

# **Moving the Early Child Development Agenda from the Peripheral to the Center of Developmental Initiatives: The new African Perspective on early Childhood Development in Africa**

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**Tholiwe Sophie Sithole**

Lecturer- Education Department BA ISAGO University  
Francistown Campus Botswana

**Boang Linkie Linchwe**

Lecturer- Education Department BA ISAGO University  
Francistown Campus Botswana

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## **Abstract**

Fundamentally, quality early learning programmes prepare children for adulthood, providing them with the necessary opportunities for social, cognitive, spiritual, physical and emotional development. Africa has for a long time been disadvantaging its own young people by not providing adequate resources for the care and education of young children. Some of this emanates from long historical ties and experiences deliberately created during colonialism. Colonialism and the resultant socio-economic suffering of young children are a matter of consideration. Inequalities did create a childhood of adversity for most black African children across the continent, including inadequate access to health care, education, social services and quality nutrition. This has and continues to; undermine the development of our children. It is however important to note that, to a large extent, we need to take hats off to most African states for their continued attempt to transform their education system by moving the young children from the peripheral to the center of educational development. This is despite the presents of socio-economic barriers which disable full execution of their policies on Early Childhood Education and Development.

**Key words: Early Childhood Education, Education Development initiatives, Young Children, Rights of children, cognitive development, new order**

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## **1.1 Introduction**

Early childhood Education in all parts of the world is a critical requirement in terms of laying a solid foundation for future manpower development of any country regardless of its development status. Transition into primary school from home or early childhood development (ECD) service is recognized as a critical period for children's development and learning (for example, Myers 1997; Sylva and Blatchford 1996). One cannot separate categorically the role of early child education to mind boosting and intellectual base setting. Healthy brain development is critical to the realization of human potential. Fundamentally, brain development sets trajectories for learning, behavior, and emotions that last a lifetime and that cannot be overcome later by the formal education system. Hence the talk and advancement of Early Childhood Education cannot be taken for granted. Of importance to note at this early juncture is that early childhood education is also embedded in, and molded by, the social and cultural context in which it occurs. A system of early childhood development varies from country to country and region to region (Annan, 2001; Brechony, 2000). It is unfortunate that, from the periphery they appear to be serious impediments on effective adoption and implementation of early childhood best practices. This paper is set to explore and interrogate present early childhood practices, mainly centering on the key challenges being faced in the Sub-Saharan Africa. The study will present recommendations that are productively geared towards dealing with the various challenges as articulated from various secondary data and partly primary data geared towards obtaining first hand experiences in the provision of early childhood education.

## **1.2 Overview on Early Childhood Development**

Early childhood education in most Sub-Saharan countries, until recently has been operating outside the boundaries of formal government policy. Early childhood education [ECD] also known as nursery education is a branch of education theory which relates to the teaching of children (Ellenberger et al., 2000; Gordon et al., 2017; Peacock, 2005). These children can either be taught formally or informally depending on the system. This is a very fundamental and paramount period of child development and must be treated as such. It is the period where the child's personality is developed and the future shaped. It is important to recognize that the history of early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to the development of care and education of children between zero and eight years old throughout history. The philosophical stance for caring

global scope, and caring for and educating young children has always been an integral and fundamental part of human societies. Approaches in fulfilling these societal roles have evolved over time and remain varied across cultures and societies (Pence, 2004).

Early Childhood Development attachment processes occurs during early childhood years 0–2 years of age, can be influential to future education. Research has shown that with proper guidance and careship children begin to become more comfortable with their environment, if a proper environment is created for them (UNESCO,2015,2014;UNICEF,2006). Parents who are consistent with response times and emotions will properly make this attachment early on. Failure to make this attachment at an early stage, the effects is detrimental on the child in terms of their future relationships and independence. Studies conducted to date shows that for much of the 20th century and throughout most of the globe, early childhood was largely unrecognized as a state-policy concern. Children, in the eyes of most states, were seen as an appendage or attachment to their parents rendering them not so important in terms of future developmental orientations (Ho, 1994; Jaramillo, 2003).

Children were as individual social entities largely formless. Their present could only be felt at the age of 6 or 7 when they entered formal school system. The 1989 Convention *on the Rights of the Child* (CRC; United Nations 1989) was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly. 20 countries had ratified the CRC by September 1990, bringing it into international law and as we speak today it has been ratified by almost all countries internationally. It is understood that a conscious inclusion of the rights of young children became evident in 1990 at the World Conference on *Education for All* (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand.

A significant advance was made in bringing, children onto the education agenda: “Learning begins at birth . . . This call for early childhood care and initial education” (UNESCO 1990, art. 5). At one of the conference held in Dakar –Senegal, in 2000, six key educational goals were developed, of which the first the delegates committed themselves to six key goals, the first of which was “expanding and improving early childhood care and education.

UNESCO’s (2006) EFA Global Monitoring Report, focused on early childhood education and care laying a strong foundation for all countries to pay attention and heed to the calling to put resources in order to lay strong foundations for future many power development to both an

intellectual and social perspective. It is argued that such a foundation is an anchor to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. Apparently, the MDGs cannot be achieved without huge and significant investment in young children's well-being. This background is critical in understanding various challenges that bedevils the adoption, implementation and sustainable policies that have a growth orientation from a social, political, economic and academic perspective. It is fundamental to note that, the impact of these conventions and statements is felt in Africa and the Sub-Saharan Region as in the rest of the world.

**Table 1 Summary of critical conventions/actions for Early Childhood Education**

Convention/Action centered	Year
The <i>Convention on the Rights of the Child</i> (CRC; United Nations 1989) was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly	1989
20 countries had ratified the CRC [ <i>Convention on the Rights of the Child</i> ]	1990
A conscious inclusion of the rights of young children became evident in 1990 at the World Conference on <i>Education for All</i> (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand.	1990
Association for the Development of Education in Africa, ADEA) created a Working Group on Early Childhood Development (WGECD).	1999
World Bank took the lead, with support from United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) together with international organizations, to organize a continent wide African International Conference on Early Childhood Development	1999
Asmara Conference produced a declaration on early childhood development ( <i>Asmara Declaration on ECD 2002</i> )	2002
Accra Conference held a special one-day concurrent session with government representatives from 39 African countries that led to the endorsement by those governments of a multipoint communiqué supporting early childhood development (ECD)2 in Africa ( <i>Accra Communiqué 2005</i> ).	2005
Eighth ADEA Biennial Meeting of the Ministries of Education held in Libreville, Gabon in March 2006	2006
Early childhood care and education -the focus of UNESCO's (2006) EFA Global Monitoring Report,	2006

**Source: Researcher compiled**

Generally, it is presumed that with exposure and organized lesson plans young children can learn anything they want to. The materials, tools, and any other supporting device they learn to use during these early years will provide lifelong benefits to their success and development. Developmentally, with proper structures and systems, relaxed freedom, children are able to reach their full potential with less interference from man-made barriers.

### **1.3 Africa's issues: trends in Early Childhood Education**

A lot has been said, talked about and written about Africa yesterday, today, and tomorrow and much of it is not very hopeful. Daily, the world hears stories of despair, disease, children not going to school, children going to school at a late age, lack of resources to teach, and no facilities for learning and so forth. However, there are at the present moment good stories coming from all corners of the world about attempts done by most African countries at policy level to transform the lives of the young children. There is hope and promise and the future if clearly framed is promising. This is the complex paradox, a story that acts as a common denominator in the Sub-Saharan [SSA] in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ECD has moved from the margins to become a shared and central concern for many countries in Africa. It is critical that the support engendered to date continues. African societies value children and place them at the center of their family life and communities (Fogel, 1994; Deutsh, 1994; Colleta and Reinhold, 2019). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) states that “the child occupies a unique and privileged position in the African society” (Organization of African Unity 1999, Preamble, para. 4). As alluded to earlier on, this paper is directed at exploring some of the major challenges faced and also developments that are underway in early childhood education in this region. The paper goes further to provide way forward in dealing with these challenges.

Statistically, there are 54 African countries and 48 in Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Sahel. Typically *not* reported are the increasing cases of children who enter grade 0-1 and the increasing number who graduate from primary school—both boys and girls (UNICEF, 2016, 2018). There is seldom information and records and or hear about the increase in the number of children who have access to a preprimary program, or variety of different programs that are being created to meet children multiple needs in a number of contexts. These, too, are important issues that touch on the development of children in Africa.

#### **1.4 Facts and Opinion on ECD Africa and Sub-Saharan Region**

- ▲ Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of absolute child poverty in the world. More than half of all children in the region are severely shelter-deprived and 45 percent are water-deprived. The region also suffers from the highest rates of deprivation in education (30 percent) and health (27 percent) [UNICEF,2014,World Bank,2016]
- ▲ Countries that are richer, less stressed, or have better development indicators for the general populations do not always provide better environments for their children [Unconfirmed source].
- ▲ Preschool gross enrollment ratio is extremely low, averaging 12 percent, 1 which is far below the developing world's average of 36 percent. However, the total enrollment rose in absolute numbers between 1999 and 2004 [UNESCO,2006;UNICEF,2005]
- ▲ Analysis of national data from 47 SSA countries confirms the strong contribution of early childhood factors to success in primary school. Average primary completion rates in these countries are associated with preprimary enrollment and with health and nutrition status early in life.[UNESCO, 2006;UNICEF,2006]
- ▲ The region has the highest rates of absolute child poverty in the world: 207 million children— 65 percent of all children in the region—suffer from two or more types of severe deprivation; more than 80 percent are severely deprived of one or more basic needs. Among rural children, more than 70 percent live in absolute poverty and 90 percent suffer from severe deprivation [World Bank,2013,2020]

#### **1.5 Investing in Early Childhood Education**

“We recognize that the future of Africa lies with the well-being of its children and youth. The prospect of socioeconomic transformation of the continent rests with investing in the young people of the continent. Today's investment in children is tomorrow's peace, stability, security, democracy, and sustainable development.” *Africa Fit for Children: The African Common Position* (Organization of African Unity 2001, para. 6). This quote is pregnant of meaning in terms of the value created through investing in ECE. Indeed the present position of African governments, levels of conflict, pace of development, democratization of institutions and systems points back to the background that was [many decades ago-shaky and unstable through failure by colonial governments then to support the cause of early child education (Behamuka,



1983; Bernard van Leer Foundations, 1994). I believe too that without adequate investment in Early Childhood education, Africa and the Sub-Saharan Africa in particular will never be the same in terms of development. Africa will also be in the shadow of the Westerners and Easterners.

Cross-national data on the status of young children in Africa highlight the dire conditions and the urgent need to improve nutrition, health, and early childhood conditions in nearly all of the countries. Research shows that the region has the highest rates of absolute child poverty in the world, affecting more than half of all the young children. It is important to note that improvement in education for EC improves lifelong human capital; investments in the early years would contribute to the longer-term economic development of Sub-Saharan African countries. Research shows that investing in young children would likely improve the chances of these children to succeed later in life (UNESCO, 2000; UNAIDS, 2004, 2017). The completion rates in the primary years, as well as the primary gross enrollment rates, are positively affected by the level at which countries invest in the early years in nutrition, health, preschools, and childhood care.

It cannot be denied that early childhood development (ECD) is the foundation of human development. A focus on the young child and holistic ECD provides an opportunity for sustainable human development, economic growth, social change, and transformation in Africa both as a region and as a continent.

HIV/AIDS is a big threat to the development of Children in Africa. Despite the lack of attention to young children on the HIV/AIDS agenda, the humanitarian and development communities are increasingly aware of the depth of the problem for children, and of the benefits of efforts that include a deliberate focus on early childhood development (ECD) (UNAIDS, 2004, 2019). Research shows that two out of every three HIV-positive people in the world live in Sub-Saharan Africa; nearly all of the nations in the region have the worst infant and child mortality indicators (UNAIDS 2004, USAID, 2016). In countries such as Botswana and Zimbabwe, which have among the highest HIV prevalence in the world, more than half of all childhood deaths are caused by AIDS (Global Health Council 2006; WHO 2003, WHO 2016). Orphans may also be taken in by orphanages or other institutions, or they may be forced to live on the streets. *In these*

*circumstances [HIV/AIDS], young children are less likely to receive the quality of stimulation, social connection, and support they would have received from family-based care.*

### **1.6 The role of indigenous ways in ECD**

Discourse on Africa's indigenous ECD is best undertaken within its own worldview, which inspires a circular path to human ontogenesis. Perpetuation of indigenous perspectives to ECD learning should be a priority in goal setting. Young children were and or are taught how to do things [singing, writing, respect, poetry, etc at a tender age. In the traditional society, education of the child was governed by family and community traditions and by social structures (UNICEF,2006; van der Gaag,1998; ADEA,2018). Each community had its own education system to socialize children into its culture, values, and traditions.

Early education transmitted important aspects of culture and values, such as sharing, social responsibility, belonging, mutual dependence, mutual respect, continuity, obedience, respect for elders, cooperation, fear of God, and ability to relate with other people (Dembele 1999; Kenyatta and Kariuki 1984; Kilbride and Kilbride 1990; Mwamwenda 1996).

From an indigenous perspective, children, learned social etiquette and conduct (for example, how to greet, sit, eat, and not interfere with adult conversation). Children learned and were taught as they participated in the daily living activities in the home, through ceremonies, direct instructions, observation, and apprenticeship. Oral literature and storytelling was also used to teach abstract philosophical attitudes toward life, beliefs, practices, and taboos (Mbithi 1982). Fathers, elders, and neighbors participated in the education and socialization of older children.

### **1.7 Challenges faced in ECD**

The motivation behind ECD planners and implementers is based on whose interests are addressed in policy development and implementation and the suitability of services in Africa: the interests of the development community or the interests of children and their communities. This compelling issue determines positioning for program status, control of or access to ECD resources, and which of Africa's children benefits from the ECD largess. This is a serious challenge on its-own given that there is a lot of bias in trying to meet other institutions or person's



personal tastes at the expense of the entire nation. Political uncertainty, famine, disease, and poverty continue to affect adoption and implementation of sound ECD policies in Africa (Asmara Declaration, 2002). As yet, investments in ECD do not appear to have increased greatly, but there are hopeful signs that greater attention is being given to improving child development.

### **1.8 Future of early childhood development in Sub-Saharan Countries**

Early childhood education Sub Sahara Africa has entered an exciting and challenging phase. For the first time in its history, preschool education has been formally acknowledged by most governments—a shift in the way it has been preconceived. Parental illness and death on young children is a cause for concern in Africa, and the Sub-Saharan Region (UNAIDS, 2004, UNESCO, 2006, 2018). When the caregivers of young children are also caring for someone who is chronically ill with AIDS—or are chronically ill themselves—they are often unable to provide adequate support. Regardless of the many challenges to early childhood survival and growth in Africa and the SSA, interventions to support young children can be an effective way to help societies stabilize and flourish into the future. These interventions are typically not expensive, and, moreover, the cognitive and emotional development they promote in the early years of life likely result in tangible economic returns later in life. Accumulated knowledge about ECD demonstrates that not only is it a sound investment in and of itself, but early interventions can also enhance the efficacy of other investments in children.

### **1.9 Benefits of ECD to African Societies**

Early childhood programs have been shown to benefit society and are a boon to the economies of both developing and industrialized countries (Kagitcibasi, Sunar, and Bekman 2001; Myers 1995; Ramey et al. 2000; Reynolds et al. 2001; Schweinhart et al. 2005). ECD programs are essential for improving the quality and capacity of populations, increasing adult productivity, and mitigating the effects of poverty, disease, and civil strife. In addition to the above benefits there are three main benefits germane from ECD in Africa are enhanced school readiness, enrollment, and completion, later age of motherhood for young women and improved family situations, including the empowerment of women. Myers' (1995) review of 19 evaluations of ECD programs in developing countries confirms that early education correlates highly with improved

school readiness, probability of on-time enrollment in primary school, lower grade repetition and dropout rates, and improved academic overall performance. Further benefits are elucidated in summary form in Table 2.

**Table 2 Summary of Benefits of Early Childhood Education**

1.	Early education also has a long-term effect on reducing fertility rates. Analysis of data from Brazil's Living Standard Measurement Survey (Paes de Barros and Mendonça 1999; World Bank 2001) shows that the incidence of early motherhood for girls ages 10–18 who had attended preschool as children is less than half that for girls of the same age who had not attended preschool.
2.	ECD programs involving parents can improve parent child relationships, “free up” older siblings from caregiving responsibilities to attend school, and enable mothers to participate in the paid workforce and increase the family's income.
3.	A study conducted in Kenya demonstrates the effects of affordable ECD programs. The researchers found that (1) a high cost for child care discourages households from using formal child care facilities and has a negative effect on mothers' participation in the marketplace and the cost of child care and the level of mothers' wages affect the enrollment of older children in school, although the effect is different for boys and girls (an increase in the mothers' wages increases boys' enrollment and depresses girls' enrollment) (Lokshin, Glinskaya, and Garcia 2000).
4.	Young children exposed to ECD do better in school than do children without early education as is reflected in the studies alluded to.
5.	ECD programs help to ensure that children receive health care and they offer psychosocial stimulation that enhances the programs' effects. Thus there is generally an improvement on nutrition and health of young children.
6.	ECD programs encourage young children to explore and they facilitate the social interaction that promotes cognitive development. This generally results in increased levels of intelligence.
7.	Children who participate in ECD are likely to move to higher grades with less repeats progresses better through school than do nonparticipants in similar circumstances.

**Source: Researched data**

### 1.10 Recommendations

Given the above issues raised from both literature and existing studies conducted elsewhere, I would like to make solid recommendations to the future of ECD in Africa and beyond. The integrated approach aims at the holistic development of the child. It encompasses health, nutrition, water and sanitation, basic care, stimulation, learning, social protection, and family and community empowerment so that children can develop to their fullest potential. The time is opportune to expand and accelerate a holistic ECD policy process as a central focus in Africa's development. The need to engage all stakeholders in the development of ECE cannot be over-emphasized. If ECD is to be taken seriously – African countries must create solid ECD policies

and properly designed implementation frameworks. Policies created must cascade from National Apex to village levels. Whatever policy frameworks put in place must not negate the indigenous approaches –the historical trend used in upbringing children in the absence of the current formal systems of educating young children.

It can never be over emphasized that supporting well-designed ECD policies and programs is a national imperative for all countries. By investing in children at the earliest ages starting in utero, a nation builds quality and capacity to evolve into a stable and prosperous society.

There is urgency need to make learning from history a compulsory practice in order to improve the ECD situations in Africa. History is often used as a context for current policy or as a set of negative lessons to teach us how not to proceed; we can also better understand the limits and potential of current reform agendas by taking into account the social and historical context of educational policy and practice.

High stakeholder involvement is critical in ensuring the success of ECD programmes. ECD stakeholders in general, and African policy planners, researchers and practitioners in particular, need to open up creatively to the reality that African parents raise culturally competent infants and toddlers “according to a different set of standards” (LeVine 2004, 159), most of which have not been theorized or formulated into ECD policy.

Most countries in the Sub-Saharan Region do not fund ECD learning yet spend a lot of money in funding tertiary education. It is the study’s position that ECD education must be the baby of all governments in Africa and s budget for that purpose must be created-realizing the need to create strong foundations for future manpower development with sufficient intellectual capacity and stability. One key practice important to practice within all concerned countries is flexibility. Flexibility is essential in structuring ECD policy-planning processes and systems. Each country’s ECD policy should fit its unique needs, cultures, and institutions.

### **1.11 Conclusion**

Countries that do not pay heed to ECD are likely not going to reach their full potential in the global business fora. Investing in ECD can overcome the major deficits caused by poverty, disease, and social disruption. In Africa the challenges, which seem daunting, must be met with a clear vision of possibilities for the future. Peace and security, conflict resolution capabilities,

designing and implementing sustainable socio-economic development programs is a function of the degree to which societies invest in their children. Studies show that higher levels of physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being and increased lifetime learning and earning are associated with good early childhood care (Lusk and O’Gara 2014). Governments of African states must start to take Early Childhood education seriously and invest aggressively into the future of young children-ultimately this will benefit the respective countries, Africa as a continent and the globe at large. There is need to move away to ‘talk’ models and put in place talking models of early childhood development. The adoption of a practical early childhood centric model with full government commitment is what I personally recommend as for now to enable Africa to move forward an integrated –sustainable mode. Alone, parents are incapacitated. After all the future of Africa rests in the young children’s abilities and capabilities, and it is not a privilege to fund their education but a ‘must do’ exercise for every government with a people touch, government with children at heart, a government with Africa’s future at Heart. The young children represent and form the bulky of Africa’s developmental agenda.

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