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Towards Designing Effective Preschool Education Programmes in Tanzania: What can We Learn from Theories?

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Abstract
Pre-school education, which ordinarily is supposed to be the foundation stone of our education system, is wholly left in the hands of private operators to manage with no supervisory authority over them, a situation that has led to poor standards and quality. It was emphasised that if pre-school education is to serve its stated purposes of making the children to have an effective smooth transition from home to school; prepare the child for the primary level of education; inculcate social norms; inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity; develop a sense of cooperation and team-spirit and really teach the children the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, among others. It should be well supervised, staffed, equipped, financed and coordinated. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to give foundation tenets for establishing effective preschool programmes.
Key words:preschool education; early childhood education, theories; Tanzania

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the early years of life are critical for the development of a child's mental and other potentials, and in particular, its personality development. Infants and children are normally very active, learn by imitation, emulation and are ever eager to try out things and in so doing constantly discover their environment. Although children are very curious of learning they need to be guided and supported so that they get appropriate education that prepares them to live confidently and comfortably in the society.

Children's learning and development occur in multiple contexts; the family setting, the school and the community to mention but a few. It is the family in the context of the society that first socializes the child, provides him/her with the basic physiological and psychological needs after which the preschool takes over these roles. For this reason, parents in the family have been regarded as "first teachers", preschool teachers as "second teachers" and the environment as "third teacher" (Klein, 2002). The basic role of the preschool programmes for this matter is supportive, that is, to modify or enrich society experiences so as to channel children's learning and development in the direction desired by the society. After all, children are not educated to spend the rest of their life in schools but in the society. The difference between pre-school education and education acquired in the family is that in the former the context is structured and relatively formal while in the latter it is unstructured and informal.

The idea of preschool programmes playing a supportive role makes it necessary for these programmes to seriously take care of societal needs, problems and expectations. Although the government has established formal public preschool which are now operating (See MOEC, 1995), the basis upon which they are operating is unclear. For example, the curriculum currently in use was not preceded by a situational analysis to determine the needs and expectations of the society (Mtahabwa, 2001). The supportive role of the preschool programmes is, for this matter, questionable.

The purpose of this paper is to gather theoretical foundation that may serve as a guideline for designing effective preschool programmes suitable for the Tanzanian context. More specifically, the paper attempts to provide basic information for preschool stakeholders in designing effective preschool programmes relevant to the Tanzanian context. The stakeholders include policy makers, curriculum developers, preschool owners, teachers and parents. Different notions such as, early childhood education, kindergarten, nursery school, and pre-school are used to denote education for children and infants. According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCE) (UNESCO, 2011) early childhood educational programmes are targeted at children aged 0-2 years; and pre-primary education programmes are targeted at children aged 3 to the start of primary education. The

educational properties of pre-primary education are characterised by interaction with peers and educators, through which children improve their use of language and social skills, start to develop logical and reasoning skills, and talk through their thought processes. They are also introduced to alphabetical and mathematical concepts, and encouraged to explore their surrounding world and environment. Supervised gross motor activities (i.e. physical exercise through games and other activities) and play-based activities can be used as learning opportunities to promote social interactions with peers and to develop skills, autonomy and school readiness (UNESCO, 2011). The paper focuses on pre-school education, and the notion pre-school will be used throughout to denote educational programmes for children before joining primary education.

2. Why Preschool Education?

Underpinning the importance attached to early childhood education which pre-primary education is an integral part, the World declaration on the survival, protection and development of children in 1990 undertook a joint commitment to make an urgent universal appeal to give every child a better future. In addition, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) (1990) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasized urgent priority to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for all children. For many children, preschool is their first experience in a structured setting with teachers and groups of children. It is an opportunity to learn to share, follow instructions and begin the foundation for learning that will occur in primary school. The development of positive, nurturing, and responsive relationships with teachers is arguably one of the most critical outcomes of preschool. Research (Mtahabwa, 2001; Kisasi, 1994) shows that teacher-child relationships in preschool can have a significant impact on the developing brain such that they enhance developmental outcomes including academic performance, mental health, and interpersonal skills. This is because young children learn through interactions with more capable adults and children are more likely to accept adult guidance within the context of a warm and trusting relationship. Teachers also have a critical role in providing children with the encouragement necessary to build self-esteem, confidence, and motivation for learning.

Before the academics children need simply to learn how to socialize and solve problems. These are not things that can necessarily be taught the same way that the academics are. Children need opportunities to interact in order to learn problem solving and social skills. Children who do not understand the social part of school have a difficult time learning the academics. Therefore, one of the biggest goals for a preschool programme is that children can interact with each other and learn how to solve a problem together. The development of social skills is an important outcome of preschool programs and is highly predictive of future academic success. Through interacting with peers, children learn to share, take turns, communicate with peers in an appropriate way, and learn to regulate their behaviour and emotions when interacting with others. Children's self-regulation (their ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour) in preschool has been found to be more predictive of school achievement in reading and mathematics than a child's IQ. Self-regulation can be enhanced by implementing classroom routines and schedules, giving children responsibilities (e.g., putting toys away, distributing materials), and providing opportunities for children to make meaningful choices and be more independent. In addition, children should be explicitly taught to follow rules and understand concepts that promote their personal health and safety. Children benefit from activities that expose them to early mathematical concepts such as identifying common shapes; number and quantity; sorting and classifying of objects; measuring, comparing, and ordering of objects; and simple addition and subtraction.

To sum up, eight reasons have been documented in support of the provision of affordable, quality programmes of early childcare that are community based and which are linked with health care and nutrition as part of an integrated approach to meeting the needs of the young child (Adenipekun, 2004; Ifakachukwu, 2010). These reasons include:

(i) From conception to six years of age, children, according to research findings, undergo rapid mental, social and physical development to the extent that by the age of six, their brains would have developed to almost the size of an adult;
(ii) The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children have a right to live and develop to their full capacity;
(iii) Moral and social values postulate that through children, societies pass on values and culture from generation to generation;
(iv) Supporting the development of the child physically and mentally leads to increased enrolment, improves performance and the society generally.
(v) Provision of early childcare facilities and offer equal opportunities to children from both the privileged and disadvantaged homes;
(vi) A programme in early childhood development should be used as an entry point for other developmental

activities which will benefit the entire community;
(vii) Early Child Care (ECC) projects should be linked with other developmental activities for women, nutrition, health, water and sanitation; and
(viii) There is a growing demand for better ways of caring for children through an ECC project given the advancement in science and technology which now ensures the survival of many more children, thereby increasing population growth.

3 Foundation Tenets for Designing Effective Preschool Programmes

One central condition for an effective preschool programme is that it has to be culturally appropriate. A culturally appropriate preschool programme is one which contextualises practices so as to reflect the needs, problems and expectations of the local people. The needs, problems and expectations of the local people are key determinants for the peoples' choice and support of the established preschool programmes. For example, instances reported by Kissassi (1994) and Mtahabwa (2001) in which parents decided to withdraw their children from preschools that engaged children in plays for most of the time, show that the society expects certain provisions from preschools. The current programmes could be claimed to lack justification because there is not study that has been conducted to determine societal needs, problems and expectations with respect to preschool education programmes. What are societal needs, problems and expectations that could be reflected in the preschool programmes to justify the programmes' roles to the society they serve? Pre-school programmes should be designed in a manner that orients children to problem solving techniques and creativity that in turn will enhance self-reliance life. Preschool is laying foundations for educational processes and the processes in a democratic society and sustainable development (Harkonen, 2006). In training the teachers for small children, the theories of education have an immense impact on how the educators see the phenomenon of education and its connections to the society, democracy, pluralism, and the broader issues of sustainability (Harkonen, 2004).

4 Preschool Programmes in Tanzania

Various government documents have expressed at least in simple statements the need to consider the local people's involvement in the provision of preschool education for example (MOEC, 1995; MOEC, 2000). The Education and Training Policy (ETP) (MOEC, 1995) liberalises provision of preschool education due to lack of government funding but does not explicate on how societal needs, problems and expectations will be reflected in the preschool programmes. This has been the major shortcoming in the ETP (MOEC, 1995) of the government distancing itself on the whole question of the pre-school education programmes. This dissociation became inexplicable in the face of the mounting number of nursery and pre-primary institutions which abounds in the urban areas of the country. The noticeable omission of policy statements relating to pre-school education was attributed to the inadequate understanding of the whole concept of preschool education by the government. Presently, there are so many ill-equipped, sub-standard kindergarten and nursery institutions scattered all over the urban centres and some in the rural centres of Tanzania.

According to Mtahabwa and Rao (2009) young children in Tanzania attend programmes in child care centres, nursery schools, Montessori or other preschools and pre-primary classes which are affiliated to primary schools. Private sector enterprises typically provide education and care for children below five years. Two years of pre-primary education became part of the formal education system in 1995 and the country now has a 2-7-4-2-3 system denoting the number years allocated to pre-primary, primary, ordinary level secondary education, advanced level of secondary and higher education respectively. Pre-primary education theoretically serves children from aged five to six years (MOEC, 2006) although some children below age five attend pre-primary schools. It is not mandatory and parents are free to decide whether or not to send their children to pre-primary school.

5 Lessons from theories

From its beginning, the field of early childhood education has been greatly influenced by theories seeking to explain and describe processes of human, particularly, child development. The dominant view of child development taken up by early childhood educators reflects the ''three grand systems'' (Damon, 1998) of the 20th century: that is, Piaget, psychoanalysis, and learning theory are three grand theoretical systems that have dominated the field. Within these three grand systems, child development is described as occurring in linear and universal stages and is considered ''lawful and, with minor adjustments, the same for everyone across time and place (Lee & Walsh, 2001). In addition, development is perceived as an individualistic process that occurs through children's direct encounters with the world rather than mediated through vicarious encounters with it in interacting and negotiating with others (Bruner, 1986).

Pestalozzi's theory of education is based on the importance of a pedagogical method that corresponds to the

natural order of individual development and of concrete experiences. To Pestalozzi the individuality of each child is paramount; it is something that has to be cultivated actively through education. He opposed the prevailing system of memorization learning and strict discipline and sought to replace it with a system based on love and an understanding of the child's world. His belief that education should be based on concrete experience led him to pioneer in the use of tactile objects, such as plants and mineral specimens, in the teaching of natural science to youngsters. Running through much of Pestalozzi's writing is the idea that education should be moral as well as intellectual.

As with Froebel, Montessori built her curriculum on the basic philosophy that children should be active participants in learning and it is the role of the teacher to be passive but available to help guide and protect young students in their learning process. Montessori's curriculum used a variety of didactic materials to help children develop their senses and to prepare them for writing and arithmetic. Motor education, practical life skill development, preparation for reading music, language and knowledge of the world were also components of Montessori's curriculum. Maria Montessori developed a series of materials to help children develop skills more associated with present day early childhood curriculum. Her basic didactic materials for sensory development, beginning writing and arithmetic skill development have their presence in classrooms today. Stacking materials, geometric templates, sound cylinders, numerical rods, and sandpaper letters/numerals are some of Montessori early didactic materials still in use today.

Levy Vygotsky's theories are based on the dialectical philosophical tradition of the 19th century. According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, learning is seen as a development influencing ways for passing on to the child the historically moulded cultural factors through interaction with a more capable peer. Through this interaction children and young people are socialized to culture. On the other hand, cultural meanings themselves are constantly undergoing change, part of which is due to the innovations that children introduce into their (and their parents.) senses during their development (Valsiner, 1987). According to Vygotsky, in the child´s learning the zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be observed. This is the stage of the learning process, when an individual is unable to solve the problems alone, but needs the help of a more experienced person. From this point of view, good learning environment offers in a socially supported environment the tasks that are placed at the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky maintains that in teaching specific learning promotes a more general cognitive development that makes it possible to apply the acquired knowledge. Teaching supports learning most effectively only then, when it creates a proximal development zone and this is done while it happens to take place in the initial stage of developing a new skill. The zone of proximal development is built in interaction between a child and a grown-up, a child and a more experienced child or a child and a stimulating object environment and tools. In the course of interaction the so-called process of internalisation takes place. The idea of internalisation is based on Vygotsky's genetic law of cultural development. According to it every activity in the child´s development appears twice or as two ´plans´, first, as a social category, human interaction, and, second, a psychological category, inside an individual. The child learns pivotal cultural skills from other people, but he/she is active, learning through one´s own activities. Learning is a necessary and a universal aspect in this way of development of human psychological activities (Valsiner, 1987). As one takes account of the theories and practices of educators from the past, one might conclude that while today's thoughts and practices on the education of young children are more informed, many basic ideas of the past fit well with current thinking and practice.

6 The influence of the Cultural Context on Preschool Programmes

The cultural contexts within which preschool programmes are located provide useful insights into what the programmes should offer. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, excellent preschool programmes are those which reflect what happens in the children's homes (Elkind, 1990). Secondly, the socio-cultural setting influences children's cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978 and Gardner, 1983). Thirdly, young children are prepared to live in a society they come from so as to give them sense of belonging and identity (Bruner, 1963, Erickson, 1950; Maslow, 1970) and, lastly, young children enjoy learning things related to their day-to-day life, understand them better and find meaning in them. Consideration of these will result into designing of effective preschool programmes.

Although culture has long been a central construct in anthropology, only in recent years developmentalists have begun to attend to it in a systematic way (Lee & Johnson, 2007). From the cultural psychological perspective, culture is the most significant system within which human development occurs (Lee & Walsh 2001). Drawing on Bruner's (1986) work, we understand developmental theories as being relative to the cultural contexts in which they are applied. Bruner argued that any theory of development that aims to be ''culture free'' is ''not a wrong claim, but an absurd one'' because ''the plasticity of the human genome is such that there is no unique way in

which it is realized, no way that is independent of opportunities provided by the culture into which an individual is born"

7 Lessons from Other Countries

The most celebrated preschool programmes in the world for their excellence are those of the Reggio Emilia in Italy. The main secret behind this is that the society's needs, problems and expectations determine what preschools offer children while preschool education experts translate the needs and expectations to fit the theoretical framework for teaching young children (Klein, 2002; New, 1993). Other countries the world over emphasize on partnerships between preschool programmes and the society (See for example, Nyeko, 1999; Sestini, 1985; Ndayidde, 1999). Within the Reggio Emilia Approach, the fundamental belief on which the image of the child is constructed is that of the child having rights rather than simply needs (Malaguzzi, 1993).

The early childhood education and preschool in Finland have been outlined on the basis of school teaching. Uno Cygnaeus, the father of the Finnish primary school, also founded a kindergarten. He introduced pedagogical ideas from Europe to Finland. The present preschool and primary education curricula have in their form and content conceived as logical continuations. Certain didactical theories of school teaching have been applied in early childhood education and preschool (Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2000, 2000). In Finland, the system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has two main goals. One is to fulfil the preschool age children's child care needs and the other is to provide early childhood education. Day-care services are open to every child-in other words, all children below school age are entitled to receive municipal child care (Happo, Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013).

The Finnish kindergarten pedagogical tradition is a hundred years long and it has been strong by its impact through the years until today. Even if the German Friedrich Froebel's pedagogy (Froebel, 1951) holds a dominant position in pedagogical sphere, we also feel the influence of the teachings of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Helen Parkhurst, Rudolf Steiner, Célestin Freinet, Paulo Freire, Vasily Suchomlinsky, Alexander Neill, Loris Malaguzzi, and a myriad of others. Coming from Sweden, we have felt the influence of the dialogue pedagogy, which has features from Paulo Freire's pedagogy (Ojala, 2002).

The present day Finnish curricula carry a reference to the pedagogical teachings of Montessori and Steiner (Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2000, 2000:20), and Freinetís and Malaguzziís Reggio Emilian thoughts as the alternative pedagogies (Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet, 2004: 41). But the most famous pedagogical theory is that of the German pedagogue, Friedrich Froebel. The Finnish kindergarten nowadays day care centre is based on Froebel's pedagogy. This is why Froebel's pedagogical theory has been analysed in this paper.

8 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse the situation of preschool education programmes in Tanzania by drawing experiences from other countries supported by theories. Taking into account the present situation of early childhood programmes, the future of preschool education programmes in Tanzania is open to discussion. The theories analysed in the paper provide some clues of the practices of early childhood education programmes in other countries. Theories are universal and therefore, they are relevant to the Tanzanian context. A number of issues need to be addressed as far as preschool education is concerned. One important aspect has to do with teacher preparation which has to take into account the role of early childhood programmes for adult learning. Another important aspect relates to decisions about early childhood education curriculum which are not informed by theories. Despite these limitations, it is hoped that this analysis will provide insights for discussion of early childhood education in Tanzania. It is recommended that broader analysis of early childhood education approaches be carried out in order to lay the foundation for preschool education programmes in Tanzania.

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