

In Africa, Our Best Teachers are Our Children

by Sherri Le Mottee

Take a Leaf from Africa's Book

Take a moment to visualise the African child. Does your mind's eye take you to popular tourist images of smiling brown-faced children in traditional clothes, beating drums and dancing? Or perhaps you think of the types of disheartening photos of children that are frequently used to raise money for relief organizations. These kinds of images are not unusual; the media feeds them to us, as do the big data reports on the status of children on our continent. Though arguably advancing the rights of the many, many children who are indeed affected by multiple deprivations in Sub-Saharan Africa, what they don't tell us is about the upside of growing up African.

Most of the globally espoused scientific evidence about the impact of early childhood experience and interventions on children's growth and development are based on research undertaken in so-called developed countries with little attention to African child care practices. Adding the richness of African knowledge and experience to these international constructs could enrich and bolster global understanding of resilience building and play-based learning that is so innate to our children, parenting approaches, and traditional education principles. As challenging as our environment can be, the diversity of cultural practices that make up this continent often allows children to play and learn in contexts that are affirming of their identities, rich with culture, and steeped in traditions that allow them to grow and develop in ways that may inadvertently have been lost in the constructs of current world education paradigms.

The organisation of African societies allows for children to play together in a 'natural' manner. They do this, regardless of their ages and stages of development or their socio-

economic circumstances. Together, they get on with learning the serious business of socio-economic life. There is much that we as early education specialists interested in play as a form of learning can glean from the children and people of this continent to enrich our practice, reminding us to be open-hearted and open-minded about the multitudes of diversities we encounter in our daily lives. Let's take a step back and let children lead the way.

It's Not Just about Universality

All children have the same rights, but not all children are exactly the same. The globalisation of childhood through international interventions sometimes leads one to forget this. Well-meaning research and aid organisations can easily paint a picture that every child is like another. This is important in a context of advancing fundamental rights, to ensure that basic needs of every child are met, so they can survive and thrive. Unfortunately, as impactful as it might be, this 'globalisation of childhood' easily overlooks collective and individual experiences, realities, and specific needs of children living in different circumstances, in different cultures, and in different geographies. Childhood is socially constructed and so may be different across societies and cultures, calling for sensitivity when we engage with children and their learning.

Significantly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990 universalised the idea that children are born with fundamental freedoms and inherent rights. While it is credited with being written in such a way that implementation is possible across different legal systems, countries, and cultures, Africans were under-represented in the drafting process and so issues particular to the continent's children were left out. To remedy this, an Africanised articulation of child rights followed in 2001 in the form of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC or Children's Charter).

The Charter pays attention to the socio-cultural and economic contexts of childhood in Africa. It emphasises



Sherri Le Mottee is an ECD Consultant working with the African Early Childhood Network. With thanks to Carol Harrington from ELRU, Carole Bloch from PRAESA, and Carol Smith from Persona Dolls for their contributions.

the importance of including African cultural values and experiences when dealing with the education, health, or any other issue that impacts the life of the developing child. It opens the door, not only to affirm the richness of growing up African in tradition and culture, but also to challenge those practices that may be harmful to the well-being of our children. As such, it makes room to intervene when traditional views conflict with the rights of the child such as child marriage, parental rights and obligations towards their children, and children born out of wedlock. It is clear that the Children's Charter supersedes any of these that contradict the rights, duties, and obligations it contains.

The Joys of Growing Up African

Africa is not one big homogenous cluster of countries. The diversity of language, cultural practice, history and religion of the region is rich and interesting. We cannot safely generalise one typical experience of living and growing up an African; it is simply too diverse and complex. There are, however, some clear, cross-cutting traditional ideas and wisdoms about community and collective play as part of life-long learning to consider.

■ **It's about community:** The phrase "Umuntu umuntu ngabantu," which translated means "a person is only a person with other people," sums up a profound and beautiful truth, which sits at the heart of African values and life. This spirit of connectedness begins with the ancestors and spans across life to embrace the unborn and the young. In practice, this humanness or personhood is best understood as a sense of connectedness experienced through community. The wisdoms that follow from this are that our children are the reward of life, and that it takes a whole village to raise a child because every child is the child of everyone.

■ **It's about life-long learning:** Children are apprentices in their family context. They play and learn through active participation in acceptable and valued social and economic activities. Indigenous African livelihoods make space for the children to play alongside their elders and actively contribute to tasks within the rhythm of daily life. This African approach to learning and 'becoming' allows parents to "sensitise their children from an early age to seek out others to extract 'competencies' and to figure out and feel their way into the world away from family and neighbourhood, but with attentive cautions that leave a lasting imprint, such as: 'venture into the world, but be a good child'."

■ **It's about learning together:** Peer culture is not a well-researched area of child development yet. Tacit knowledge tells us it is a central way of supporting the

learning and development of young children. Given the history of the continent, the majority of children are becoming more knowledgeable about the broader world than their parents were able to; therefore intergenerational learning is therefore an important part of community life.

■ **It's about self-actualisation:** While children are seen as stronger together, their ability to "acquire physical, intellectual, and practical education through their own initiative" is recognised. Literature tells us that in African contexts, children play a central role in their own development. "Indigenous pedagogy permits toddlers and youngsters to learn in participatory processes in the home, community, religious service, peer culture, and other settings through 'work-play' activities, with little to no explicit didactic support.... It is thus participatory pedagogy rather than the instructional models applied in current educational constructs that facilitates growth in their intellectual and functional abilities."

We accept the general definition that play-based learning is "when children are enjoying what they do and deeply engaged in activities that are relevant and meaningful, so that they remember things for longer and at the same time develop holistic skills for life-long learning... usually... in an environment where the child has opportunities to imagine new things, take risks, and share experiences with others." It follows that these characteristics of learning on the African continent are key features of learning through play and build the capacities young children need to embrace a modern world of complexity from a place of resilience and self-confidence.

Positive Learnings from a South African Experience

Heralded as the most progressive in the world, the South African Constitution embraces the spirit and values of being African. In policy and practice we have sought to acknowledge not just the diversity of our own country, but of our continent as a whole.

South Africa with its 11 official languages is a melting pot of different religions, cultures, and nationalities. Its diversity is compounded by vast socio-economic disparity and a vibrant collection of foreigners from countries like Zimbabwe, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo who live and work here. As much as we grapple with these layers of diversity, the cornerstone of our democracy — the Freedom Charter, which has been made into law — reminds us "that South Africa belongs to all who live in it."

These sentiments inform our policies and practices, including how we tackle the issues of early childhood development. Three organisations working in the ECD sector that stand out in terms of their approach to diversity are the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU), PRAESA, and Persona Dolls. ELRU has a curriculum that embraces and teaches diversity and is distinctly, “similar to anti-racist approaches to education, aims to challenge prejudice and oppression of all kinds. In the anti-bias approach, it is not sufficient to be a passive ‘non-biased’ observer of prejudice; every individual needs to intervene actively to challenge personal and institutional behaviours that perpetuate bias and oppression.” PRAESA on the other hand researches, supports, and encourages mother tongue-based bilingual education and is responsible for launching a national multilingual reading-for-enjoyment campaign. In this final section of this article, I share some of their ideas and resources as fine examples of South African endeavours to embrace diversity and affirm multiple identities within a solid pedagogical framework.

Early Learning Resource Unit

As early as the 1980s, ELRU was actively equipping early years practitioners with the techniques and skills needed to manage inclusive learning environments for children engaging children from different cultures, genders, abilities, languages, and social backgrounds. ELRU’s strategy has matured from the Anti-bias Curriculum Approaches of the 1990s (which was an activism approach), to a deeply embedded mainstreaming approach to ensure that inclusion and diversity are not only promoted but become systemically embedded. ELRU has designed a learning programme linked to South Africa’s National Curriculum Framework for children aged birth–4. It actively promotes practical methods and activities for Early Years Practitioners to ensure tolerance and inclusion. Both anti-bias and mainstream curricula have common aspirations to challenge prejudices and ensure that all children are included regardless of race, gender, culture, language, or possible special needs. These principles are aspirational and very difficult to implement. ELRU has taken up the challenge by preparing a multi-pronged approach to help typical parents and early childhood practitioners on the ground to do this in a practical manner. The challenge is that it is never as easy and simple as one thinks.

ELRU implements this approach in the following ways:

- Parents and caregivers of babies, toddlers, and young children are invited to information sharing sessions and are equipped with knowledge and skills for early

identification of challenges. They are also invited to share their personal beliefs, traditions, and cultural practices around parenting and child development.

- Early childhood practitioners attend training to help with awareness, planning, and adaptations of typical daily programme activities to ensure mainstream curricula can be implemented on the ground.
- The children learn these principles by taking part in structured and unstructured activities. Thematic teaching centres around the celebration of tradition, culture, and context. Children from multiple cultures will be present in most spaces where early childhood initiatives take place and will naturally engage in peer learning. This fosters a culture of positive cultural practice.

PRAESA and the Nal’ibali Campaign

The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa is an independent research and development unit affiliated with the University of Cape Town. Since 1992, PRAESA’s work in literacy curricula, teacher training, materials development and research, has put meaning making, stories, and imagination at the heart of children’s learning. PRAESA conducts research and trains trainers and teachers in South Africa and other parts of Africa on multilingual education. The organization also supports publishers to create appropriate multilingual storybooks, particularly for babies and young children.

PRAESA’s aim is to continue to inform multilingual literacy discussions and debates, particularly in early childhood, by supporting adults to be the kind of interactive literacy role models children need for successful biliteracy learning. The literacy vision for a national campaign aimed at sparking children’s potential through storytelling and reading, Nal’ibali, was initiated in 2012 and driven by PRAESA for its first four years. Nal’ibali creates public awareness about the critical link between reading for pleasure and children’s educational success. The campaign aims to provide the optimal conditions for learning, both inside and outside of school, that motivate children to read and write in African languages as well as English.

Persona Dolls

The Persona Dolls model recognises that young children are not immune to noticing difference. Research tells us that they become aware of differences in gender, skin colour, language, and physical ability at a very young age. The values they attach to these differences are accumulated through their observations and experiences of the attitudes

of others, spoken and unspoken, positive and negative.

In their view, anti-bias must foster each child's:

- development of a knowledgeable, confident self-identity.
- empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- critical thinking and problem-posing about issues of bias.
- ability to stand up for herself or himself, and for others, in the face of unfairness and injustice.

Persona Dolls are life-like, culturally appropriate girl and boy dolls made of cloth. Each has a 'persona' or identity, and is thus transformed into a unique personality with cultural and social class backgrounds, family situations, abilities and disabilities, fears and interests. "The 'stories' that are told about each doll's life include issues such as racism, gender, HIV and AIDS stigma, social class, poverty, abuse, and disability. Interactive problem-posing discussions develop, based on what has happened to the doll. In this safe environment children talk about their own identities, life experiences and feelings, and try to assist the doll in resolving his or her problems. This empowers children to cope with these issues in their own daily lives."

Photographs by the authors



In Conclusion

While this article focuses on and celebrates what it is to be an African, at its core are two fundamental messages:

Jonti-Craft® Large Multicolored Light Table

Jonti-Craft®

Captivate the minds of young learners with the ultimate light table!

- 16 colors with four modes—flash, strobe, fade, and smooth—and brightness control
- Combine with colored elements to teach lessons on mixing of light and colors
- Comes with infrared remote and battery



KYDZ Safe

KYDZ Strong

KYDZ Tuff

www.jonti-craft.com // 800.543.4149 // sales@jonti-craft.com

that all human beings are born equal but different and that while these differences count, they do not make one life more valuable than another. Unfortunately, these simple truths seem to elude us; as human beings we are often drawn into the quagmires of bullying, racism, bigotry, sexism, xenophobia, and the many other forms of discrimination we encounter and perpetuate on a daily basis across the world. But it does not have to be like this. Starting with ourselves and with the children we teach, we can build a different world, one in which all human beings are respected and honoured.

The much-admired first president of our democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela, made the observation that "no one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." As early years educators, our responsibility is to set young children on a path where they step out into a diverse world confident in who they are, able to love themselves and from this place of resilience and self-confidence, demonstrate respect for and openness to learn from the many cultures, values, and beliefs they will encounter as they grow and journey through life.