



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURAL AND PARENTAL STANDARDS AS THE BENCHMARK FOR EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Recognition and inclusion of cultural parental expectations of their children at different stages of development is critical in formulating comprehensive early learning and development standards. While there has been significant research on 'best practices' from the west that are largely school based expectations of children at different stages in Uganda, there is a lack of research into traditional parental expectations of their children at different stages of development. This study explores cultural parental expectations of 160 parents of pre-schoolers that they wish to see inculcated into their children. Structured interview was used to collect data which was later analyzed descriptively. Result from this study may inform the process of developing a comprehensive early learning and development standard that is sensitive to both parental and school based standards so as to cater for a whole child.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Uganda Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy was approved. This policy, together with the Uganda Education Act (2008) became the basis for standardization and implementation of different ECD services. Accordingly, standardization among other things, started with the development of the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) following advice of the funding agency. This task is being spearheaded by the Directorate of Education Standards (DES). ELDS technically is supposed to outline what children should know and be able to do after participating in preschool education programs (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Consequently, use of a comprehensive early learning and development standards is supposed 'to promote an effective kindergarten readiness experience no matter where children are enrolled' (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). The ELDS currently being developed in Uganda, as guided by international experts, focuses more on school based standards and 'best practices' that are working well in the west. It should however, be noted that declaring an approach a "best practice" often signifies little more than that a measurement tool or program model is favoured by a particular stakeholder group, such as the originators of the tool or program (Ball, 2010). It should also be noted that even 'best practices' like the Developmentally Appropriate approaches (DAP) in the west has been known for its failure to address, among others, issues of culture, context, and the limitations of a positivist approach (Kessler 1991; Jipson 1991; Swadener

and Kessler 1991; Kessler and Swadener 1992). Thus, importing early learning programs created in Euro-western countries where European-heritage norms and approaches to development predominate can interrupt the transmission of locally-valued cultural knowledge and practices and undermine the diversity of voices, knowledge sources, ways of life and supports for raising children in local conditions in receiver countries and communities (Canello & Viruru, 2004; Soto & Swadener, 2002; Stairs, & Bernhard, 2002). We must therefore, curb our enthusiasm for promoting uniform methodologies for international comparisons and exporting so-called "best practices" to cultural and national contexts that are fundamentally different from their source (Ball, 2010).

Currently, in Uganda, there are two categories of ECD centres. The first category is the privately owned and commercial ECD centres in the form of nursery school, kindergartens, day care centres and children's homes are mainly based in urban areas. The commercial ECD programmes mainly use 'best practices' from the west, since some of them like to be referred to as 'international schools'. These schools, since they are influenced by government policies use school based standards. The second category is the local community based ECD programmes usually located in rural areas. These programmes are controlled by communities with little or no government supervision. It should be noted that there is increased establishment these 'unregulated' community schools that have their own standards defined by elders, parents and community volunteers (Uganda Child Rights Ngo Network, 2007). These pre-schools although termed formal, based on the hours kept and the curriculum and materials used, they are

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non-formal in character and remain firmly rooted in and controlled by the communities which are responsible for building schools and employing Paraprofessionals (Myers, 1992). Some of these communities do not agree with school based standard and feel that formal schooling is largely irrelevant to their lifestyle as it alienate children from their communities (Licht, 2008). Even if children wanted to attend 'normal' school, their domestic duties conflict with school attendance, yet these duties are essential to their family's survival (Licht, 2008).

With this advice therefore, in developing a comprehensive early learning and development standard for Ugandans that will stand the test of time, DES must make cultural parental expectations the core of standards. This is because "Cultural sensitivity" is common advice in the field of early childhood learning and development, and few would argue with it (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004). Also, parents who are expected to implement these standards must first agree with them since they are their children's first and most important teachers (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). In use of cultural parental expectations, we shall be recognizing that indigenous African ECD systems possess logical coherence and purposive consistency, which deserve investigative discovery and enhancement rather than neglect and erasure (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). Available researches in Uganda have not focused on parental expectation of their children's early learning. They have instead focused on methods for teaching used in indigenous education and not the current methods parents expect teachers to use to teach their children (Ssekamwa, 1996). Others have only focused on standards to provide guidance for responding to education needs in crisis and post-crisis environments (Sullivan-Owomoyela, 2006) and stories that have lessons in shaping character and promoting children's education in specific social values (Gamurorwa, 2004).

Producing a whole child, therefore, in the African context calls for comprehensive early learning standards that include indigenous knowledge epistemologies in skills children learn in schools which are critical for the survival of children and families (Ng'asike, 2011). This should be done systematically by drawing indigenous knowledge because ECD interventions in Africa are more successful when built on local than foreign knowledge (Ball & Pence, 2000; Pence & McCallum, 1994; Pence & Marfo, 2004). This study, therefore, seeks to explore the common cultural parental expectations that Ugandan parents treasure as standards so that it can inform DES on what direction to take in order to develop an acceptable and usable early learning and development standards for Uganda.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

A cross-sectional survey research design was used to collect the opinion of different categories of respondents. The study was conducted in the four regions of Uganda to get information that is representative of the major regions of the country. While in each region of Uganda, the districts that form each region were identified. From the districts, 10 districts were randomly selected using the lottery method. This brought the total number of districts to 40 from the four regions. While in each district, communities that have

community schools were purposively selected and participants selected from them.

Sample

Parents who had children in the 3 years and 5 years age categories were purposively sampled with the help of the area early childhood focal point officer. In selection of elders, purposive technique was used to sample persons identified by community members as their elder. Likewise, caregivers chosen by the community to teach in community child care centres were purposively selected.

Tools for data collection

The major tool for data collection was the structured interview. This was used because most of the respondents are not very literate. The interview also allowed the researcher to probe into areas that were not well understood by respondents in a given item. The design of the tool is as follows:

Parental expectations: This comprised of simple questions that sought to establish parental expectation of their children at 3 and 5 years. The items were organized under the following sub headings: What children should be taught at school, development expectations for children at 3 years and at 6 years, teaching methods to be used when teaching children.

Procedure for Data Collection

Data collection was done in two phases.

1. Preliminary Investigation: Preliminary investigation was done in the intended area of study to gauge access to the samples and to pre-test the tool. A total of twenty parents were approached to pre-test the tool. After pre-testing, the tool was analyzed and necessary modification made to make it ready for data collection.

2. Data Collection: Data was collected from purposively selected parents who had children of 3 years or 5 years. From among these parents, only those parents who either have their children in community based centres or those who keep their children away from school were selected. The identified parents were asked to come to one convenient place where they were interviewed. Either mother or father in the household was selected depending on their availability for the interview.

Data Analysis

A master sheet was prepared for coding and scoring individual responses. Similar ideas were categorized to identify the expectations and their frequencies and percentages recorded. From the tables, content analysis was done. Descriptive analysis of data was then done thematically.

RESULTS

Results from this survey, along with explanations of what is referred to in the tables are presented below. This data was collected from a very small section of parents in Uganda and is being used to show that there are other set of standards that

need to be carefully considered as we develop the early learning standards. A broader study including more parents especially at the age validation may show further results to improve the draft early learning standards. A total of 160 participants were reached in this study (See Table 1). These included parents, elders and community teachers.

Table 1. Participants in the Study

Region	Parents	Elders	Community caregivers	Total
Central	20	10	10	40
Eastern	20	10	10	40
Northern	20	10	10	40
Southern	20	10	10	40
Total	80	40	40	160

A total of 80 parents, 40 elders and 40 community teachers were reached and participated in the study. Parents of those children in the age category identified were included, the elders whose opinions are followed by the parents and the caregivers who take care of the children while parents do their daily business.

Parental expectations of children at 3 years

Results from the survey show that parents have different expectations for their children at the age of 3 years (see Table 2). Parents expect children at the age of 3 years to effectively communicate their needs, socialize with peers, show appropriate toilet habits, recognize familiar people in their environment, identify themselves and recognize their environment.

Table 2. Parental expectations of children at the age of 3 years

Expectations	Frequency	Percentage
Communicate needs effectively	45	28.1
Socialize with peers	37	23.1
Show appropriate toilet habits	28	17.5
Recognize people in the environment	20	12.5
Identify themselves	16	10.0
Recognize their environment	14	8.8
Total	160	100

Most of the parents interviewed (28.1%) expected their children to be able communicate their needs more effectively by the age of 3 years. They also expect these children to understand common sign language used in their environment, and be fluent in their mother tongue. Children at this age are also expected to socialize with their peers and have close friends. If a child fails to go out with these peers, such a child is considered immature or spoiled by the parents. Parents also expect children by the age of 3 years to show appropriate toilet habits like using the toilet/latrines independently, cleaning self after using latrine/toilet, and dressing after using toilet. At this age, parents also expect their children to recognize common people in their environment beyond family members. Such people may include local leaders, religious leaders, caregivers, vendors, neighbours and relatives who do not live in the same home with them. By the age of 3 years, parents expect their children to tell who they are by gender, age, name and tribe. Parents also expect the children to tell the names of the parents, and where they live.

Children by the age of 3 years are expected to know their immediate environment and what is done in different areas in their environment. They should be able to move from one location to the other easily without getting lost.

Parental expectations of children at 6 years

By the age of 6 years, parental expectations of their children changed as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Parental expectations of children at 6 years

Expectations	Frequency	Percentage
Respect elders	33	20.6
Clean self	25	15.6
Home chores	19	11.8
Effectively communicate in local language	18	11.3
Know their Culture	17	10.6
Socialize with peers	16	10.0
Defend self	16	10.0
Have an income generating project	16	10.0
Total	160	100

Most of the parents (20.6%) expected their children at the age of 6 years to show respect to elders. Respect and discipline came out very strongly as parental expectation of children at the age of 6 years. Parents emphasized that it is at this stage that a child has to show respect which is interpreted as discipline. Respect here includes; appropriate greeting, use of appropriate language when talking to elders, being in appropriate posture like kneeling for girls or bowing for boys and avoiding looking in the face of an elder when communicating with him/her. Parents emphasized that at this stage, children can now tell right from wrong and therefore corporal punishment should be encouraged to ensure that unwanted habits are discouraged as early as possible. In terms of personal hygiene, parents interacted with expected their children by the age of 6 years to bath alone with little or no help from adults. These children are expected to brush their teeth, comb their hair, wash their face, apply Vaseline on themselves and dress themselves. In case of ill health, they are expected to report their condition to their parents or guardians. They also expect them to dress their beds, wash their pants, stockings and handkerchiefs.

Parents emphasized that by the age of 6 years, they expected their children to participate in doing home chores like fetching water, participating in cleaning the home, running errands, minding younger siblings, participating in farming or tending to livestock, and cooking light foods. In fact, parents noted that people in the community would be surprised if a parent was seen going to fetch water when she/he has young children. This is because things like fetching water, minding siblings and looking after domestic animals is a reserve for children from the age of 5 -15 years. Effective communication in the local language is another critical parental expectation. They expect the children not only to be fluent in their local languages but also understand and use sayings, proverbs, and terms. In most cases, parents take pride in using proverbs. They are therefore disappointed if their children cannot interpret the proverbs or act according to show they have understood the proverb or saying.

Show an understanding of common cultural practices like their totems, cultural regalia, dressing, greetings, initiation ceremonies they are to participate in, common medicinal plants, traditional food dishes unique to their culture, use of various instruments, equipment or utensils in their home. Socialization with peers was also named as a parental expectation of children by the age of 6 years. Parents expect their children at that age to belong to an age group within their environment. These peers are seen as positive influence to the child depending on what behaviour they promote. If a child is not seen to be in the company of his/her age group, such a child would be labeled anti-social. By the age of six years, parents also expect their children to show skills of self defense for example, a child is expected to report any incidence that is harmful to him/her to adults, raise alarm or respond to warning signs shown in the community, avoid company of adults unless told to be with them, show some fighting skills and bravery especially boys, by participating in mock fights. Children by the age of six years are also expected by their parents to show initiative of starting their own income generating projects. For example parents usually allocate to the child a personal chick to rear, a calf or a garden. This child is then given the responsibility of taking care of that item as his/her own. In the end, whatever proceeds that will be generated from the sale of that item/animal will be left to the child to decide what to do with it. Children who will not take the initiative to make follow up for the items allocated to them by their parents are always seen as a disappointment to the parents. Survival of children's projects is also seen by parents as prediction of the child's future success or failure in life.

Parental expectations of methods of teaching

Parents interviewed expected their children to be taught and helped to learn in different ways as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Parental expectation of approaches to learning

Expectations	Frequency	Percentage
Apprenticeship	65	40.6
Simulations	38	23.8
Demonstration	23	14.4
Project	21	13.1
Discovery	08	5.0
Stories	05	3.1
Total	160	100

Most parents (40.6%) expected their children to learn through apprenticeship. Parents believed that children would learn better if they worked together with a skilled person in a real life situation like pottery, vending, motor garage, farm, or carpentry workshop. Most of the parents who were withdrawing their children from school took them to stay with people they admired. They believed that as the child stayed helping such a person, the child would also be able to acquire the skills of the person and later in life start a business project that is similar to the one of the trainer. The parents also believed that through apprenticeship, children were able to immediately see and appreciate the benefits of education in a real world. Parents also expected their children to learn better through simulations. In the simulations, parents preferred their children to be put in situations that are very near real life situations for them to learn. For example, in the case of hunters, children would be given small spears and taken to the

bush to hunt. While there, a wheel would be rolled in their direction to symbolize an animal to be speared. The child who spears it would be considered a better hunter for the day. In every learning situation, parents expect the teacher to first demonstrate a skill to be learnt as children watch. After the demonstration, the children are then expected to emulate. Parents were not happy with teachers who simply did every thing for their children without letting them experience 'tough' situations. For example, if a child fell down, the teacher is expected to first ignore him/her and let the child cope alone instead of rushing to it. The parents also wanted teachers to use guided discovery for teaching children. They believed that it was not good to do everything for children. Parents wanted teachers to provide opportunity for children to discover how certain things work on their own as long as safety is ensured in the process of discovery. As a way of improving children's mental capabilities, reasoning and passing on information from adults to children, parents argued that it was not a good idea to tell children plain facts. They wanted children to be told information in parables, wise sayings or through stories to stimulate their mental abilities.

DISCUSSION

If far reaching decisions will be made basing on early learning standards, it must be done right. This therefore calls for careful considerations of all that we stand for and include them in standards that are comprehensive, accommodative and inclusive of all children. The following discussion addresses the issues and policy implications for them.

Issues

Whereas school based standards emphasize more cognitive aspects taught within the classroom, parental standards emphasize socio-cultural, life skills and moral behaviour. Most activities revolve around local environments seen outside the school in form of hunting of birds and squirrels, fishing, swimming, milking of goats, boat building, tree climbing, basketry, fruits gathering and stories and games (Ng'asike, 2011). The erosion of culture in African children therefore, begins in preschool education which continues to be in the hands of the missionaries and NGOs which operate as custodians and agents of western Euro-American culture in Africa (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008). Thus continued insistence on school based standards alone implies that African children will continuously be alienated from their culture which the school based system perceives as barbaric, archaic, primitive and the cause of cognitive deficiency in school children (Dyer, 2006; Ntaragwi, 2004).

The core of the African early learning and development standards should be hinged on cultural and parental standards that have withstood the test of time. The cultural curriculum in itself is very rich and broad covering ten focused areas that include livestock education, crop production, peace and security, human health and other relevant subjects (Licht, 2008). The school based school based expectations as being proposed in the ELDS revolves around only five limited areas that include physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, cognition and general knowledge (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005).

The new ELDS, if it has to be respected, must be African in nature. It does not matter even if the process is being guided by an international expert from the west. The proliferation of brand-name programs touted as “best practices” based on the authority of Euro-western science or simply on persuasive marketing of training, toys, tools and teaching techniques (Fleer, 2003; Kincheloe, 2000) must not be allowed. Most parents consistently have differing ideas from schools on what the curriculum should encompass (Freer, 2009). This is because ideals of the west that have been transferred to African schools are not necessarily African ideals. Parents, currently, are still willing to take some children to these schools as they argue that it is better to stand with two legs (Krätli, 2001). This may, however, not continue for long if these schools continue teaching meaningless content and make children fail national exams because the knowledge tested is school culture or middle class urban culture that is not culturally relevant to their ways of life (Ng’asike, 2011).

This study established that there were some differences in focus between parental and school based standards. These difference may be attributed to the fact that child rearing practice in most communities including Uganda is more ‘controlling’ and ‘authoritarian’ as it is embedded in a cultural ‘tradition’ that European Americans in the west do not necessarily share (Sharma, Vaid, & Dhawan, 2004). Therefore, in order to help the process and go by the ‘normal’ trends, there is need to blend the two standards into one comprehensive hybrid that favours African diversity. This blend of indigenous knowledge in the standards will ensure endorsement and respect of the standards by all ECD service providers in most African communities. Use of this approach will also prevent early learning standards from becoming more specific to preschoolers, but rather aimed at young children more generally (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009). Otherwise, if DES goes a head and focuses on school based standards alone as it seems to now, schools implementing the school based standards alone may face larger societal, cultural, and ideological problems (Schubert, 1986).

Parents in this study were concerned that some schools were eroding their culture by ‘drilling’ their children with western culture. Some of these schools, instead of focusing on promoting African heritage, revolved around use of different unregulated media other than close child-adult interaction (Dodge, Petit, Bates, & Valente, 1995). Parents emphasized that their children should be more exposed as early as possible to their cultural heritage and way of life. They were opposed to over academic programmes that were being implemented in some schools. Parents want school programmes to be more relaxed, and dwell more on cultural aspects. This finding is in line with that of Kontos *et al.* (1994), who found that parents prefer family-based programs that are more flexible about children’s schedules and formal learning activities, and provide more positive adult-child interactions. Therefore, failure to recognize and mesh co-existing ECD heritages in Africa today into culturally meaningful and contextually appropriate service systems will be a major impediment to providing African children with a good start in life (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). The process of developing a comprehensive and an acceptable early learning and development standards requires constant consultations and

involvement of all stakeholders at different stages instead of insisting on one perspective. The Directorate of Education Standards is using across section of ECD professionals from different school based institutions to draft the ELDS. Later, selected parents and community leaders were asked to ‘look through’ a 100 page document in 30 minutes to see if it caters for their expectations in the content validation. This experience alone tilts the draft standards largely towards school based expectations with little parental expectations as the design dictates. This will not help us in Uganda. Experience shows that parents desire schools that accommodate learning differences rather than promoting a “one best system” approach (Davies & Quirke, 2005). Thus parents will always choose schools that address their aspirations for their children (Pinar, 2004; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). DES must go back and make this process more participatory by allowing parents in the rural areas originate their ideas and document them so as to form the core of the standards. The experts can come later to refine the standards into identified categories and areas. This involvement will also works as an endorsement procedure of the standards by different stakeholders and lay a good foundation for later implementation and sustainability (Bodrova, *et al.*, 2004). The current trends in early childhood development put parents as their children’s first teachers and should arrange preschool learning at home to prepare them for the classroom (Beckert, Strom, Strom, Yang, Huang & Lin, 2004). Use of the grass root parents in identifying what standards they expect of their children works to moderate their expectations so that they do not underestimate or overestimate the learning potential of young children (Bodrova, *et al.*, 2004). Also, since children belong to communities in the African context, it is important to engage families and communities in discussions that help to shape (early learning) standards (Bodrova, *et al.*, 2004).

Conclusion

There are no more such things as ‘best practices’ that can be used as one template to solve ECD related issues. We can all experience different childhoods and end up with a better childhood. In the African context, cultural and parental expectations should be the foundation up on which school based expectations can be blended. If this is done, we shall have a comprehensive standard that will be widely accepted and respected by all stakeholders. Use of such standard will ensure holistic development of children. While funding agencies are important in providing the necessary funds to kick start ECD programmes and activities, the beneficiaries should insist that the funds are not used to divert them from the core of their roles, ‘promoting holistic African childhoods’. Therefore, development of standards needs to be done from bottom to top and not the other way round in the African context. The technical team and the funding agency can only decide on the domains to be used to collect all standards from the grass root parents and other key stakeholders. It is only after this that the technical team can start to look at the standards and categorize them where they fit. Otherwise, content validation of already drafted standards is only done by the elites who are already school based biased. The lower level parents will in most cases agree with what has been drafted because they do not want to contradict highly placed people. Constant involvement of communities in standards development raises their awareness on their role in

early childhood, incorporates their concerns in children's development and becomes part of the standards endorsement and later implementation plan.

Implication for Policy

Ministry of Education and Sports

Parental standards are different from school based standards in nature and emphasis. Therefore, there must be a deliberate policy to have home grown programmes and standards that cater for cultural diversity of Africans. Continued transfer of 'best practices' from the west, especially those practices that have strings attached must be avoided.

Directorate of Education Standards (DES)

It may not be possible to use only one standard for ECD in Uganda because of the different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in it. Rather, after the first draft, there is need to have more specific standards across the seven ethnic regions in Uganda so that ELDS can serve its purpose. Short of this, we may continue to impose alien local cultures and expectations within the country from the dominant groups to minorities.

It is not easy to change the minds of people who have been used to doing the same thing for a long time. It therefore implies that for the purpose of endorsement, linkages and implementation, there must be wide consultations and involvement of key stakeholders at all levels. They must be made part of the process as the core team moves from drafting through validation and refining of standards if the standards are to be accepted and used.

Communities

The basis of ELDS is that it should contain our expectations of our children at different stages of development. Therefore, communities who are to use the ELDS must be the principal contributors and not experts who have experience in the west. If this is done, it will assure parents that they are important stakeholders and their expectations have been incorporated in the early learning standards.

Future Research

Early learning and development standard is still a relatively new concept in many African countries and communities. This study was exploratory in nature with the hope that DES will go out and cover more areas of the country so as to carefully identify all the salient Ugandan cultures, best practices and expectations by African standards so that they can be incorporated to produce a more acceptable early learning standards.

There are still many parents who are refusing to take their children to school for various reasons. It is important that more research in this area is conducted to establish their reasons for keeping their children away from school. If these concerns are discovered and addressed, it may promote better school enrolment and retention in these communities.

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