

# Exploring and Promoting the Value of Indigenous Knowledge in Early Childhood Development in Africa

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**Abstract:** There is currently a renaissance of interest in indigenous knowledges, after a long period of neglect and disdain by Western scientific and academic establishments. However, educational institutions have not made some of the more fundamental changes required to successfully integrate indigenous

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knowledges. Interventions and programs in ECD similarly tend to be based on an accepted body of knowledge built on Western experience and practice. The ECDVU takes a very different approach to capacity building. Its curriculum is built around the idea of co-construction of knowledge, requiring the participation of all in the creation and dissemination of content. The initial results of this process of generating curriculum within concrete cultural contexts are encouraging. The participants in the ECDVU program recognize the value of indigenous knowledges and are actively pursuing the documentation and incorporation of these knowledges into their research and program activities in the field of ECD. This article presents arguments in favour of incorporating indigenous knowledge into the ECD field and highlights the work of a number of ECDVU participants contributing to this area.

### The Paradigm Shift

After decades of development research and practice in the Majority World<sup>1</sup> based primarily on the Western scientific canon, a paradigm shift has begun that looks towards 'indigenous knowledge' to supplement, integrate with and, at times, even supplant the previous approach. In practice, the collection and documentation of local practices and knowledges by 'outsiders' has taken place for as long as people have been travelling the globe and recording their observations. However, despite being built upon a long history of the exchange of local knowledges, by the middle of the 20th century the Western scientific paradigm had developed an approach that was relatively insular, universalizing, and exclusionary. Although there continued to be an interest in local practices and cultures, primarily in the field of anthropology, both scientific and policy-oriented research in development appeared to lose respect for indigenous knowledge and advocate the wholesale adoption of Western scientific models as the best solution to development problems.

By the mid-1980s, the socioeconomic situation of Africa had not responded to the modernist development approach in the ways envisioned by the proponents of modernization theory (Leys, 1996). In academic and policy circles, there arose several divergent new approaches to 'solving the African crisis.' At the two extreme poles were neo-liberal economics and post-structuralist analysis. Despite great differences between the paradigms, the majority of scholarship on Africa shared a renewed interest in participatory development and the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into development practice.

The most commonly cited definition of ‘indigenous knowledge’ is that of Louise Grenier (1998): “the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area.” Arguments in favour of recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge range from those based on philosophical principles to those derived from more utilitarian, pragmatic rationales.

On the side of principles, there is recognition of the intrinsic value of cultural diversity and tolerance—or celebration—of different worldviews and philosophical systems. Some see indigenous knowledges as providing an alternative to the capitalist, individualist moral system of the North/West that has been blamed for damaging the planet and compromising the survival and quality of life of future generations (Obomsawin, 1993). Pragmatic reasons for valuing indigenous knowledge are many. Indigenous knowledge is perceived as having developed over time as a dynamic response to the challenges of survival and development in a specific context. It is place-based knowledge, which fits with current paradigms of ecosystem research that link elements of a system within micro-units in space and time (Lewontin, 1991). Indigenous knowledge is integrated within culturally mediated worldviews and tends to be holistic in nature (NUFFIC/UNESCO, 1999). The holism of indigenous knowledge is in contrast with the Cartesian mechanistic rationalist philosophy that dominated Western science for centuries (Okolie, 2003). Cartesian thought has been challenged by more recent scientific theories, such as relativity and quantum theory (Morgan, 2003, p. 39), and ecosystem or ecological theories advocate a more holistic approach that is coherent with many indigenous philosophies.

Scientists, development practitioners, conservationists, political advocates, and profit-seekers have different motivations for pursuing indigenous knowledge, although they may often overlap in their methods. Within the development paradigm, which is of primary interest for the present discussion, incorporation of indigenous knowledge is seen as a more effective way of attaining development goals given past failures of technical and technological fixes rooted in Western society. Evans and Myers (1994) argue that knowledge of child-rearing practices and beliefs in the field of early childhood care and development (ECCD) is important to:

- ◆ understand, support, and improve the child-rearing process
- ◆ respond to diversity
- ◆ respect cultural values
- ◆ provide continuity during times of rapid change. (pp. 2-3)

Hyde and Kabiru (2003) and Pence and McCallum (1994) argue that interventions are more successful when built on local knowledge. Many development agencies are now articulating the importance of understanding local knowledge and practices and, consequently, of designing culturally appropriate interventions. In the field of ECCD, we can cite amongst others UNICEF's recent Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) studies (see <http://www.unicef.org/>) and the Bernard van Leer Foundation's 'Growing Up in Indigenous Societies' initiative (see <http://www.bernardvanleer.org/>). The World Bank's Indigenous Knowledge Program includes components touching on ECD (e.g., looking at indigenous knowledge to reduce maternal mortality; see <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/IK/>), as does the UNESCO/MOST and NUFFIC collaboration. There is also recognition within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of the importance of the child's right to cultural identity.

### The Gap Between Knowledge and Practice

The movement to collect, document, and analyze indigenous knowledge began in the fields of agriculture and natural resources (see, *inter alia*, Agrawal, 1995; Chambers, 1983; de Boef, Amanor, Wellard, & Bebbington, 1993; Librando, 1994; Scoones & Thompson, 1994). Botanical and medicinal knowledges remain the dominant fields of investigation on indigenous knowledge world-wide,<sup>2</sup> but the approach has been gradually spreading to include other fields, amongst which is community development, linked with infant, child, and youth development.

Despite the existence of a great wealth of knowledge on local cultural practices in the fields of child rearing, education, and socialization, this knowledge is not yet being sufficiently or systematically integrated into the programming of development interventions in the field (Evans & Myers, 1994). A lack of progress in this respect is also evident in the case of agricultural and ethno-botanical indigenous knowledges (Mathias, 1995).

A variety of reasons exist for the failure globally to translate a respect for indigenous knowledge into practical applications within the development realm. In Africa, we can suggest a number of possible explanations, amongst which are the "narrowly didactic" education system inherited from colonial regimes (Lelliott, Pendlebury, & Enslin, 2000, p. 50) and the consequent Westernization of the approach of African decision makers and policy implementers (Okolie, 2003, p. 240); social changes resulting in the loss of, or irreversible transformations in, indigenous knowledge (Hollos, 2002; Hyde & Kabiru, 2003); the pressures of globalization in the realms of culture and technology; the lack of contemporary research on

indigenous knowledge; conceptual frameworks that remain Western in their foundation and hence are not able to adequately incorporate indigenous knowledges and ‘ways of knowing’ (Morgan, 2003; Okolie, 2003); and poor training for ECCD teachers and practitioners (Hyde & Kabiru, 2003, p. 18). Both Okolie and Morgan, an African and an Australian indigenous scholar respectively, level criticisms directly at the primary institutions involved in the ‘knowledge industry’—universities and research centers—for their failure to recognize multiple ways of knowing and the consequent tendency for indigenous knowledge to remain unincorporated in current curriculum and theories.

This paper argues that the case for integrating indigenous knowledge in higher education is not hopeless, notwithstanding previous performance. The authors propose the generative curriculum model (Ball & Pence, 1999, 2001) as an effective means of integrating indigenous knowledge, without requiring the Westernization of this knowledge or the privileging of one paradigm over another. This article presents the case of the ECDVU as an example of an effective way of transforming tertiary educational approaches to accommodate and advance the integration of indigenous knowledge within appropriate epistemologies as well as apply this knowledge in the promotion of development. The following sections illustrate this approach and document its outcomes to date.

### Promotion of the Use of Indigenous Knowledge in Early Childhood Development Within the ECDVU Program

The ECDVU program places indigenous knowledge, local culture, and contextual learning at the heart of its curriculum. Both the generative approach to learning and the content of the ECDVU curriculum promote respect for indigenous knowledge—although not unquestioningly, just as there is neither *a priori* acceptance nor rejection of the tenets of the Western scientific canon. The generative curriculum model does not privilege one epistemology or ‘way of knowing’ above others, but encourages a range of discourses to emerge and be debated.

One of the obstacles to the use of indigenous knowledge in early childhood policy making, programming, and implementation in Africa is the lack of contemporary research and documentation of local child-rearing practices, traditions, norms, and beliefs. Participants in the ECDVU program gained access to existing literature on these topics (e.g., Evans, 1994; Marfo, 1999; Mwamwenda, 1995; Nsamang, 1992; Swadener, Kabiru, & Njenga, 2000), and were inspired to carry out their own projects for researching and documenting indigenous knowledge.

For many participants in the program, the realization that there was value in local knowledges, traditions, and practice was relatively new and transformative. A number of the learners have taken up the idea of indigenous knowledge enthusiastically in their research and programming. One approach that was used by ECDVU participants in Malawi, Lesotho, Nigeria, Uganda, and Tanzania was the collection of indigenous stories and carrying out research exploring the traditions and beliefs linked with the transmission of oral history through the generations.

The learners justify their attention to indigenous storytelling and oral traditions through reference to both the preservation of valuable cultural practices and their potential contribution to ECD goals, such as psychosocial and cognitive development. They also focus on the potential linkages with ECD programs and are drawing out the connections with implementation.

Several of the learners involved in the documentation of indigenous knowledge are taking the next step in planning and programming the incorporation of this knowledge into ECD practice in their countries. The predominant approach to this incorporation is through the development of curriculum activities for ECD programs that are built upon and utilize the indigenous knowledge collected during documentation.

The following sections summarize and profile the work of participants in the field of documentation of indigenous knowledge and incorporation of indigenous knowledge into programming.

### Malawi

In Malawi, participant Mary Phiri undertook the collection of indigenous stories for children as the focus of her major project. Phiri is Director of the Chirunga Early Childhood Center, and is therefore in a good position to evaluate the importance of stories in childhood development as well as to implement programs incorporating indigenous stories. She justified her project on the basis that many of the stories were not being preserved in written form, and the oral tradition was not strong enough to preserve the stories in the minds of the people “because our traditional fora where grandparents use folklore to educate children are gradually disappearing, largely due to the impact of urbanization on the traditional extended family system” (Phiri, 2004, p. 1). After collecting a number of indigenous stories, Phiri created a sample curriculum and lesson plans to incorporate the stories into ECD activities in centers as well as households. Phiri (2004) described the context of her project in the following way:

Most educated families no longer live in villages and so their children don't have ongoing opportunities to listen to stories related by their grandparents. While parents themselves might have listened to folktales as young children, they now have very little if any time to sit with their children themselves to pass on the wisdom of the elders, because they are tied up with office work or business ventures. (pp. 1-2)

Furthermore, Phiri noted that Malawian children were being exposed primarily to cultural influences originating outside their own cultural traditions. They were thus denied access to local wisdom and lore that could be relevant to their own lives. Locally relevant stories have been demonstrated to aid in children's learning of language, their social development, their development of a sense of identity and formation of character appropriate to their environment and context.

Phiri's work included songs as well as stories, in recognition of the added value songs bring for children.

In addition to the innate appeal that songs hold for children, and the opportunities they create for children to improve their language, pitch, and rhythm skills, songs can be used to communicate certain mathematical concepts, hygienic habits and gross motor activities to preschoolers; as children grow up these sung concepts are translated into applied understanding. (Phiri, 2004, p. 4)

## Lesotho

In Lesotho, Phaello Ntšonyane investigated the current status of indigenous stories amongst Basotho people. Ntšonyane is a teacher in a school in Lesotho that has close links with a community center and preschool. His participation in the ECDVU program increased his awareness of the importance of ECD for children's later success at school, and he began to work on ways of translating this knowledge into practice within the context of the Leseli Community Center and preschool.

Ntšonyane started from the premise that more information was needed on the meaning and values attached to the stories in contemporary local Basotho culture. The first phase of his project, therefore, consisted of bringing together Basotho elders in focus groups to discuss their views on the importance and value of culturally based stories. The second phase of the project was to determine the potential for the incorporation of such traditional knowledge in early childhood programming. The third phase was for caregivers at the ECD center to pilot their strategy for incorporating the stories into the curriculum. At the end of the piloting phase, Ntšonyane held another focus group meeting with the caregivers to determine their sense of the feasibility of this approach and

its potential for future use. Through the piloting, he was able to take his plans a step further in the process of implementation.

Ntšonyane (2004) set the background for his study, describing the way in which “the establishment of ECCD programs in Lesotho was, to a great extent, a response to the disintegration of traditional institutions and family structures that were responsible for child care” (p. 6). Ntšonyane (2004) used material from earlier courses in the ECDVU program to argue that “the research evidence to date shows that cognitive development that is embedded in the socio-eco-cultural relationships and practices and participation of children in local cultural activities would be more effective in ensuring that children develop to their full potential” (p. 9). Hence one projected contribution of the study Ntšonyane expects is the realization by the Basotho of the “potential inherent in their cultural childrearing practices towards child development” (Ntšonyane, 2004, p. 8).

In the first phase, two focus groups of elders were convened. One group was comprised of elders from the various regions of Lesotho; the other was comprised of elders who were professionals. The first group was convened prior to the piloting to help determine the planning of the intervention. The second group was convened after the piloting. The first group included three males and seven females; the second group was composed of four people, two male and two female, all in the teaching profession.

Caregivers and elders identified many advantages which they felt accrued from the use of traditional stories (*litšomo*) with young children. For example, they mentioned memory development, pre-mathematical skills, moral and social development, language development, and the propagation of culture. Caregivers and elders both advocated the use of *litšomo* in the ECD centers, but the former advocated for story books, while the latter felt that elderly women should be brought in to do the storytelling. The problem was raised, however, that if children were not being exposed to *litšomo* and other aspects of Basotho traditional culture in the home, there would be a lack of congruence between that which is learned at home and in the school.

After the pilot period for the increased incorporation of *litšomo* in the ECD curriculum of the Leseli center, caregivers felt that this was a successful approach. The children showed interest in the stories and enjoyed being told them frequently. The caregivers felt the children responded positively because the stories were told in their own language rather than English, as was the standard for storytelling previously, and because the messages were familiar to them and easy to comprehend. The children liked the repetition in the stories and the rhymes. Furthermore, the children showed higher participation in discussions following these stories compared with the English stories from outside Lesotho.



## Uganda

In Uganda, the participants placed the utilization of indigenous knowledge high on their agenda for ECD as part of the ECDVU course “The Past, Present and Future of ECD: Understanding Children, Families and Communities Over Time and Across Cultures.” Following that prioritization, one of the Ugandan participants, Anne Gamurorwa, focused her work in the ECDVU program on indigenous knowledge and its use in early childhood.

Gamurorwa worked as a communication expert for the World Bank-funded project, the Nutrition and Early Childhood Development Program (NECDP), also known as Community and Home Initiatives for Long-term Development (CHILD). She perceived the need to collect indigenous stories to provide input for the development of curriculum in early childhood, which was being undertaken by the government at the time. For her coursework, she began to document indigenous stories in Uganda through the innovative means of a competition at district level. For her major project, she followed up the collection of the stories with research to analyze the themes that were raised and how these reflect local ideas of early childhood education, social history, transmission of moral beliefs and cultural education across generations. She further pursued this approach by gathering the views of opinion leaders—including early childhood educators and elders—about storytelling and ways of using these stories in early childhood education (ECE).

Gamurorwa found in her research that the culture of storytelling has been dwindling in Uganda with the rise of urbanization and the shift from extended to nuclear family living arrangements, modern cultural influences, the demands of formal education, and family struggles for economic survival. Her work aimed not only to document existing storytelling, therefore, but also to revive interest among the current generation of parents, caregivers and children, creating “awareness among parents and caregivers about the rich indigenous knowledge that can be tapped in promoting holistic development of children, morally, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally” (Gamurorwa, 2004, p. 5).

In Gamurorwa’s findings, various themes were identified through the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, and also through selected story content analysis. The key themes were problem identification and solving, resilience, bravery, greed and corruption, cleverness and intelligence, care for others, family life, obedience to elders, hard work, good and evil. Most of the themes were aimed at character moulding (90.9%) and child education. Elders, teachers, parents, and opinion leaders recognized the value of indigenous stories for children’s

social and cultural development, but suggested that changes would be needed to adapt such stories to the current circumstances of children's lives; for example, children were more likely to encounter thieves or rapists than dangerous animals on their way home from school.

One intention behind Gamurorwa's research, and the Ugandan team's proposals, is to assist in creating programming for ECD activities that incorporates the indigenous knowledge captured in the stories. Gamurorwa's list of potential future activities in this field includes the following:

- ◆ Popularization of the use of storytelling with indigenous stories using mass media
- ◆ Documentation in print media using various local languages
- ◆ Production of animated cartoon videos
- ◆ Use of radio for storytelling
- ◆ Capacity building among early childhood educators to use indigenous stories
- ◆ Creation of a Website for children's stories, to be used in local school programs.

## Nigeria

Mgbechikwere Ezirim's project was undertaken to identify and document indigenous stories in the Umuchigbo community in Enugu State, Nigeria. Ezirim aimed to integrate indigenous stories into ECD services by encouraging parents to come to the center to tell stories. She also worked on developing strategies for reintroducing storytelling into annual festivals. A final aspect of the project was to disseminate the outcome to ECD practitioners in the ten states covered by the UNICEF field office in which she works.

Ezirim's major project presented a convincing argument for the importance of collecting and preserving indigenous stories. She writes: "Confirming the effectiveness of proverbs in story telling and child rearing in Igbo land, Achebe (1996) noted that proverb is the palm oil Ibo use in eating yams" (Ezirim, 2004, p. 3).<sup>3</sup>

Ezirim (2004) noted that in Igbo tradition in the past, fictional and true narrative stories "were also used to develop the child's imaginative, thinking and learning skills especially when the histories of the communities or biographies of founding fathers of the villages are narrated" (p. 3). She observed that as in the other African countries mentioned above, the changes underway in Nigerian society related to urbanization and modernization are having an impact on local culture and, in many cases, storytelling traditions are not being maintained.

In carrying out her major project, Ezirim assembled a number of focus groups. The sample included seven parents, seven caregivers, and seven elderly members of the community. The group of 21 was divided into three mixed groups, and a focus group interview was done with each group. Stories were submitted and analyzed by the whole community in a participatory activity, which had an added indirect benefit of helping to train ECD caregivers in participatory methodology for group work. Ezirim found in her interviews that stories generally had strong morals to them, and that story themes were different depending on the gender of the storyteller and the audience (e.g., men typically tell stories of bravery while women tell stories of love and care).

Ezirim's major project included a programming aspect subsequent to the collection of indigenous knowledge on child rearing. Members of the community and caregivers in the ECD centers were encouraged to identify ways in which children could participate in the storytelling, such that they become more than passive listeners and develop other skills in the process. In her conclusion, Ezirim made recommendations for agencies involved in ECD work to identify ways in which they can help to promote the use of indigenous stories through their own programs and funding.

## Tanzania

In a variation on the storytelling theme, Leoncia Salakana's major project involved collecting proverbs of relevance to ECD and child-rearing practices. Salakana developed this theme into program action within the NGO Plan International in several of the districts within which Plan International works.

Salakana's project area included three regions: Ilala municipality in Dar es Salaam region; Kibaha and Kisarawe districts in Coast region; and, Kilombero district in Morogoro region and Nyamagana and Geita districts in Mwanza region. These were all districts in which PLAN works, but were geographically different and hypothesized to present different cultural traditions for study. Data collection involved conducting focus group interviews with male and female adults (approximately 40) in each of three communities selected and several key informant interviews with elders. There was a community meeting to present initial findings and gather feedback to incorporate into the final report, as well as to obtain consent for the use of the proverbs by the researcher in specified ways.

In the next phase of the project, learning activities were prepared by the researcher and presented to nursery and preschool teachers, who were asked to plan lessons based on these materials. Feedback was sought on these activities. Validation of the learning activities was also

sought by presenting them to in-service preschool teacher trainees at a training college.

Salakana quotes a 1999 study by the NGO Kuleana regarding their observations of the Sukuma culture in relation to proverbs and storytelling traditions:

Whether we like it or not, it is always there, culture carved out of nature, carried over the past, placed in the middle of people's lives. Hundreds of year-rings of learning passed through its roots. Layer on layer of survival embedded in its trunk. It is further added that tradition is a log magogo and the elders bagogo sitting on it. (Salakana, 2004, p. 39)

An example of a proverb with social utility is given: *Uluwikala na mamila ukwingwilwa na magino*. If you do not regularly clean your nose, insects will enter through your nostrils (i.e., an emphasis on cleanliness).

During the project research, Salakana collected a total of 86 proverbs, of which she identified 25 as having relevance for young children. The general themes identified from the proverbs collected were warning, reconciliation, obedience, cooperation, charity, respect, dependence, wisdom, self-reliance, advice, forgiveness, hospitality, patience, appreciation, persistence, solidarity, struggle, and imitation/modelling. Other findings were that only one of the three cultural groups had strong preservation of indigenous proverbs, and that people over 45 were more conversant with proverbs than the younger generation. In relation to gender, women were more conversant with proverbs in two of the regions, and men in the third.

Salakana (2004) wrote:

The most important feature of this project was to show how the different learning activities that are designed to meet the needs of preschool children can be linked to ordinary activities that are familiar to the children themselves, their families and caregivers. The added value of this approach to fostering effective learning for preschoolers is that the learning experiences can even occur in the home environment assuming that a complementary program on parenting education is put in place. This project intends to see that such a program is put in place in the project areas. (p. 62)

The learning activities designed as part of the major project were validated by a group of teacher trainees from Bituma Teacher Training College and a number of preschool teachers in the PLAN project areas. The teacher trainee group felt that the materials were appropriate to the level of the learners and that they would provide motivation for them as teacher trainees to become more innovative and sensitive to the cultures around them. The responses from the preschool teachers who attempted

to implement the learning activities were encouraging. The general observation was that some of these teachers have been teaching children on the selected themes, but the major difference was that they had done it out of cultural contexts. They were of the opinion that the proposed approach could be useful.

In terms of future activities, Salakana plans to use the proverb collection and learning activities to develop a Caregivers' Handbook to distribute to preschools and other interested ECD stakeholders. She recommends further collection of indigenous knowledge and support for its use in child rearing in both informal and formal contexts.

### The Gambia

Another initiative of the learners in the ECDVU program has been to look at local child-rearing practices and cultural knowledge in other areas of child development. Jenieri Sagnia of The Gambia explored local practices and beliefs around play and psychosocial stimulation of children to better understand local perceptions of play. Psychosocial care was understood in the study as activities parents and families do to promote the cognitive, social, moral, spiritual, and emotional development of their children (Sagnia, 2004, p. 3).

In terms of ECD, little is known in The Gambia about what parents and caregivers know and practise in promoting psychosocial development of their children. Identifying indigenous knowledge and practices supports government and other interested stakeholders' efforts to develop suitable programs that would assist communities to address the holistic development of children more meaningfully. (Sagnia, 2004, p. 6)

Sagnia is an education project officer for UNICEF in Banjul, The Gambia. His interest in local psychosocial care practices stemmed from the fact that little was known about this issue in The Gambia, and because he felt that it would assist greatly in UNICEF's approach to Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD). One objective of Sagnia's major project work was therefore to provide recommendations for UNICEF on the programming implications of this research.

Sagnia (2004) was critical in his literature review of approaches to ECD that use a 'deficit model' that focuses on what parents and communities need to learn rather than on what they already know and do. From his reading in the ECDVU course, Sagnia was able to present evidence that ECD programs which devalue indigenous knowledge are less effective than those that use and build upon it. Sagnia (2004) raised the important issue of how indigenous knowledge and practices relate to

gender issues and how this enhances or impedes the psychosocial development of children, especially girls (p. 15). He also brought attention to the potential conflicts and tensions that might exist between what we term 'traditional' and 'modern' practices, and the danger of romanticizing indigenous knowledge given the fact that families and communities everywhere are stressed by poverty, unemployment, dislocation, and other challenges.

Sagnia used both qualitative and quantitative methodology in his major project study. He carried out a semi-structured survey questionnaire, supplemented by in-depth interviews with key informants. His research covered three ethnic communities: Mandinka, Fulla, and Wollof, in the proportions of 50%, 30% and 20% respectively. Sixty percent of interviewees were female, and 80 percent were under the age of 49. Focus group discussions were held in each community, with ten men and ten women per group, one group of each per community. Observation, during visits to the communities, was used to supplement questionnaire and interview data.

Sagnia's findings include the fact that men and women in all three ethnic groups studied believe that large periods of time spent in play harms children's chances of success in their future lives, making them lose their sense of seriousness, responsibility and foresight, making them idle and lazy. While a majority of respondents felt the children should be given some opportunity to play, they felt this should be limited. There was, however, awareness of play's contribution to children's development. For example, play was believed to help children develop listening and attention skills, to keep them occupied while parents were busy with other things, and to help them learn to express themselves. Observing whether a child would play or not was also used as a means to discover whether they were physically unwell.

Through observation, Sagnia (2004) found that children in the three cultural environments were "constantly stimulated in the environment" (p. 56), despite the facts that many parents felt that play should not form a large component of a child's education and that parents had little understanding of the developmental impacts of much of their interaction with their children. Storytelling was an exception in that communities were aware of the benefits of storytelling with children and felt it was an important contributor to their development, in the social, cognitive and moral realms. There were gaps in parental knowledge about the impact of toys on children's development, but there were also locally made toys available for most ages apart from the youngest infants. One of the greatest limitations found was the lack of time that parents were able to devote to playing with their children because of the demands of work. In

addition, fathers were less likely to play with their young children because of the gendered division of labour that assigns the care of the youngest children to women only. Finally, Sagnia found pronounced differences in the treatment of girls and boys in relation to play and psychosocial care more generally. This can be seen as facilitating their future gender roles in society, but it also plays a role in denying girls, in particular, some of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In conclusion, Sagnia (2004) wrote:

The findings of the study indicate that many good practices in promoting psychosocial development of children do exist in these communities. These include: the importance attached to play, children being highly valued, understanding relevance of toys in promoting children's play, storytelling by grandmothers, children playing together, carrying infants on the backs of females, and the extended family system and high community spirit and commitment to children's welfare. It has also identified a number of gaps, which needed to be addressed to positively influence attitudes to introduce the IECD approach at community level. These gaps include: fathers not playing sufficiently with their children, children not given opportunity to play with water, sand and mud, limited variety of toys, and limited toys for infants. Other issues include: limited skills for toy development and production, lack of space for children's play, gender discrimination in play and promoting cognitive and social development, and overly perceived notion that childcare is the exclusive responsibility of women. Significant also to mention was the lack of adequate time for parents to interact with their children and talking to their infants and the heavy domestic workload of children, which limit their time for play. (Sagnia, 2004, p. 74)

Sagnia's work on psychosocial care in communities in The Gambia will be used to further enrich the training materials prepared by UNICEF in that country, which aim to promote IECD by working with communities and integrating state of the art knowledge on childhood development with the indigenous knowledge of communities, building on positive practices and helping to fill gaps in knowledge or understanding.

Other project work by Sagnia that was stimulated by his learning in the ECDVU program included the development of a local toy production project using indigenous knowledge and local materials.

## Eritrea

Wunesh Woldeselassie Bairu was involved in designing evaluation tools for the Eritrean Integrated Early Childhood Development Project.

As part of her course work for ECDVU, she worked on developing indicators for measuring the effectiveness of the program. One of the goals of the project was to improve the awareness of beneficiaries in relation to ECD components. Although many indicators for such programs are derived from externally developed goals and objectives, Woldeselassie included a crucial activity that suggested a new approach: the incorporation of indigenous knowledge within such didactic programs. The activity was the organization of community-to-community visits for the purpose of sharing indigenous knowledge. The aim was not to derive central benefits from the extraction of indigenous knowledge, but rather to develop contacts between communities and provide space and opportunity for them to learn from each other and strengthen their position in relation to such centrally directed initiatives. Woldeselassie went further to develop this objective into a discrete program component to be evaluated itself, thereby demonstrating both the importance accorded to indigenous knowledge and a new awareness of bringing communities into evaluations and discussions around their own knowledge production and its uses.

### Summary and Conclusions

There is currently a renaissance of interest in indigenous knowledges, after a long period of neglect and disdain by Western scientific and academic establishments. Both principled and pragmatic reasons exist for this renewed interest. In the development field, and specifically the field of ECD, proponents advance arguments based on the right to cultural identity alongside arguments that understanding and integrating indigenous knowledges into practice will ultimately result in more successful program interventions. However, universities and other institutions involved in producing and disseminating knowledge have not made some of the more fundamental changes required to successfully integrate indigenous knowledges. Universities continue to approach knowledge from the rationalist scientific perspective that compartmentalizes knowledge. This approach is not easily compatible with the more holistic worldviews within which indigenous knowledges tend to be grounded. Universities also tend to privilege the Western canon and to reproduce this canon for an African audience without consideration for local knowledges, cultural contexts, identities, and histories. Matthew Luhanga, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, stated that “information technology links us to resources that are, for the most part, not developed by Africans” (cited in Useem, 1999).

Interventions and programs in ECD similarly tend to be based on an



accepted body of knowledge built on Western experience and practice, often employing the rhetoric of 'best practice' and the application of 'lessons learned' without sufficient modification for cultural context or attention to and respect for indigenous knowledges and practices.

The ECDVU takes a very different approach to capacity building in the field of ECD in Africa. Its curriculum is built around the idea of co-construction of knowledge, requiring the participation of all in the creation and dissemination of content. Learning is not a one-way but a multidirectional process of interaction and exchange.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the program contributes not only to building the capacity of participants to participate in the academic field, but ensures new and unique contributions to the body of knowledge on African ECD. ECD programs are then built around these culturally grounded bodies of knowledge and themselves generate new knowledges that start from a community base and move up to the national level. The ECDVU approach is not simply a philosophy of learning but a concrete pedagogical model that is applied throughout the program.

The initial results of this process of generating curriculum within concrete cultural contexts are encouraging. The participants in the ECDVU program have embraced the idea of indigenous knowledges and are actively pursuing the documentation and incorporation of these knowledges into their research and program activities in the field of ECD. They are contributing to filling the lacunae in knowledge of local practices and beliefs around child rearing in Africa, which has been identified as an important obstacle to the integration of local knowledges into early childhood programming. They are developing plans for further documentation and dissemination of indigenous knowledges. Equally important, they are drawing the attention of policy makers to these issues, and bringing them onto the ECD agenda.

Despite these advances, much remains to be done to continue to move forward with a culturally sensitive, contextual approach to indigenous knowledge within the field of ECD as in other realms of development. Penn (2002) observes that one of the main funders of ECD programs in Africa, the World Bank, continues to support Western-centric approaches to ECD, despite articulating support for cultural diversity in its rhetoric. The indirect effects of economic policies promoted by the World Bank and other international institutions also reduce the capacity of African institutions to determine the agenda for ECD based on local priorities and cultural contexts. African governments remain highly dependent on external funders for ECD, which often then determine the direction of policy and activity within the country (Torkington, 2001). At the level of individual African countries, the legacy

of the colonial system in the sphere of politics continues to marginalize non-elite knowledges and cultural traditions. Ethnic differences in cultural practices may not be respected, particularly in situations of ethnic tension and political conflict.

Similarly, in the institutions of higher learning, more can and should be done to advance the consideration of, respect for, and inclusion of indigenous knowledges within the academic paradigm. The generative curriculum is one approach that attempts to do so, but it is hampered by the legacies of colonial and rationalist modes of thinking that continue to dominate and promote exclusive approaches to knowledge generation. The generative curriculum approach requires continual self-examination and reflection on the ideology and sources behind accepted assumptions. This is a difficult but a necessary task if we are to take seriously the notion of inclusive, participatory and emancipatory knowledge generation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This term is used to replace 'developing countries' in recognition of the potential for widely differing definitions of development and in acknowledgement that these countries contain the majority of the world's population.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the table of contents of the *Indigenous Knowledge and Development Monitor* from its inception in 1993 shows a strong preponderance of articles from those fields.

<sup>3</sup> That is, proverbs are like grease that oils the wheels of society and carry its flavour. They are part of the staple cultural diet, one could say.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the approach shares elements of the Freire pedagogical method (see Blackburn, 2000).

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