

CHAPTER 2

A CRITIQUE OF DOMINANT DISCOURSES IN INTERNATIONAL ECD

Africa, a land mass larger than the United States, China, India, and Western Europe combined (The Times Atlas, 2006), is home to about 14% of the world population, with slightly over 16% of the world's children under age 5 living in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (UN Human Development Report, 2014, p. 58). Despite Africa's, and sub-Saharan Africa's, size and share of the world population, Indigenous African voices are seldom heard in the child development literature that dominates policies and programs in international ECD. Both scientific and popular literature place Africa well outside the normative and desirable, representing Africa as a key target for change. While change is a constant across time and across cultures, this volume argues it is critical that African institutions, governments, and peoples lead the process of determining the nature and the need for such change in their own countries. The Euro-Western academic, socio-philosophical, and political perspectives that have dominated international ECD in recent decades rarely promote diversity in our understandings of children's care and development, and in many ways leave little room for other cultural understandings of, and aspirations for, children. In line with the previous chapter's critique of 'capacity building,' this chapter also examines the dark side of good work, and questions who decides what is desirable and how it is measured.

While this chapter critiques the dominant Euro-Western discourse of child development and the image of the child that it produces, it does not reject this discourse outright. Rather, we challenge the dominance and power of this discourse, calling for dialogue within and between cultures regarding child development and care. Indeed, within a dialogic context, in which power is more equally distributed, the discord between diversity and normalizing standards

can emerge as a potentially useful tension, rather than leaving us stuck in an either/or dynamic. Majority and minority world perspectives on ECD reflect certain histories, philosophies, and sociopolitical objectives that have shaped the contemporary world, each containing valuable perspectives for the future of early childhood education, care, and development. However, to reap the benefits of the creative tension among different world views, it is important for Euro-Western ECD scholars and policy-makers to place their own understandings of childhood into a social and political context, to take a deeper interest in African understandings and traditions in child-rearing and care—and indeed, to consider that they might have much to learn from those understandings in the global, interdependent context in which we all now live.

Childhoods

Childhoods, no less than children, come with diverse shapes and characteristics. That said, the range of childhoods has been greatly reduced over the past two centuries. To take one powerful example that is germane in both the majority and minority worlds, childhood in most countries has not been the same since the introduction of schools. International and country-level discourses—certainly those dominant over the past century—have typically argued that schools are a good thing. How can children succeed in contemporary societies without schooling? However, the structure those schools imposed, the content they deemed important, and their positions regarding traditional learning have all disrupted or destroyed long-established ways of learning and becoming an adult in every human society.

Until recently, early childhood largely escaped the normalizing impacts that schools have had around the world. Although one can, with reasonable accuracy, imagine the schooling environment for a nine-year-old in mountainous Laos, in a Kenyan village, in countless Indigenous communities across North America, or for that matter, in any North American or European city or town, the environments experienced by children younger than school age in most parts of the world are less clear and far more diverse.

Of particular relevance here is the African view of early childhood, which contrasts sharply with that of post-industrial Euro-Western views, as well as with the related view of childhood put forward by child development theories (see below). Like most people the world over, Africans view children as a gift and the early years as a special time to welcome children into the family, the community, and the culture. However, African cultures have a unique perspective on young children's abilities, on the nature and context of children's learning, and on the relative centrality of the extended family—or at least, one that has been largely

forgotten in post-industrial settings in the West, and one that many have come to regard as suspect and as violating children's rights. As documented by a number of important African scholars (see, for example, Nsamenang, 1992, 1996, 2008; Ohuche & Otaala, 1981; Uka, 1966; and Zimba, 2002), African children from a young age are viewed as capable members of the community, able to assist in caring for siblings and in the economic life of the family. While this view of children can indeed be abused—especially when it is unmoored from its traditional cultural underpinnings—it is not inherently exploitative.

While the “unmooring” process had arguably begun much earlier, with both Islamic incursions from the north and from European (and Chinese) coastal contacts, the most dramatic politico-geographic restructuring/unmooring of Africa took place in the late 1800s—a time of change for “childhood” as well.

The Entangled Roots of Africa, Child Science and Colonialism: A Brief Overview

On November 15, 1884, 14 countries, of which all but the U.S. were European, met in Berlin at the request of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to end confusion over the control of Africa (Rosenberg, 2010). By February 26, 1885, lines had been drawn and the Western powers signed an initial set of agreements that involved no Africans whatsoever but that forever transformed their lives. The changed map of Africa, along with its problematic colonial and postcolonial legacy, is well known. However, the transformed map of childhood that emerged at a similar time is less apparent, obscured by the powers of modernity, progress, and science to suppress, and even erase, other interpretations and perspectives—a process that arguably continues to the present.

Around the same time that Darwin undertook his historic voyage on *The Beagle* (1831-1836) and subsequently published *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Friedrich Froebel was the most influential name in early childhood. Froebel's vision of childhood, which was not unusual at the time (see, for example, Alcott, 1830), incorporated a strong spiritual element and an appreciation of the child's innate goodness and capacity. The Froebelian child was not an empty vessel or an incomplete adult, nor was his or her development amenable to coercion: “Education must be passive and protective rather than directive, otherwise the free and conscious revelation of the divine spirit in man ... is lost” (1826, p. 34). By the late 1870s, however, a quite different image of childhood was being advanced in Europe by individuals such as Ernst Haeckel, one of the first to propose a science of psychology.

From its very origins, the underlying assumptions of child psychology closely paralleled—and were often intertwined with—the rationale for colonialism (Morss, 1990). The nineteenth-century social Darwinist movement presented evolution as a scientific rationale for the observed physical and cultural differences in peoples around the world. The mechanism of natural selection was seen to account for these differences, with different peoples representing different stages of human evolution, from less to more developed. The child development movement reflected a similar understanding: children, like cultures, were situated along a continuum from less to more developed over time. To quote Haeckel: “To understand correctly the highly differentiated, delicate mental life of civilized man, we must, therefore, observe not only its gradual awakening in the child, but also its step-by-step development in lower, primitive peoples” (1879, quoted in Morss, 1990, p. 18).

From its earliest formulations, the science of child development reflects a Western ‘civilizing’ imperative based on an image of deficiency. Guidance by those defined as ‘higher on the ladder’ typically takes the form of colonization of other cultures and societies, and close adult supervision of children’s development. An image of the child as incompetent and incomplete dominates the formative years of child study within psychology, as seen in William James’ classic evocation of the world of the newborn: “The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin and entrails at once feels that all is one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (1890, reprinted 1981, p. 488). This image persists in Gesell’s work, supplemented by an increasingly powerful metaphor of maturation as financial investment: “Three is a delightful age. Infancy superannuates at two and gives way to a higher estate” (1950, p. 40). Such economically driven perspectives regarding children’s development, and subsequently ECD, became dominant international discourses in the late 20th Century and continue, with ever greater power and influence, to the present (Heckman, 2006; Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2012).

Such particular and narrow understandings of the child have persisted in part through psychology’s failure to incorporate culture as a key factor in child development, for, as noted above, not all cultures and societies perceive children in the ways of the West. Cole’s 1996 critique of psychology’s failing, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline*, noted Wundt’s 1921 formulation of “two psychologies”: a “physiological psychology” focusing on the experimental study of immediate experience, and a “higher psychology” (*Volkerpsychologie*) that was rooted in context and could not be studied using laboratory methods, but with the methods of the descriptive sciences such as ethnography and linguistics (Cole, p. 28). Cole went on to note that despite Wundt’s standing as the founder of scientific psychology, “the only part of the scientific system

to win broad acceptance was his advocacy of the experimental method as the criterion of disciplinary legitimacy” (1996, p. 28). With that focus, one witnesses the marginalization of culture within child development.

The experimental method, with its underpinnings in positivism and a belief in an objective and knowable truth, dominated psychology throughout much of the 20th century. Kessen, describing his introduction to psychology in the 1950s, noted its pursuit of “laws of behavior [that] were to be perfectly general, indifferent to species, age, gender or specific psychological content” (1981, p. 27). It is noteworthy that while psychology continued throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s to strengthen its positivist orientation towards child development, the physical sciences, which psychology had sought to emulate, were engaged in poststructural and postmodern critique and deconstruction, questioning the very possibility of separating the seer from the seen, the subjective from the objective. That the physical sciences could engage in such critical reflection while psychology, as a social science, could ignore its own social fabric is as astonishing as its longstanding marginalization of culture. Despite such obvious problems and limitations, psychology’s hold on the field of child development remained strong throughout the 1960s and 70s, in part because of the virtual absence, at that time, of a focus on children in other disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology. By the 1990s, however, both disciplines were advancing the view that childhood is a social construction rather than a universal (for early influential work in sociology, see James & Prout, 1990, and Qvortrup et al., 1987, 1994; for renewed engagement by anthropology, see Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Lancy, 2008; LeVine & New, 2008; and Montgomery, 2009). Despite the value of such scholarly perspectives, these literatures, among others, are typically absent in the contemporary dominant discourse of international ECD, and, in particular, are not reflected in some of the most influential documents in the international ECD field.

A Particular Child on the Development Agenda: 1989/90 to the Present

It was during the period of child development’s positivist and universalist ascendancy under the banner of psychology that the international development community began to elevate the child as a key component of the development equation. The years 1989/90 were a critical point in the evolution of international ECD, with the approval of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and acknowledgement at the Education for All (EFA) meeting in Jomtien, Thailand that “learning begins at birth” (UNESCO, 1990, 1995). These events were soon followed by an influential analysis of advances in child survival rates that sought to expand the focus on ‘third world’ children from survival

to healthy development and well-being (Myers, 1992)—a potentially positive focus, provided that images of health and well-being are diverse and culturally grounded, and that all societies have equal agency in promoting those images.

The demand for ideas, services, and products to feed new-found international development interests in the young child led to the creation of what are often termed ‘best practices.’ Rather than arising locally, ‘best practices’ are typically imported from Western sources, often through the support of Western donors. They tend to be seen as rising above ethical concerns of cultural imperialism, but nevertheless the ‘trading dynamic’ is a familiar one. As part of physical colonization, such a practice was called mercantilism: “The goal of the [colonizing or supplier] state was to export the largest possible quantity of its products and import as little as possible, thus establishing a favorable balance of trade” (Random House Dictionary, 1969, p. 896). The balance of trade in child development ideas has indeed favored the West. However, such processes enhance and perpetuate inequalities, serving neither science nor Africa well. What is needed instead—and what this volume offers—are ways and means that strengthen recipients’ ability to draw on local capacity to engage in their own problem identification and problem-alleviating activities. Euro-Western perspectives can play a potentially positive role in that process, but only given a more equitable relationship between minority and majority world scholars and policy-makers.

At its best, the Western child development literature presents a strong case for the need for and value of ECD programs. Various strands of the literature highlight key rationales for investing in ECD. The following subsections consider the strengths inherent in a number of these rationales, but also highlight a number of weaknesses, key among them the degree to which Western perspectives and understandings, particularly those of a positivist and universalist nature, continue to dominate our understandings of children and childhood.

Human Development

Key references in the ECD literature rightly highlight the dangers posed to children’s health and development by maternal and child malnutrition, and underline the need for continuing concern with child survival and programs focused on health and nutrition: if children’s basic needs for nourishment, shelter, and sanitation are not met, children cannot thrive within any culture’s vision for childhood or human life. In addition to valuable publications like the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)’s annual *State of the World’s Children* (see for example, UNICEF, 2009, special edition on the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)) and EFA annual reports (of particular interest is the early childhood

care and education report, UNESCO, 2007), two series in *The Lancet* (Engle et al., 2007; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2007; Engle et al., 2011; and Walker et al., 2011) summarize compelling evidence of the developmental risks faced by more than 200 million children in the majority world. That said, of the 20 studies considered appropriate for inclusion in Engle et al. (2007), none was led by African scholars, and only two each in the two 2011 articles. The lack of opportunities for African and other majority world researchers to contribute to what should be a global discussion gnaws at the dominant discourse (Marfo, Pence, Levine, & Levine, 2011; Pence, 2011).

Western-led neuroscientific research is increasingly cited to demonstrate the critical importance of the first three years of life in the development of the neural pathways necessary for physical, mental, and emotional development. As often seen with streams of the international development ECD discourse, the neuroscientific arguments first appeared in the United States (Chugani, Phelps, & Mazziota, 1987; Chugani, 1997; Nelson & Bloom, 1997; and Shore, 1997) and were refined there (Gopnik, 1999; and Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) before key individuals and institutions brought them more fully into the international literature (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006; Mustard, 2007; and National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). Should this Western dominance be considered problematic? Given the neuroscientific evidence, coupled with genomic advances, why should it be important that child development is studied around the globe? To this question, Van IJzendoorn (2010) has a ready response: “Simply put, because gene by environment interactions can change, even be totally reversed, when the ecological niche is taken into account” (p. 2).

Although it is appropriate to use scientific evidence to highlight the importance and potential of the early years, it is also important to recognize that our understandings of neurodevelopment are still in their early stages, particularly in regards to diverse contexts. Even as frequent a contributor as Shonkoff (2010) notes, “scientific investigation of the impact of different childrearing beliefs and practices on early brain development is nonexistent” (p. 363).

Social Justice and the (Mis)Measure of Children

While it is important to recognize the power of ECD programs to support children, it is also important to acknowledge that the instruments and concepts typically used to measure and establish child development norms may themselves confer disadvantage, further stigmatizing already disadvantaged groups. As early as 1984, a report published by the Bernard van Leer Foundation noted: “The normative approach [is] a strategy which itself brings disadvantage to children

whose lifestyle, language, cultural heritage and social patterns do not conform to supposed...norms” (p. 8). “For such children, standard educational ‘processing’ often devalues what they are, damages their image of themselves, their families and communities...The dominant culture, and its expression through normatively based educational systems, becomes thus an instrument of oppression” (p. 9).

In general, various UN and international organizations strongly support measurement, based on the arguments “no data = no problem” and “numbers count.” These arguments do not take into account the reductionist power of numbers, thereby disabling a holistic view of the child, undermining local perspectives on what matters, and favouring exogenous and top-down priorities. Rose (1998) expresses a concern shared by many: “We have entered, it appears, the age of the calculable person whose individuality is no longer ineffable, unique, and beyond knowledge, but can be known, mapped, calibrated, evaluated, quantified, predicted and managed” (p. 88).

With such cautions in mind, minority world researchers need to be receptive to majority world understandings of child development and support non-Western researchers to play a key role in addressing international ECD policies and programs. If this does not occur, many, if not most, majority world children will continue to be defined as disadvantaged or deficient. And, as Nsamenang (2008) notes, the labels are too often applied to the Indigenous knowledge base as well:

Whenever Euro-American ECD programs are applied as the gold standards by which to measure forms of Africa’s ECD, they forcibly deny equity to and recognition of Africa’s ways of provisioning for its young, thereby depriving the continent a niche in global ECD knowledge. p. 196)

Poverty Alleviation

The issue of poverty runs throughout contemporary arguments in favour of ECD as a keystone of development. Indeed, poverty is the holy grail of development and the single greatest worldwide influence on children’s development. However, studies based on poverty issues in the United States and other minority world countries are deeply problematic for lived realities in the majority world. Cost-benefit analyses, common in the ECD literature, have historically been anchored by U.S.-based studies, where the issues of poverty, poverty alleviation, poverty impacts, and virtually all facets of a poverty discourse bear limited resemblance to poverty in the majority world.

It is concerning that one of the key rationales found in poverty and family/child-related work, ‘breaking the cycle of poverty,’ with its strong association with the 1960s War on Poverty in the United States, is used as a call for action in dramatically different contexts in the contemporary world. The cycle-of-poverty construct, as used in the United States, is profoundly individualistic and puritanistic, placing the onus on individuals to break out of their condition through meritorious activity (as defined by those not in that condition). The economic landscapes of poverty in the United States and other parts of the minority world differ dramatically from those found elsewhere. And, here again, appropriate and contextually informed child-related literature from the majority world is scarce.

A useful and relevant literature must include the local, seeking to understand poverty through the eyes of those who experience it—who may not identify themselves as ‘poor.’ Rather, they live their lives in the place they know, perhaps even unaware that others have called it poverty. One is reminded of the earlier quote from Gustava Esteva regarding President Harry Truman’s introduction of the term ‘underdevelopment’ into the international discourse: “two billion people became ‘underdeveloped’... and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others’ reality” (Knutsson, 1997, p. 109). In a similar sense, we see children not as they might see themselves or as those close to them may understand them, but as a Western—and in particular an American—literature has led us to see and understand them. A literature that sought to hear from the local, and that used local realities and understandings as starting points, could take the poverty and ECD literature beyond preconceived or externally driven understandings.

Enabling Local Voices and Local Leadership

The role of enabler has not been common in child development, psychology, or any of the social sciences. Academics and professionals have been encouraged to believe that their knowledge trumps other, presumably less informed voices, an outlook that counters enabling processes and disables diversity. The field of international ECD, forged in the privileging, Western structures of academia and conjoined with professionals shaped in those same institutions, may wish to consider the words of the respected agronomist Robert Chambers, who came through similar corridors into international development somewhat earlier than most ECD specialists:

[We], who call ourselves professionals, are much of the problem, and to do better requires reversals of much that we regard as normal ... Normal professionalism means the thinking, concepts, values, and methods dominant in a profession.

It is usually conservative, heavily defended, and reproduced through teaching, training, textbooks, professional rewards, and international professional meetings. (1993, p. ix and 62)

Chambers' caution (and ire) was directed at himself and his colleagues, who had long sought to shape majority world agriculture and development to their own understanding of the world, with invariably problematic results. However, his cautions apply equally well to the ECD field. To redress the damage done by professionals in his own field, Chambers called for participatory approaches that would seek to create an exchange, a hearing of different voices, without privileging one over the other. Such approaches have been successful as part of Indigenous ECD training and education (Pence et al., 1993; Ball & Pence, 2006). They form the basis for Maori influence in the national Early Childhood Education (ECE) *Te Whaariki* curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Carr & May, 1993; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996), but are limited in the world of ECD and international development (Pence & Marfo, 2008).

The importance of local leadership is often referenced in the international literature, but the call seems tokenistic when the great flow of information and dollars are from the top down. Critiques of these dynamics are common, but solid examples of local actors in the driver's seat are not. Local leadership has more than face validity. Not only has it been demonstrated and called for by the broader development community (Chambers, 1997, 2002), it has a long-standing history in ECD international development as well. Myers, in this 1995 afterword to the paperback release of his now classic *The Twelve Who Survive* concluded: "Our approach must stimulate and support local initiatives that will establish enduring processes and allow continuous learning from experience" (p. 463). Myers' comments were echoed recently by Mamadou Ndouye (former Executive Secretary for the Association for Education in Africa (ADEA), 2001-2008) regarding the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) of the EFA: "We have seen the extent to which 'solutions' and approaches aimed at promoting EFA have been top-down....What we can take away from this analysis is the extent to which context matters and will determine the fate of any educational plan." (Ndouye et al., 2010, pp. 43-44)

Context matters. Local leadership matters. But perhaps what matters most is an understanding of the relationship between knowledge, power, and colonial mentalities. In this respect, Shiva's (2000) comments are insightful:

[W]hen knowledge plurality mutated into knowledge hierarchy, the horizontal ordering of diverse but equally valid systems was converted into a *vertical* ordering of *unequal* systems, and

the epistemological foundations of Western knowledge were imposed on non-Western knowledge systems with the result that the latter were invalidated. (2000, p. vii)

Such subjugation of others' knowledge has taken many forms over the years, but the very few locally initiated studies that would pass 'high-level' evidence-based screening are a disturbing contemporary manifestation. This paucity creates the illusion of a void, when in fact useful activity and hard-acquired knowledge do exist. This aspect of the field must be examined closely, considering both its enabling and disabling properties.

Such an examination is critical for the success of a key imperative—the opening of the ECD international development discourse to those less heard, to scholars steeped in their own contexts, with questions that may not appear on the dominant agenda or be conceivable by its agents. The absence of a robust literature on child and sibling caregiving within the international ECD literature is but one example of a vast and largely untapped source of knowledge—a point raised by Weisner and Gallimore (1977) nearly 40 years ago. The lack of research on this key practice—common throughout much of the majority world—suggests the presence of a cultural filter that impedes the generation of important new knowledge and understanding.

Supporting majority world researchers and scholars to employ their own ways of knowing and to make a difference in their own contexts will benefit all of humankind. To develop a truly global knowledge base, it is not only the “draining of brains” but the “framing of brains” that must be addressed. We can no longer behave as though 5% of the world is a suitable proxy, a generalizable base, for the 95% unheard (Arnett, 2008). The following chapters of this volume explore some field-tested and externally evaluated approaches that bring such voices into discussions of policies, programs, research, and education.

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