

Early Childhood Education in a Sociocultural Context: A Documentary Review

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Abstract-*This documentary review was set to analyze various documents based on Early Childhood Education in a sociocultural context. The sociocultural theory informed the analysis of the documents based on the provision of early childhood education, specifically on how young children live and learn in their social and cultural contexts at a particular point in time. The analysis seeks to understand emphasis that sociocultural theory places on culture and social interactions as an integral part of human development. How these influences manifest within children's learning experiences are the interest in this review. The findings indicated that education of the child in the traditional society was governed by family and community traditions and by social systems. A good curriculum is one which is drawn from society and embodied in the existing cultural norms, traditions and customs of the particular setting. Learning and development of young children occur through social interaction and guidance from skilled others within culturally rich settings. The findings have implications to childhood education, parents, educational management and community of teachers. It is suggested that curriculum design needs to promote education in caring, responsive social contexts where adult-child, child-teacher and child-child interactions and opportunities for exploration promote children's intellectual and socio-emotional/behavioural development. Therefore, if early childhood education curriculum is not contextualised it will end up itself in the business of producing failures because the structure of educational opportunity and accessibility is such that only a tiny minority of children are able to proceed each year to more advanced levels. So to understand cognitive and non-cognitive development of a child, we must examine the social and cultural processes shaping children.*

Keywords: Early childhood education, early childhood curriculum, early childhood development, and sociocultural theory.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analysed early childhood education (ECE) in a sociocultural context. The concept of ECE does not refer to a single entity; rather, the term covers a variety of programmes for young children between birth and 8 years [1]-[4]. Central to the sociocultural theoretical framework is the view that an understanding of the ECE, its curriculum process and enactment can be achieved by investigating how the children live and learn in their social and cultural contexts at a particular point in time [4]-[6]. The social and cultural context is interpreted here as a child's living environments including the surrounding family, relatives, caregivers and the immediate situational events [7]-[9]. The sociocultural theory informing the analysis of the current review is one of a family of perspectives on human development that interpret context as an incorporating system of social activities and cultural meanings [5],[7],[9].

Underlying this review is an attempt to understand how early childhood education is conducted in response to ECE curriculum put in place in 2016 in Tanzania. The emphasis that sociocultural theory places on culture and social interactions as an integral part of human development is the focus and how these influences manifest within children's learning experiences are the interest in this review.

The sociocultural theory origins, learning, and development

Sociocultural theory states that "young children actively construct their own understanding and experiences during collaboration with adults or more knowledgeable peers within their social and cultural environments" [10, p 81]. Vygotsky held that children learn as a result of their social interactions with others [11]. A sociocultural theory argues that children gradually come to understand the world through their

own activities in interaction with peers and significant others [12], and that a frequent process of communication and learning generates development. This involves reciprocal partnership between a child and an adult in engaging with various activities, who jointly construct understanding and knowledge [11], [12].

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development integrated culture into the development of a child; Vygotsky saw development as originating in social and cultural interaction [1], [8], [13]. Vygotsky [10] believed that the mind is regularly changing as part of a "dialectical relationship" (p.79), in other words the environment is manipulating the individual and the individual is influencing the world.

Vygotsky was also a social constructivist who located his interests in the social aspects of learning and cognition [10]. He further, described social constructivism as individuals constructing learning for themselves within a social context [14], [15]. However, Vygotsky believed that learning takes place through experiences, meaning that knowledge is constructed by the learner and the process involved in learning is of greater importance than product [15]. The focus is on how a child could arrive at a solution to a problem rather than on the answer the child gives. In this theoretical approach, children are viewed as powerful participants in the learning process. For Vygotsky peer interaction, collaboration, and participation with significant others serves to foster socialisation, problem solving, and understanding, as new and challenging ideas are met [8], [13], [9].

Moreover, Vygotsky's work emphasises on culture and context, and the role of language in thinking [15]. Vygotsky was interested in investigating children in their social settings in order to understand development. Vygotsky suggested that cognitive development depends on interactions with the people in the child's world through the cultural tools that provide and support thinking [10], [16].

Generally, in Vygotsky's view, all higher mental functions originate in social activity. Sociocultural perspectives suggest that the people with whom children relate in their social and cultural contexts contribute strongly to children's learning outcomes [9], [16]. The theory can be used to explain teaching and learning in ECE. Among others, the focus of Vygotsky's theory is on the role of culture, and the mediation of cultural values, norms, and practices through social interaction. In order to enact this theory, curriculum developers would need to

prepare a curriculum which accommodates the social context of the learners.

Culture

Vygotsky [10] articulated the role of culture in a child's development as a central feature in Developmental Science. A number of research studies have indicated that there is "considerable variation in children's behaviours, emotions, and cognitions across cultural context" [17, p.2]. For instance, children in traditional, subsistence-based societies, in which extended families live together such as in Tanzanian society, and where children are needed to assume family roles and responsibilities, tend to demonstrate high levels of prosocial-cooperative behaviour at least toward people they know and share with, different from those from complex societies and higher class structures [17], [18].

In addition to this, another central feature of Vygotsky's theory is his use of the ideas of cultural tools for learning. Culture is a crucial element of Vygotsky's thinking. He views all cultures as having a set of tools which they use to support learning and thinking, such as dances, language, symbols, music, parables, stories, songs, and legends [19], [14], [15], [9]. The view is supported by Smith [12] who argues that culture and the tools of culture (especially language), institutions, and history are acknowledged to have a great influence on children's learning. Socialization practices apparently play a significant role in social, behavioural, and emotional development [17]. For example, Chen and Eisenberg found that parental effort to socialize self-control and responsibility in the early years is a major factor related to prosocial-cooperative behaviour in many cultures such as China, Indonesia and African countries, Tanzania included. Children's learning and their participation in adopting existing cultures plays an active role in their development. Culture may also influence social processes by indicating the functional and structural characteristics of children's peer relationships such as making friendships and group networks in which interaction occurs. Chen and Eisenberg [17] argue that peer interaction provides opportunities for children to learn social and problem-solving skills from one another and to understand rules and standards for correct behaviours in different settings.

This analysis places theoretical importance on developing culturally sensitive approaches in early childhood curriculum through peer interactions. The African community, such as Tanzania, is raising its

voice in support of the discourse on developing culturally sensitive approaches [20],[21], [22], [5], [23] to enable better provision of ECE. That includes extending the dialogue and incorporating cultural conceptualisations of childhood, by introducing child development theories and practices that follow from African ways of performing in and understanding the world [4], [24], [25]. This African view allows children to enter into adult roles early and to manage their own learning and development within the peer culture. Socialization and education are organised to engage children with core cultural, that is, developmental tasks at various stages. Therefore, it is important to understand social ontogenesis (the development of an individual organism) to determine the ethnographic theories and pedagogic strategies beneath Africa's indigenous ECE services [4], [22]. However, African culture is little appreciated by Western views, and it seems targeted for systematic replacement by Western values instead of enhancement [4], [26], [21], [22], [23]. It would be appropriate to blend ideas from both indigenous and imported Western ECE services in Africa [27], [21]. Blending imported Western ideas with indigenous cultural parameters to form a locally appropriate and progressive path of educational reform in African governments could be economically realistic [21], [5], [28], [23]. An indigenous ECE system developed within an African worldview would inspire the community to safeguard and uphold the cultural aspects imperative to the development of children [29], [25].

The gap between "African children's conditions and the theories that interveners apply to them persists because the field relies more on scripted new conceptualizations than on embedded contextual realities of childhood" [4,p.137]. Culture determines the nature of many dimensions of children's developmental functions including daily practices and settings, parenting, and childrearing arrangements. And it needs to be incorporated into policy development and service provision in Africa. Among others, one expectation is that ECE experts and practitioners need to understand and endeavour to move children and their families forward from acceptance of their current circumstances. However, instead of drawing strength from the wisdom of African norms, customs and traditions [5], [25], which the people have preserved for centuries, a Eurocentric or Western frame of reference encourages a detachment from the indigenous worldview, values,

and practices [4], [26], [21], [23]. Those identified as expert typically have different perceptions from the people in the African community for whom their work or support is intended [30]. It seems to discount the blunt realities and contexts of Africa's ECE. This argument aligns with that made by Nsamenang[4, p.135] who supports "the need for changes in attitudes, approaches, methodologies, and service provision" in ECE in African contexts.

A main argument of the sub-section is that cultural, learning, and developmental issues need to be discussed in contexts relevant to the lives of children in the contemporary world. For example, rapid social change due to urbanisation, cultural communication as a result of ethnic diversity and advances in Science and technology. There is a need to blend imported knowledge with local knowledge for more efficiency.

Mediation

This section presents a concept of mediation through the use of cultural tools as a crucial aspect in a child's learning. Mediation is a central theme that turns throughout the thinking and writings of Vygotsky [31]. In his view, a concern of human consciousness is stipulated through and associated with the use of tools, especially "psychological tools" or "signs" (p.178). This signifies that instead of acting in a direct, unmediated way in the social and physical world, our contact with the world is indirect or mediated by signs and tools [11], [10].Wertsch[31] argues that the fundamental assumption of this approach is that "action is mediated by and cannot be separated from, the context in which it is carried out" (p.19). Another key idea in Vygotsky's work according to Tracey and Morrow [11] is that "development depends on sign systems with which the individuals grows up" (p.127). Sign systems include culture, language, writing, and counting systems (p.127). Vygotsky [10] asserted that children's learning is mainly affected by their mastery of language, as evidenced by their mastery of sign systems such as alphabets, speaking, listening, words, and writing. Vygotsky claimed that it is through the application and manipulation of these signs that children have the tools to think about and respond to the world [11], [31]. Vygotsky asserted that children successfully find out about language and the corresponding sign systems from the people around them with whom they interact [12],[11]. The early childhood curriculum is implemented through various means including sign systems. When ECE children

communicate with peers and adults sign systems facilitate communication and clear understanding. For this analysis, mediation is a very useful concept to explain what teachers do in the classroom teaching and learning context, since teachers and children communicate through languages, signs, and symbols when making points clear.

Social relationships

Social interaction serves to mediate the links between cultural values, norms, and individual development. The aim of a sociocultural approach is to illuminate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, historical, and institutional contexts, in which this action occurs, on the other [31]. A study by Tracey and Morrow [11] argues that during interaction, peers evaluate individual behaviours in ways that liaise with the norms, customs and values endorsed in the peer social world. According to Vygotsky, social relationships are the most vital mediator for learning [7], and mediation occurs when people interact with others through cultural tools, including languages, places, objects, and symbols. A study by Guo [19] suggests that when someone's contact with the world is a mediated process, learning is the outcome of mediation between actions and meanings that individuals express through their actions. In particular, Vygotsky found that mediation stimulates a lively perspective on the relationship between meaning and learning by recognising the influence of social and cultural contexts on people's learning and development [10]. The development of culturally mediated beliefs and practices through the use of cultural tools and social relationships underpins the process of learning and development [7], [31]. TeWhāriki, New Zealand's early childhood curriculum emphasises the significant role of "socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things" [32, p.9]. This current paper will benefit from the accommodation of various ideas from different writers; the New Zealand's early childhood curriculum included, and uses these ideas as a lens to examine the ECE curriculum in Tanzania. Many writers emphasise that children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others together with individual exploration and reflection [33], [9], [12], [32]. Social interaction plays a basic role in the development of cognition [8], [13], [31], that learning is taking place from and through interaction of an

individual with others and then the individualization of his/her learning.

This documentary analysis examines whether and how teachers can create conducive environments for children to feel free when interacting with teachers, adults, and peers. Learning is meaningful when conducted in friendly environments in a collaborative way. For the most part, Vygotsky's theory would seem to imply that providing guidance and support for children's learning and development is important from the early stages [11], [10]. Teachers can help this movement by focusing their teaching just beyond the children's level of development, while providing the necessary supports to allow them to succeed. Support can be in the form of material help or can be social in nature. This support can take place through clues, reminders, encouragement, breaking down the problem into steps, or anything else that allows the child to grow as an independent learner and can be in material help or social in nature.

Vygotsky [10] argues that learning is most effective when children engage in activities within a supportive environment, receiving appropriate guidance from competent others. One of the main principles of Vygotsky's theory [10] is that people are products of their social and cultural worlds. And that to understand children, we must understand the social, cultural, and societal context in which they develop [1], [8], [13], [31]. The concern of sociocultural theories is to promote children's social and intellectual development in responsive social contexts [12]. Vygotsky argued that the situation where a child interacts with adults, knowledgeable peers in his/her cultural group needs to be a properly organised learning context [12], [10].

Consequently, it is argued that learning and development are socially and culturally constructed. Consistent with this argument, Wertsch [31] points out that the key to sociocultural theory is the connections between human beings and their sociocultural contexts. Moreover, social relationships formulated through interaction are a major basis of feelings of security and belonging [17], which are related to socio-emotional development in various domains. In the same way, peer interaction is likely to be shaped by cultural norms, customs, and values in the society or community.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ANALYSIS

The aim of this documentary review was to explore early childhood education in a Sociocultural

Context. Sociocultural theory informed the analysis of the documents based on the provision of early childhood education, specifically on how young children live and learn in their social and cultural contexts at a particular point in time. The analysis seeks to understand emphasis that sociocultural theory places on culture and social interactions as an integral part of human development. How these influences manifest within children's learning experiences are the interest in this review.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present work is solely based on secondary information which is collected from different sources like Books, Journal Articles, Reports and Websites. All the reviewed documents located the importance of social and cultural context in the provision of early childhood education. The documentary review was grounded from the following documents;

- A book written by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky in 1978, called *Mind and Society: The Development of Psychological Processes*;
- Tanzania Institute of Education, *Early Childhood Education Curriculum, Tanzania Mainland of 2016*.
- TeWhāriki New Zealand Ministry of Education. *TeWhāriki: He Whāriki Mataurangamōngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: early childhood curriculum in 1996*.

Inclusion criteria were used to qualify these documents. Based on the focus of the research question, the theoretical framework and the scope of the review, the researcher found early childhood education curriculum from the context of the study and the other one from international perspective, together with the writings from the pioneer of the socio-cultural theory to be most relevant documents to the question the researcher seeks to answer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This documentary review was set to analyze various documents based on Early Childhood Education in a sociocultural context. All the reviewed documents such as Books, Journal Articles, Reports and Websites located the importance of social and cultural context in the provision of early childhood education. The findings have been framed based on the following key theme:

Early childhood education curriculum in a sociocultural context

A good curriculum is one which is drawn from society and embodied in the existing cultural norms,

traditions and customs of the particular setting. In many countries it is even assumed that care is something that is important for children under 3 years of age or for children who are away from their parents for a full day (in day care centres) (Smith, 2013). And that education is something for pre-school centres or schools for 4 to 7 year-olds to address. But it is important for both care and education to be incorporated in all early childhood settings, no matter how old the child, whether the context is a centre or a home, or how long the child is away from his/her parents. In African countries before the imposition of Western ideas, the expectations of families and communities and the values which were placed on children influenced how children were cared for and educated [22]. Education of the child in the traditional society was governed by family and community traditions and by social systems. Nwoye [34] reports that childhood socialisation in traditional Africa was geared to accomplishment of specific objectives, "children were brought up to fit well into the traditional social fabric, members of the extended family system, together with community elders, friends, and neighbours, participate in child upbringing" (p.5). For example, growing boys and girls were taught important responsibilities including manners and posture proper to their status in the community. The construction of African curricula, Tanzanian ECE in particular, needs to promote traditional knowledge that can help to educate African children for their own traditional society.

Furthermore, each community had its own education system to socialize children into its culture, values, and traditions. Traditional society was very keen to provide the child's education from birth and this was continued through various stages and ages [22] with a system of education demarcated for every stage. The intentions were to prepare children to contribute to strengthening the community and for children to acquire skills essential for protection, food production, and mastery of the environment. This form of curriculum was guided and appropriate; children learned and were taught as they participated in the daily living activities in the home, through ceremonies, direct instructions, observation, and apprenticeship [35]. An African child grew in a supportive environments beginning in infancy. Children were taught through songs, games, storytelling mainly by their mothers, in a collaborative way with caregivers such as grandparents, aunts, and older siblings [35], [4], [24], [25].

In the same way, curriculum design needs to promote education in caring, responsive social contexts where adult-child and child-child interactions and opportunities for play and exploration promote children's intellectual, socio-emotional/behavioural development [5], [25], [28]. According to Smith [12] education services for children are organised, supervised programmes with social and educational objectives for children in the temporary absence of their parents. Locating such practices within their particular sociocultural and historical context provides some clues as to their effectiveness or ineffectiveness [35], [4], [24], [25].

Sibling caregiving is a role which most African children have experienced from their childhood. This experience facilitates their transition from childhood into the parenting role. African parents focus on children's involvement in responsible and productive livelihood activities as the key principle in their development and learning [30], [4],[28]. However, this perspective differs from the dominant Western description, which constructs children as "reproducers, to be filled with knowledge and values and made "ready to learn" and "ready for school", or as liberating agents, who solve social and economic problems in society if subjected early enough to effective technical interventions [36,p.3].

African children normally progressively graduate from one activity setting to another, until they reach adulthood. In so doing, children are brought up more under the guidance and supervision of peer mentors than of parents, siblings or adult caregivers [4], [28]. In their interactions children follow an unwritten curriculum, which they implicitly learn or teach by themselves at different stages that correspond to the developmental stages the culture is aware of and this socialisation is according to children's developing abilities [4], [5], [25]. Mentors and adults train children from an early age to participate in self-care, routine duties, and family maintenance chores. Usually, a developing African child is expected to complete his or her foundation training in the intellectual, social, moral, and physical capabilities in various sectors of economic and communal life by the end of adolescence [29]. The curriculum was prepared in relation to the surrounding traditional indigenous culture and norms.

Likewise, the early childhood curriculum needs to accommodate cultural contexts, so that children grow up with the indigenous knowledge which prevails within their surroundings. Sociocultural theory as a

lens for this review emphasises the role of peers, siblings, parents, caregivers in guiding and supervising the development of competence and abilities of children. The practical demonstration of acquired competencies and skills is the extent to which a given child notices and responds to the needs of peers, mentors or sibling charges. The infant or toddler matures into a child-participant in household chores and, thereafter, into an adolescent who graduates into higher order interactional systems and transactional roles [30], [22].

An early childhood curriculum is pedagogically effective when the teacher is positioned as a facilitator and mediator of learning within the sociocultural context. The teaching philosophy recognises both the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the co-constructive process of teaching and learning [40]. However, Serpell and Jere-Folotiya [25] express that in many contemporary, rural African communities, the curriculum of public schooling is formulated to impart a set of competencies whose main practical applications depend on further schooling. Therefore, if ECE curriculum is not contextualised it will end up itself in the business of producing failures because the structure of educational opportunity and accessibility is such that only a tiny minority of children are able to proceed each year to more advanced levels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the documents based on early childhood education in the sociocultural context indicated that learning and development of young children occur through social interaction and guidance from skilled others within culturally rich settings. So to understand cognitive and non-cognitive development of a child, we must examine the social and cultural processes shaping children. In Teaching and learning context sociocultural theory emphasises that teachers and adults need to collaborate with children in joint cognitive activities to fit the child's level of potential development. Vygotsky's concept of cognitive development suggests an active role for teachers in assisting development to occur, such as teachers organising learning experiences for children [41], or a teacher exploring the task to be learned with the children in order to identify what is necessary for success. Therefore, the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky is able to describe desirable teaching for children's development. Hence, a child grows within a certain culture and interacts with his/her social environment which shapes his/her cognitive creativity.

Limitations of the Study

The current study was confined to analyse early childhood education in a sociocultural context using documentary review. Underlying this review was an attempt to understand how early childhood education is conducted in response to early childhood education curriculum put in place in 2016 in Tanzanian context. However, the review revealed that early childhood education curriculum was likely based on existing literature and taking Western views of child development, where the ways of thinking and contexts are different from indigenous African ways of thinking and contexts. Therefore, a further inquiry is recommended to examine on how African communities could build indigenous knowledge, values, and attitude into curricula for young children using the local context. African societies have their own conceptions of child development and strategies for supporting it, and a rich store of often neglected resources and play materials could be incorporated into early childhood education, rather than viewing that Western knowledge as superior to African indigenous knowledge. Hence, the reformulation and enactment of early childhood education curriculum reflecting the context could be considered the most critical contemporary issue for curriculum developers, policy makers, and key users in classroom contexts.

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