we have two options. First, we can have different ELDS for each region or ethnic group. The many different ethnic groups in Africa are completely different from each other and therefore need different sets of standards. The fact that Uganda has failed to adopt one national language serves to show the magnitude of the diversity. The second option is to take up another survey and identify the common best practices within different ethnic regions of the country. These culturally oriented best practices and expectations would then form the core of the standards. Communities using these standards would also be allowed to incorporate culturally relevant expectations into the process to make it workable in their circumstances. Africa, with its distinct regional, cultural, religious, and political traditions, as well as its ethnic variety, has various forms of “public Africa” to learn from (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). We will thrive if we are allowed to move at our own pace.

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