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Early Childhood Education in Kenya: A threat to Cultural Development and Sustenance

in African Children

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Abstract

In this article the author discusses the findings from research carried out in early childhood settings operating in rural and urban areas in Kenya. The research draws from instructional experiences of preschool teachers based on observations, interviews and documents analysis of instructional materials carried out in early childhood classrooms across the diverse communities of Kenya. The study is based on the framework of decolonizing and indigenous research methodologies. The theoretical framework draws from postcolonial theory to unravel the discourses of exclusion institutionalized by the dominant oppressive colonizing structures that appear to continue to be sustained in post colonial Kenya system of education. The core argument of the essay is that entrenching English as the sole language of instruction in early childhood erases African culture in children resulting in loss of opportunities in these children to learn indigenous knowledge beliefs and practices of their cultures.

Introduction

This paper shares my research and working experience in early childhood in Kenya since 1992. The essay is a reflection of my teaching experience and anecdotal of observations I recorded from preschool teachers' teaching practice experiences. I have also incorporated the narratives of my colleagues in early childhood; especially the contribution of Mr. Odongo – a doctoral student at Arizona State University who shared his work with preschool teachers in his home area in Luo land which I found illuminating and similar to my observations of Turkana children in pastoralist area of Kenya. How teachers implemented curriculum activities in Kenya always left a mark of cultural oppression as these teachers ensured they instill the popular cultures in children at the expense of children forgetting their own culture. The observations I have described happened incidentally and yet were illuminating and showed the hidden injustices of education to the cultures of African children (Ng'asike, 2011). Just how early childhood is perceived popularly as a solution to the care of young children is an issue that defeats logic as one

observes culturally insensitive instructional practices of teachers in early childhood classrooms in Kenya. I interviewed teachers and reviewed instructional materials such as the syllabus and textbooks used in early childhood education. This essay discusses the findings of my research work with teachers working in early childhood incorporating the contributions of the families in different communities of Kenya ranging from those that are traditional and cultural to those that live in urban areas and cities in Kenya. The critical perspective is drawn from the deliberations of RECE 2010 conference held in Dalton Georgia which exposed me to critical pedagogies in early childhood. On the research methodology I draw from decolonizing research (Mutua & Swadener, 2004) and indigenous epistemologies (Smith, 1999). The theoretical framework is drawn from critical ethnography (Thomas, 1993) and postcolonial theoretical framework that explains the continued perpetuation of loss and erosion of African culture in children in early childhood with impunity perpetuated by the Kenyan education system.

History of early childhood education in Africa

In Kenya, preschool education like formal education continues to broadly reflect a Western ideology inherited from the British who were the colonial masters (Ntarangwi, 2004; Prochner & Kabiru, 2008). Although the assumptions are that Kenya is an independent country able to conduct its educational affairs with an African world view, preschool education continues to be carried largely with structures reflecting Europeans' world views. The origin of infant schools, for example, originated in Europe and was carried over to Kenya by the missionaries who were the agents of colonialism in Africa. The Missionaries used early childhood care services targeting children and families to

perpetuate Western ideas related to race, childhood, education and religion with the objective of converting and civilizing young African children (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008).

The infant schools, a British model of early childhood education penetrated the care of African children in the form of humanitarian programs of the missionaries for young children living in poverty. Infant schools became agents of moral and social rescue and training which emphasized rote learning of reading, writing, numeracy, sewing and manual dexterity activities and physical training in playgrounds etc. The materials used were slates, European pictures and the Bible (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008).

The schools were highly regimented and teaching was mainly by recitation and rote contrary to the theories of child development that emphasize natural play in a child friendly environment. The goal of infant schools in British colonies was to teach Indigenous children education that was similar to that given to British children. In addition, British imperialism was to be sustained through education for Indigenous children that will develop them into an independent society of African elites who will support the colonialists and help in the conversion and civilization of the barbarous tribes of Africa.

This approach to infant education by the British and their agents (the missionaries) continued despite the fact that African people had established education for their own children. African education socializes children to the culture, values, and traditions. Children in African communities learned skills important for strengthening the community including mastery of the environment. Education for young African children was transmitted through the African culture and values and encompasses skills such as sharing, social responsibility, belonging, mutual dependence, mutual respect, continuity,

obedience, respect for elders, cooperation, fear of God and social responsibility (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008). These skills are taught along with the history and traditions of the African family, clan, and the whole community. Children in Africa teach each other by playing games, running and hiding, using word games, singing and dancing, and by wrestling and gymnastics etc (Tedla, 1995). By the age of six the child, for example in a traditional pastoralist community will join his/her brothers and sisters to herd the family sheep, goats and cattle or the child may follow his father or mother to the farm and learn by observing and by helping the parent perform family tasks according to his/her ability.

This study argues that African preschools in Kenya have continued to operate largely with a curriculum and practices that follow Western models of early childhood education. The study problematizes the meaning of “best practices” and “developmentally appropriate curriculum” in early childhood under a critic of early childhood curriculum in Kenya using the lens of African culture and Indigenous knowledge epistemologies.

Early childhood education policy in Kenya

As argued at the beginning of this paper, Infant schools were transported to Kenya by the missionaries as a Humanitarian child care program for African children living in poverty in 1940s. The emergence of infant schools was accelerated by the involvement of African families in the independent war against the British resulting in many children living without parental care. The Missionaries had to start Infant schools in detention camps to cater for African children living in difficult circumstances due to neglect, abandonment and confinement of their parents in detention prisons. These schools operated in detention camps under the care of European missionaries who taught them to read the Bible while

being converted to Christianity. English then took the center stage as the language of instruction and the Infant schools became known as nurseries or preschools. However, Europeans and Asians operated their own Nursery schools separate from the Africans. The arrangement in which nurseries operated in Kenya continued to marginalize African culture, although African elites who embraced Western culture had their children learning in nurseries caring for European children.

The management of nurseries later became known as early childhood education when the government of Kenya took over the administration of preschool education in 1980. However, through the spirit of African social responsibility “*Harambee*” (Kiswahili word meaning pulling resources together or cost – sharing) the government placed the management of public preschools in the hands of the community. In this way preschools that were under the umbrella of the churches and humanitarian organizations continued to operate under their system. More importantly, these organizations worked in the interior of Kenyan rural communities as they operated churches and humanitarian assistance to the communities they lived with. In postcolonial Kenya, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and churches continue to be influential in the overall provision of education in Kenya and are the main agents operating preschools on behalf of communities while mitigating the threat of poverty in children. The arrangement of Kenya’s early childhood policy that vested management of preschools to communities has provided avenues for the erosion of African culture in children through the over presence of humanitarian organizations in preschools management whose interest continued to be the promotion of Western values. In rural areas preschools take different forms such as Sunday schools, church schools, feeding centers, *Madrasahs* (Muslim

preschools) etc. These arrangements of early childhood centers demonstrated lack of parental involvement in the care of children as poverty took center stage and families were voluntarily abdicating their roles of child care to the care of missionaries. Private preschools were mainly for the elite’s children in Kenya who embraced Western education as they believe that their children should have the same education as European children and they had resources that enabled them meet high cost charged by private preschools.

Preschool curriculum and erosion of culture in African children in Kenya

In Kenya early childhood education policy is focused on children aged 4-5 years. The goal of education at this age group is to provide a holistic and integrated program that meets the child’s cognitive, social, moral, spiritual, emotional and physical needs (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2005). To perform this role early childhood education in Kenya is being mainstreamed into primary education system. However, early childhood curriculum like Primary education is centralized and developed at the National curriculum Institute (Kenya Institute of Education [KIE]). This is an independent department of the MoE located in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. The MoE takes the responsibility of training early childhood teachers. However, employment of preschool teachers after training is left to the local communities. The table below shows every day curriculum activities of an early childhood centre in Kenya.

Table 1 Curriculum Activity Areas in Kenyan Early Childhood Program

Activity Area	Lessons allocated per week
Language Activities	5
Mathematics Activities	5
Out – door Activities	5

Science Activities	2
Social Activities	2
Creative Activities	2
Music and movement	2
Religious Education	1
Life skills	1

Source: Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Education (2008)

These curriculum skills are taught to children in all early childhood centers spread across all the 42 ethnic communities of Kenya. Teachers are left to operationalize the content of the activities to reflect the diverse cultures of Kenya. Classroom instruction in early childhood is expected to be authentic and focus on the use of strategies that emphasize learning through play and child centered approaches that offer opportunities for hands-on-learning.

However, preschool teachers in Kenya appear to face instructional challenges when implementing the curriculum in their classrooms that reflects the culture of children in particular contexts. For, example, preschool teachers like their primary counterpart appear to fear that to teach in a manner to reflect the cultural environment of the children will be teaching African culture which is regarded as barbaric as perceived by Western dominant discourses. Education in Kenya is regarded as a venue for developing Kenyans who are going to lead modern life. Socialization to a civilized person must begin in early childhood. For instance, a deeper look at the religious content in the early childhood syllabus reveals that African religious education is not among the religious practices outline in the curriculum. All religions including Buddhism, Indus, Muslim, Christianity etc are listed in syllabus except African religious practices (MoE, 2008). The Kenya education curriculum assumes that African religion cannot be taught in schools as Christian religion appears to have replaced it. This article is of the view that African

religion cannot be equated to Christianity. In Kenya, traditional communities, such as the pastoralist and increasing elders in communities viewed as modern still worship traditionally using African beliefs systems. The Kikuyu for example, go to worship at Mt Kenya the ancestral home of “Ngai” (the Kikuyu name for God). Kenyan communities even though some are said to be civilized, like the Kikuyu, the Kamba, the Luhya etc still practice circumcision which is usually carried out in an environment of rituals, prayers, offerings etc and which traditionally convey the presence of God in the socialization of children. The Turkana tribe and other pastoralist communities, pray to their God for rain, for blessings after the birth of a baby and during initiation ceremonies etc. Africans are very committed to God but connect to Him using ceremonies and rituals (Tedla, 1995). The question that remains to be asked is why does the curriculum prepared by Africans themselves in Kenya deny preschool children opportunity to learn African spirituality and their belief systems? It appears that the roots of colonialism have permitted African education to the extent that African educators have allowed their own cultural systems to be swallowed by the Western culture. Education is being used as a systematic way of eliminating African ways of life including their spiritual belief systems.

Early childhood curriculum has not only denied Kenyan children African spirituality, it has totally ignored African indigenous knowledge practices which are essential in the sustenance and preservation of African culture and knowledge. Take for example, the Turkana people, who have a wide range of cultural knowledge ranging from the use of intestines of livestock for predicting nature, knowledge of Universe, environment, plants, livestock, hydrology etc (Ngasike, 2010). Turkana children learn the skills of livestock and of water exploration early before joining elementary grades. This

indigenous knowledge is not in the syllabus and in the textbooks used in preschool curriculum and instruction in early childhood. Observations in preschools show children receiving direct instruction through rote memorization of decontextualized concepts presented in English. Consequently children who join preschool centers are most likely to lose their cultural knowledge including their language and knowledge of the environment required for survival in the community. By the time the child graduates from the University, he/she would have lost everything that the families depend on as knowledge for survival. The most critical loss is felt more when children drop out of school and cannot fit in the community or in the modern life. Since school knowledge cannot connect with the values and skills used in the community children usually fail to fit in the society after school and this causes alienation of children from the traditional society. Sometimes nomadic people do not see the value of education, when children drop out of school and fail to assist the families to continue with the harsh life of livestock herding (Swadener, 2008).

The nature of learning that goes on in early childhood classrooms can be humiliating and oppressive to children who especially cannot speak English for the first time they join preschools. Consider the interview I had with a preschool teacher after observing her preschool class session in Nairobi and I quote the teacher's words;

This child is "dumb" he can't speak in English. He has just come from his rural home and I have difficulty in communicating with him because he doesn't speak any English. He keeps talking to me and the students in his mother tongue. I am afraid this child might influence the other children

not to speak in English. I have to isolate him from other children and that is why he sits alone separate from the rest of the children until he is able to communicate in English (interview with preschool teacher in Nairobi).

The child referred to by the teacher belonged to a family, who has just moved to Nairobi city from their rural home. In Kenya, families migrate from rural areas to urban centers as they struggle to seek employment in Kenyan cities. At the rural community environment, mother tongue is the dominant language spoken by the children. Young children migrating with their families find it challenging when they have to switch from rural preschools to city preschools which are predominantly English oriented. Rural children joining city preschools will have to endure the humiliation of isolation including being labeled as dumb with communication and learning difficulties.

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1984) these humiliating strategies resulted in Kenyan children learning to associate their own ethnic language with low self esteem, shame, corporal punishment, slow footed intelligence or downright stupidity. African children would be stigmatized when speaking their own language to the extent that they would not even speak in their mother tongue to their own parents, families and elders when they return home from school. The pressure in African children to speak in English started with entry of modern education to Africa and has since continued to this day. For example, in another article I wrote regarding language loss in Turkana children (Ng'asike, 2011), I reported that while growing up learning in elementary schools in Kenya, the fear to speak broken English made me remain silent the whole school day. I would not even answer questions in class due to fear that I might say the wrong words in English which

will cause embracement from peers or might result to disciplinary action from the teachers.

In addition, parents whose children are learning in early childhood centers not helping in fighting against the pressure in children to learn in English as success in education is associated with fluency in English language. Modern families associate preschool education as a getaway to getting their children to qualify and join the best primary schools where they would be guaranteed entry to the best high schools and eventually to University. The consequence is the pressure to transform the children from their mother tongue to English speaking as soon as they enter school. English ensures that children who complete early childhood are able to pass the interviews and score the grades that determine their entry to first grade. Competition to join the best schools will depend to the degree on how fluent children can speak in English after completing preschool. Cultural erosion continues even in rural communities in Kenya where literacy rates are under 20% where ignorance in educational matters is worrying as parents generally equate education with English. Further, these parents view education as a Government and teachers project (Dyer, 2006; Kraetile, 2002). Those children who join school are regarded as school children and parents usually have no control over what these children learn in schools (Ng'asike, 2011).

The instructional process in preschools in Kenya would even be culturally challenging and insensitive in cases where the teacher does not speak the ethnic language of the children. For example, a case was observed of a preschool teacher from a Luhya ethnic community teaching children who were predominantly of Luo ethnic community.

While this teacher was taking children to the field for outdoor, on their way to the field, the children sang and danced using Luo songs (their mother tongue (Luo). They used Luo words like *Achiel, Ariyo, Adek* etc (Meaning, one, two, three). The children enjoyed the dancing and as they approached the playing field, they had already changed to another song which they sang while holding each other's waist. They continued to sing in Luo and listening close by one would hear Luo words like "*Ngielo ngielo, ngielo jagodhre*". In Luo this song is sang to demonstrate zigzag motion of a python. The teacher simply smiled as the children danced towards the playing field. She did not join the children to dance with as she appeared unable to figure out the language and culture of the children. To the disappointment of the children the teacher stopped them from singing when they arrived at the playing field. She asked them to switch to English songs if they wished to continue to enjoy the dancing. Her view was that it was important for the children to sing in English as it is the official language in the school besides being the language for mastering important skills like mathematics etc. Obviously, English is the language familiar to the teacher and the language probably valued by the sponsoring agent of the preschool. If the language and culture of the children are suppressed starting at preschool level in rural areas, what would be left of these children when they reach primary or high school?

Like most African communities endowed with rich cultural practices and beliefs, the Luo community which is geographically located around Lake Victoria in East Africa is economically a fishing community. Luo children are most likely to bring richness of their fishing culture in school through music, dances and drama. When the children speak and sing in their mother tongue they practice the skills, beliefs and values of their

indigenous knowledge while they continue to engage in modern education. In this way school will be seen as enhancing both modern and traditional knowledge of the children. This will be a good way of developing and sustaining culture through education contrary to ideas that seem to eliminate cultural practices and indigenous knowledge practices.

Theoretical framework and empirical evidence

Evidence from funds of Knowledge and indigenous epistemologies research is overwhelmingly compelling regarding the critical role culture plays in education (Cajete, 1999; Jegege, 1997; Kyle 2006; Kawagley, 2006; Kawagley, Norris-Tull and Norris – Tull; 1998; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2005; Ogawa, 1995; Ogunniyi, 1988). Further, the role of culture in intellectual development in children draws support from Vygotsky's social cultural historical theory that argue that cognitive skills are dependant on cultural tools that children bring to school which include; literacy, mathematics, mnemonics, problem solving and reasoning (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). According to National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the potential exists for early childhood programs to better recognize, respect and reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the children they serve (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997). In Kenya, education curriculum recognizes the role of mother tongue in children cultural heritage and maintenance of cultural values of families (MoE, 2004). In spite of the overwhelming evidence available in support of culture in education, impunity appears to be the order of the day in education curriculum instructional process as Kenyan educators continue to perpetuate values of Western culture in education.

The promotion of educational ideologies that appear to be colonial and disrespectful of African children's culture can be explained to some extent using postcolonial literature. For example, Anderson-Levitt (2002), asks two critical questions and I quote; "how can teachers learn about culture in ways that will help them to serve an increasingly diverse pupil population? And how can teachers understand their practices as cultural?" Anderson-Levitt challenges education professionals not to normalize teaching and urges educators to problematize teaching and rethink those practices of teachers that seem to sanitize or dignify the teaching that goes on in the classrooms. Early childhood education professionals should move out of the familiar to be able to see the unfamiliar. For example, does culture exist or not? According to Anderson – Levitt (2002) teachers all over the world normalize the process of schooling and become oblivious with the fact that they are inculcating in other people's children their own cultural values.

In Kenya education is accepted as a given truth from the west, which should be learned by every child in order to become successful. However, on the contrary many children in Kenya are still illiterate and poverty is rising in rural communities as education disparities continue to remain unaddressed (Dyer, 2006; Krätli, 2001; Ng'asike, 2011). Anderson-Levitt argued that given the diversity of our population, the power of our roles, and the complexity of learning, there is need to carefully analyze our instructional strategies as programs of education become increasingly diverse.

The goal of education inherited from the British - the colonial masters of Kenya, was to eradicate poverty, ignorance and disease. Kenyan Africans were regarded as ignorant even though they had their own education before colonization. Western education was a tool that Africans needed in order to facilitate interaction between them

and their colonial masters. English language was learned by children and adults for the purpose of facilitation of communication with the colonizers. In the case of Christianity, African education was to facilitate reading of the Bible according to the missionaries and to train clerks. Vocational training was given to African children to prepare technicians to work in the European Industries. According to the perspectives of the colonists, education was what makes a person human and is associated with overall improvement in the quality of life of Africans. Modern education comes with a mind set of superiority and higher status (Krätli, 2001). These goals of education continue to be perpetuated in Africa and below I quote Krätli (2001)

indeed school going is often seen as a hygiene of the mind, where ignorance is the dirt in which diseases like poverty and violence proliferate, and learning is first of all a cleaning process (cleaning from superstitions, from traditional beliefs, from ones past in the darkness of a primitive life (p.4).

This ideology appears to persist even when fellow Kenyans are implementing education of their fellow Africans children. This explains why preschool education in Kenya is washing away African culture by promoting the use of English which it uses to embarrass them as they learn in their own schools.

Postcolonial development policies in Africa that are intended to address injustices of the colonial systems have not been regarded as performing that innocent role of correcting injustices. Political activists and Academic institutions in Africa view postcolonial programs as perpetuating colonialism due to what they see as inequalities and injustices in the execution and distribution of resources. They believe that though the colonizers left Africa, their programs are still being sustained through postcolonial

education (Ntarangwi, 2004). The colonizers are still very much in control of Africa and education is used as a tool for sustaining the status quo of Western ideologies. Cary in 2004 argued that the colonized are embedded in the messy terrain left behind by their colonizers manifested institutionally, culturally, socially and spiritually.

Gunnestad (2003) writing on the role of the Culture in Early Childhood Education narrated that people relate to culture in three different ways listed as: 1) freeze and keep, 2) develop and keep or 3) leave it behind. In the first orientation which is common among many religious beliefs, which is to *freeze and keep*, people tend to protect their culture to the extent that they don't want to discuss it or listen to any criticism directed at it. The second perspective, which is to *develop and keep*, is seen to be the most argued as realistic in many parts of the world. However, it has also been the most controversial as the Western culture has been perceived to persist in directing social goals of children and education. The third option - to leave and discharge is the most common and controversial as it appears to be the cause for oppression and colonization and acculturation of African children in education. This explains probably the tendency in many education programs in African to want children to forget their culture and adapt Western education in the way of attaining modernity. Everything that is argued as modern and comes from abroad is considered appropriate to be adapted at the expense of one's own traditions and culture. Gunnestad (2003) and many cultural relativists argued that we lose our identity if we discharge our own culture which has values, skills, and ways of doing things that are suitable and good for specific people and their living condition.

Human rights and social justice activists have argued the complex nature of education in Africa. Swadener (2008), challenged the impact of global policies in the lives of families in Africa, particularly in Kenya problematizing ways in which children's rights, voices and participation are framed in contrasting cultural and geopolitical contexts. The need to recognize the complex nature of education in cultural societies in Africa is critical. Swadener continued to argue that global policies which tend to set the benchmarks for driving education and other humanitarian programs in Africa can be oppressive to the children and families as these policies are funded by taxpayers and thus may add to the debt burden of third World countries like Kenya. In addition, the international policies remain to be unrealistic and culturally insensitive.

Conclusion

This paper has carefully provided analysis of Kenyan early childhood education and pursued the argument explaining the systematic erosion of African children's native language, culture and indigenous knowledge practices through the promotion of English in early childhood education. The article provides an overview of the history of colonial early childhood education, Kenya education policy and research evidence of observations and interviews of preschool teachers across cultures of various communities in Kenya. The central argument is that failure to encourage local languages in preschools creates not only language loss but disintegration of cultural and indigenous knowledge practices as well. African people are not necessarily interested in keeping and freezing their culture since they have embraced modern education in totality. However, on the contrary Western ideologies appear to influence postcolonial Governments and educators to the

extent that cultural erasure continues with impunity in African children studying in Kenyan early childhood preschools. The author will continue to explore answers to questions such as the meaning of best practices in early childhood in Africa; what counts as culturally relevant early childhood experiences and the need to rethink the concept of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood especially in relation to early childhood experiences in African context.

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