

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Re-Conceptualizing Early Childhood for Localized Applications in Ghanaian/African Contexts

Aaron Osafo-Acquah

Senior Lecturer, Department of Basic Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Abstract:

This manuscript discusses the idea of the universal child and suggests that child development in Ghana and Africa would be best served by a broad range of disciplines, methods, and orientations that are localized to the needs of the people. The environments for children's development are culturally structured. Therefore local knowledge is necessary to understand development and devise social programs to promote healthy outcomes. A particular institution or practice cannot be simply plucked out of one culture, and inserted into another with the expectation of similar results or outcomes.

Keywords: *Reconceptualization, universal, early childhood, child development*

1. Introduction

Traditional African education, an informal way of transmitting the cultural heritage of a group of people to their young ones, had existed before the introduction of Western formal education in Ghana (McWilliam & Kwamena-Po, 1975). In traditional African education, every child was considered a learner and every adult was also considered a teacher or instructor. The curriculum was made up of all the experiences of life that the child had to go through. These included running errands; providing service to the community; learning skills that will provide the child a source of livelihood; being respectful and obedient to adults; providing safety and security to the immediate family and the larger community as a whole; and becoming a very useful individual to one's self and the entire community.

Children were expected to obey rules and regulations as pronounced by their parents and the community in general. For example children did not have many choices when it comes to decisions made by the adults in their lives. The child would have to eat whatever had been prepared by the parents without the option of suggesting some other type of food. Traditional meals such as fufu, banku, akple ampesi, and rice, were prepared and eaten by the whole family, and no child could suggest anything else. The child could not suggest kelewele when the menu for the day did not support that. Very early in life children were expected to contribute to the total life of the community by engaging in assigned activities intended to boost the physical, social, and economic life of the parents, the family, and the entire community.

Children in Ghana were prepared through informal traditional education to become custodians of their own heritage (Serpell & Marfo, 2014), and were considered to fully own their future. In the traditional informal education, every child was a learner and every adult was a teacher or instructor. Everywhere was a classroom and the curriculum comprised everything that the child needed to know. Every child belonged to every adult, and it was the duty of every adult to ensure that children in the community lived upright lives. It was, therefore, common to see a Ghanaian child being punished by an adult on the street (Twum-Danso, 2013).

In Ghana, children learn from adults through the child's ongoing interactions with their adults. Children imitate most of the activities that they see adults, particularly their parents, do and engage in (Kwamena-Po, 1975). For example, the daily activities that parents do such as fetching water from the well, sweeping the room and compound, and cooking are imitated by the children while at play, and these applied experiences serve as an important way of learning roles in the home. In traditional African education many of the things that children learn are through observation and imitation (Kwamena-Po, 1975). The child will grow up to know how to prepare food not because the parents ever set aside days and times to teach the child how to prepare food, but because the child had observed the process of food preparation over a period of time.

Children may not be able to internalize cultural norms very early in life but the use of punishment and rewards by some parents in some cultural environments was enough to enable their children to distinguish between actions that brought punishment and pain to them, and those that brought praise and rewards to them. Growing up in Ghana, I was told by my parents just as other parents and adults in the community told their children that children were expected to be obedient in whatever they did. What that instruction meant was that children were to abide by instructions both at home and outside the immediate home. Any deviation from such instructions was considered as a show of disrespect and therefore the offending child punished (Twum-Danso, 2013). According to the adults who gave such instructions, they were meant to ensure discipline and respect of adults on the part of the children. Children were therefore very careful with their behaviors particularly when they were in the company or presence of adults for fear of being punished. In the

households and communities, children were expected to accept and respect whatever parents and adults told them. Such informal way of child upbringing would go on until the child began formal education by enrolling at a Kindergarten.

Though children would not have internalized cultural norms by age 5 the use of punishments and rewards by their parents and guardians at home might be enough motivation to carry certain behaviors to school and to the classroom. There is therefore the possibility that in an environment where children have not been trained at home to ask questions, unless a teacher calls a child to answer a question, nobody will even raise the hand to attempt to answer the question because doing that could amount to a show of disrespect. The teacher therefore has to prompt children by mentioning their specific and individual names to urge them to participate in the class discussion just as parents prompt them at home to respond to specific questions and actions. Children have been told that when adults are talking they should not interrupt and so this idea has been carried to the school and to the classroom.

Looking straight into the face of an adult while he or she is talking to you is considered a sign of disrespect and many of us have grown with that till today. Children in Ghana sometimes carried to the classroom the behavior of not looking straight into the face of an adult when he or she is talking to you. A casual observation of some Ghanaian classrooms would show that while the teacher is talking and writing on the chalkboard or blackboard, the children will not be looking in his or her direction because looking in her direction to them is a sign of disrespect. It calls for a teacher who understands the Ghanaian culture to be able to understand the children's behavior and thereby use appropriate strategies to help them to participate in classroom interactions.

Many of the adult programs, and activities in Ghana, are accompanied by singing, and sometimes, drumming and dancing (Marfo et al., 2004). You can hardly see a gathering and a program of activity without the presence of singing and dancing. Thus, very early in their upbringing, children in Ghana become used to play as a means of accomplishing tasks. Even on their farms, parents sing to accompany the work they do while the children play all manner of instruments to accompany the singing.

In a study by Pence and Marfo (2008), they challenged the idea of universal child and suggested that African child development, would be best served, by a broad range of disciplines, methods, and orientations. To them, the environment for children's development were culturally structured. Therefore local knowledge was necessary to understand development and devise social programs to promote healthy outcomes. They further argued that a particular institution or practice could not be simply plucked out of one culture, and inserted into another with the expectation of similar results or outcomes. To them, it is "think locally, act globally". Grounding early childhood development in community development and capacity building Marfo, Biersteker, Sagnia, and Kabiru(2008) stated as follows:

"The Akan (Ghana) philosophical principle of *san kofa* (widely expressed outside the culture as a single-word dictum, *sankofa*) is perhaps a parsimonious way to introduce this section. Symbolized by the image of a bird that turns to look back while still flying ahead, the principle of *sankofa* conveys the importance of reaching into the past for valuable lessons, insights, or practices, even as a culture undergoes transformation and its people embrace new ideas and new ways. Two legacies are worth retrieving from the past as we think about building and implementing ECD programs. Africa's communal and community legacy is highly celebrated but the legacy's foundations have been rocked by modernity, urbanization, and the social isolation of people from their cultural and ancestral roots. The community as the unit of social organization for the common good remains an important but decreasingly harnessed traditional asset in development planning in much of rural Africa" (p. 204).

Research on child development in Africa was almost exclusively directed and published by scholars of European cultural heritage (Serpell & Marfo, 2014). According to Pence (2009) African child development would be best served by a broad range of disciplines, methods, and orientations if the cultural environment of children was considered, because local knowledge is necessary to understand development and devise social programs to promote healthy outcomes. Pence (2009) challenged the idea of the universal child, and observed that a particular institution or practice cannot be simply plucked out of one culture and inserted into another with the expectation of similar outcomes (P. 32). Responding to the challenge of meeting the needs of children under three years old in Africa, Marfo et al. (2008) posited that Africa's communal and community legacy was highly celebrated, but the legacy's foundations had been rocked by modernity (p. 204).

Any viable early childhood development program in the African context must build on existing initiatives of *sankofa* that address the survival, health, and nutritional needs of children (p. 203). To Marfo et al. (2008), target groups that should be considered in the design and implementation of programs and policies were children, their families, guardians, and primary caregivers (p. 203). Assumptions about what counted as normal development were frequently applied inappropriately within international policy and curriculum development (Woodhead, 2006). Respecting diversities between and within societies, and recognizing the challenges of social change, migration, and multi culturalism, was a core issue for early childhood care and education policy and practice (p. 19). Contextually appropriate practice in which childhood policies, services, curricula, and practices took into account the circumstances of children's lives should be emphasized.

All human behavior is culturally based (Cazden, 2001), and ways of talking that seem so natural to one group are experienced as culturally strange to another (p.67). Early childhood care and development (ECD) is increasingly found on national agendas of Sub-Saharan Africa (SAA) (Pence & Marfo, 2008). This is because Sub-Saharan Africa faces tremendous challenges in its efforts to promote the well being of its children. Nsamenang's (2008) recent work regarding the hegemony of Western ECD and its suppression of local perspectives and knowledge is an example of one "local" scholar working to open space for a counter, critical perspective to emerge that has the potential to fundamentally reshape both the means and the ends of ECD development in Africa (Pence & Marfo, 2008). In a study of the Kpelle children of Liberia by

Lancy (1996), children, were found to be actively engaged in the household chores of the community, and contributed immensely to the total upkeep of the community. Child agency was the dominant approach where children were offered opportunity to play very active roles in the communities in which they lived (Nsamanang, 2008). Here, children construct, build, and do a lot more things by themselves.

Tobin (2005) discussed the issue of quality early childhood education and challenged the assumption that "quality" standards were universal, generalizable, and non-contextual. He called for cultural relativism and argued that the criteria for judging one culture cannot be used to judge other cultures when in fact they do not share similar characteristics (p. 425). Having universal standards that would be appropriate for all communities across the whole world would be a very difficult exercise because of the cultural backgrounds from which people come. This is why the current study was focused on Ghana, where the cultural norms and beliefs differed markedly from others found in other jurisdictions. It is important to consider the circumstances within which education was provided so that the children, people, and community who were supposed to be beneficiaries of such a venture actually benefited. This would call for adoption of the way of life of the people as a way of facilitating the process so that those who participated in such education would eventually fit into their communities but not become "misfits" who would not be able to fit into the very society from which they went to pursue their education.

Marfo and Biesterker (2011) have stated that children need to learn in order to succeed as adult members of their communities. They however thought that western-style schooling in Africa was a problem when measured by the criteria that education must be locally relevant, and transmit a society's enduring values and best traditions across generations (p. 1). The study on Kpelle children in Liberia (Lancy, 1996) stands out in terms of insights it shed on play as an agent of enculturation in African societies (p.3). According to Pence and Marfo (2008), a great deal of children's participation and engagement occurs in the context of work and chores. For example, rural Ghanaian children were known to turn the daily morning chore of fetching water from the river into play by building a simple "vehicle" with two wooden wheels and a long wooden pole connected to the rod that held the wheels together. On the other end of the pole that rested on the driver's shoulder there was also a steering device. Big nails hammered partway through the pole at points closer to the steering device were used as anchors to hold the buckets of water. The joy of driving and outracing siblings or peers with this make-believe transporter could not escape the attention of onlookers. The emphasis here was the use of a local initiative through play, to get children learn how to run errands with joy. The children enjoyed the activity and so they would always initiate the idea of going to fetch water for use by the family, something they would otherwise not do. It is in this light that teachers' verbal and nonverbal prompts would help children to participate in lessons during the instructional process.

Pedagogy is context-bound and value laden (Serpell & Marfo, 2014). It draws on the connections that exist among teaching, culture, organization, and the mechanisms of social control (p. 99). It is therefore very important for these pieces to be seriously considered in the planning of school activities, and hence the school curriculum. Creation of curriculum is a human endeavor, and involves the cultural beliefs, assumptions, theories and languages of its construction (Edwards, 2003). It is the expectation of every community that their young ones were able to excel in their education. In pursuance of this goal the cultural beliefs remained a fulcrum around which everything revolved. (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011). Interest-based curriculum and pedagogy were highly participative and interpretive. They described funds of knowledge as including information, skills, and strategies, which underlie household functioning, development, and well-being (p.189). Curricula should therefore utilize such knowledge. Children acquire a lot of knowledge and skills from their interactions with peers, parents, and adults. The informal education that takes place in the environment in which children live provide a source of information, skills, and knowledge that equip the children with a lot of experiences with which to deal with the challenges of the environment in which they find themselves. Daniels (2003) says that the perspectives that a teacher has about child development and how children learn will also inform the behavior of the teacher towards the child. Knowledge about child development and how children learn is a factor that can place teachers in a better position to appreciate the efforts that children make in class during the instructional process.

The idea of "the universal child" may not apply to the Ghanaian context because the Ghanaian belief system carved out from our culture may be at variance with what the expectations of the universal child were (Pence & Marfo 2008). Much of the research that has been done was by researchers with European background (Serpel, & Marfo, 2014), and therefore they seemed not to tell the true and real African and Ghanaian story. This is why Serpel & Marfo (2014), argued that it was not right to pluck an aspect of a particular culture and insert it into another culture with the expectation of similar results.

Understanding the Ghanaian cultural context was important to understanding children's behavior to be able to appropriately and adequately teach them. My philosophical framework is that the idea of "Universal child" is not making children in Ghana's early childhood schools benefit appropriately and adequately.

Literature reviewed has showed that more studies on Africa and for that matter Ghana, were done by researchers with Western background and knowledge and therefore such studies were done using ideas that were foreign and not representative of the people and places being studied. Results from such studies have not showed the true state of the situation about the areas studied. It is therefore very important that researchers with African and or Ghanaian backgrounds endeavor to do more studies so that such results would reflect the real situations as could be found in the areas being studied.

Teaching pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive would provide them with the knowledge to appreciate that children in Ghanaian schools needed a lot of verbal and non-verbal cues to adequately benefit from the interactions that went on in the classroom.

2. Cultural Influences and the Idea of a Universal Child

The cultural influences and norms among groups of people seem to cast a shadow on the idea of the "universal child" where all children are viewed as the same irrespective of cultural background, and orientations (Pence & Marfo, 2008). The universal child idea argues that every child anywhere is similar to others everywhere and therefore would behave in similar ways under similar conditions. Pence and Marfo (2008) have asserted that, plucking an aspect of a certain culture and planting it in another culture with the expectation that it will yield similar results will not work. This is because the idea of a universal child that has dominated Western philosophy does not work well for places such as Africa and Ghana to be specific.

Pence and Marfo (2008), have said that much of the research done about Africa, was done by researchers with European background and so they chose and picked what they wanted. Therefore the story out there may not accurately represent the Ghanaian experience. The belief systems of Western countries differ markedly from those of African countries and therefore creating the impression that all children everywhere are the same may not be a fair argument.

It is important to note that the social, moral, physical, and emotional conditions of a place that are important to the behavior of the child must be considered when drawing programs and activities for children in such communities (Levine, 2007). If such important considerations are not met but an imposition is made on the child, the child will not grow to become capable of helping his community. Children who are the offspring of members of the community are expected to grow to take over the mantle of leadership and the culture of the community is transmitted through various forms of education to equip them with the legacies of their parents for preservation.

Taking into consideration the people for whom a program is initiated would help address the concerns of such a group to ensure successful implementation of the program and that is why Tobin (2005) has said that it is important for children of a particular culture to be considered when preparations and programs are made because no community wants their children to be misfits in their own backgrounds and culture. This is why the school is expected to ensure that children who go through the school do not become people who cannot fit into the very community from which they went to school.

In view of the arguments made by anthropologists and developmental psychologists, Woodhead (2006) suggested Contextually Appropriate Programs (CAP) instead of Developmentally Appropriate Programs (DAP). The argument here is that the context within which any set of programs or activities is provided to the child is probably more important than anything else. I personally think that "appropriate context" might even include developmental issues. This supports the argument of Pence and Marfo (2008) that there is no universal child and that the notion of universal child should be reconsidered.

Child participation in activities and programs of the community is allowed and approved. Therefore very early in life, children are guided in whatever they do (Rogoff, 2003). Such guided participation allows the child to interact and participate fully in the activities that the community engages in. Children are part of the decision-making process because they contribute to the economic and social life of the community.

As observed in the Ghana Early Childhood Care and Development Policy (MOE, 2004), one medium through which adults could get their children to participate in activities that would help children to learn was the use of play. This is because children from birth are used to the lullaby that parents and caretakers sing to them as part of the child-rearing practices. The use of play whether in-door or out door is a culturally mediated activity that serves as method of teaching and learning in the community (Marfo et al., 2004). Through such dramatic play and activities children learn the basic norms of the community. Children are ready to go on errands because they see such errands as opportunity to engage in one or two activities of dramatic play. For instance going to the riverside to fetch water for the family is never difficult because children have the opportunity to hang buckets on improvised vehicles, which they drive happily to go and fetch the water. Oberhuemer (2005) also suggests that using play makes children learn faster and better. They see a lot of fun in the play activity and do not associate fatigue with it. Young (2010) has also suggested pedagogy that is culturally relevant. What this means is that pedagogy should not be foreign to the culture in which the child lives. Such pedagogy will be appropriate and more relevant to the principles and tenets that the community holds. Western pedagogy is alien and brings along a lot of challenges including the neglect of cultural practices that are considered "primitive"

3. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that a reconceptualization plan needs to be put in place to begin to emphasize the African story. Re-conceptualizing does not however, mean that we have to throw away the "baby with the bad water". We need to utilize the ideas that are in line with the tenets we believe are true to Africa, and review other parts that need attention. Looking at what the cultural demands of Ghana are, there should be a way of drawing programs and activities for educating children in Ghana so that we would make such education more meaningful and beneficial to the children and the entire Ghanaian community.

4. References

- i. Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning* (2nded.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- ii. Danieles, D. H., & Shumow, L. (2003). *Child development and classroom teaching: a review of the literature and implications for educating teachers*. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 23, 495-526.
- iii. Hedges, H., Cullen, J., & Jordan, B. (2011). *Early years curriculum: Funds of knowledge as a conceptual framework for children's interests*. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*43(2), 185- 205.

- iv. Lancy, D. F. (1996). *Playing on the mother-ground: Cultural routines for children's development*. Guilford Press.
- v. LeVine, R. A. (2007). *Ethnographic studies of childhood: A historical overview*. *American Anthropologist*, 109(2), 247-260.
- vi. Marfo, K., Agorsah, F. K., Bairu, W. W., Habtom, A., Ibetoh, C. A., Muheirwe, M. R., & Sebatane, E. M. (2004). *Children, families, communities, and professionals: Preparation for competence and collaboration in ECD Programs*. *International Journal of Educational Policy, Research, and Practice: Reconceptualizing Childhood Studies*, 5(3), 31-60.
- vii. Marfo, K., & Biersteker, L. (2011). *Exploring culture, play, and early childhood education practice in African contexts*. In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play pedagogy in early childhood education: Contexts, concepts and cultures* (pp. 73-85). London: Routledge.
- viii. Marfo, K., Biersteker, L., Sagnia, J., & Kabiru, M. (2008). *Responding to the challenge of meeting the needs of children under 3 in Africa*. In M. Garcia, A. Pence, & L. Evans (Eds.) (2008). *Africa's future, Africa's challenge: Early childhood care and development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 201-225). Washington DC: World Bank.
- ix. McWilliam, H.O. A., & Kwamena-Po, M. A. (1975). *The development of education in Ghana: An outline*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- x. Nsamenang, A. B. (2008). *Culture and human development*. *International Journal of Psychology*, 43(2), 73-77. DOI: 10.1080/00207590701859093
- xi. Oberhuemer, P. (2005). *International perspectives on early childhood curricula*. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(1), 27-37.
- xii. Pence, A. R., & Marfo, K. (2008). *Early childhood development in Africa: Interrogating constraints of prevailing knowledge bases*. *International Journal of Psychology*, 43(2), 78-87. DOI: 10.1080/00207590701859143
- xiii. Republic of Ghana Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. (n.d.). *Early childhood care and development policy*. Retrieved from <http://mowacghana.net/files/eccdp.pdf>
- xiv. Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- xv. Tobin, J. (2005). *Quality in early childhood education: An anthropologist's perspective*. *Early Childhood & Development*, 16(4), 421-434.
- xvi. Twum-Danso, A. I. (2013). *Children's perceptions of physical punishment in Ghana and implications for children's rights*. *Childhood*, 20(4), 472-486.
- xvii. Woodhead, M. (2006). *Changing perspectives on early childhood: Theory, research, and policy*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Available from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001474/147499e.pdf>
- xviii. Young, E. (2010). *Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy: How viable is the theory in classroom practice?* *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(3), 248-260.