

Title: Achieving Optimal Early Childhood Development through enhanced Collective Care and Grounded Early Childhood Education in Madagascar

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Abstract

One of main challenges to achieving the goals of optimal early childhood development, care and pre-primary education for all in 2030, as stated in the S^Cdvoy eo aaent, care



Introduction

Education remains one of the most basic needs and yet, highly unattainable that guarantee a reasonable level of welfare and wellbeing recognised under human rights as due to all of humanity. It seems incredible that in this century, many children in most LDCs are still denied this open door to human dignity as they lack full and equal access to health, education, water, energy, ICT. Looking at education and care more particularly, researchers and social thinkers from the Global South have for the last decades advocated for contextualised early childhood care and education (ECCE) (Marfo et al. 2008; Nsamenang and Pence 2008 ; Harkness et al. (2009). ‘Children must be empowered from an early age to become the authors of their own lives’ (UNICEF 2013). These words, which summarise the essence of responsible parenting and home-based ECD, draw the main line for this study as they map out the very aims and targets of all early years care and education provision regardless of culture and economic status. This advocacy stems from the fact that children in this part of the world have often been left behind within the globalised narratives on ECD (Harkness et al. 2011; Akkari et al. 2016; Ebrahim, Okwany and Barry 2019). Thus, calling forth urgent and active measures in order to carry these young children’s voices onto the mainstream arena of education and care and to valorise indigenous knowledge. There is also the timely need of our contemporary context which requires a general shift in education and caregiving from the exclusive hands of trained ‘experts’ to the midst of collaborative communities who are only asking to be involved in the future of their homes and the planet (Okwany et al. 2016). Notwithstanding the urgent need for support that parents are experiencing due the toll added by the pandemic context on the already existing hardships of poverty.

According to the early childhood development countdown to 2030 (UNESCO’s Country report on ECCE in Madagascar, 2006 ; www.nurturingcare.org, 2019), Madagascar lacks certain key data in order to build a facilitating environment of laws, policies, services and community support to assist parents and caregivers in providing their young children with nurturing care. Indeed, having the necessary data on access of young Malagasy children to OECD can inform policy makers as to what is already present and what requires reforming in the pre-existing educational system. The outcomes of this study will contribute in informing policy-makers as to the strengths and weaknesses of the established education strategies; encourage the establishment of collective care centres for young children in order to get convinced and committed parents to provide their offspring with optimal and sustained



growth. These reforms are expected to help Madagascar align with the other African countries that have already piloted this type of structure and managed to advance within OECD.

Using a mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis, the present paper proposes to explore the state of nurturing care, responsive caregiving, as well as early learning and stimulation at home through the survey of the beliefs and practices of a sample of parents in order to



the difficult and complex task of providing their young children with adequate care and



2. ECD in homes and care centres

Besides a facilitating environment of laws and policies which are either already in place but not fully implemented or not made available to parents; one of the most important elements of ECD where Madagascar lacked data and which the survey covered are that of nurturing care and responsive caregiving. Beyond care per se, the first element refers to the state of early learning: stimulation at home, type of playthings and games, attendance in ECD, which are dependent on the quality time parents are spending with their child in addition to reading and the availability of books within homes. As for the second element, it encompasses parents' awareness on ECD as revealed through public information; parental mental health where parental cooperation and an equal division of care have been taken into account; parent support through group talks or home visits; as well as access to quality child day care. The last point has been given particular attention as care facilities and services have been a major issues raised by parents and caregivers. Whenever they need to step outside for a side job or to run any errand, parents rely heavily on community to keep an eye on their children. Extended relatives, uncles and aunts, even older siblings and especially grandparents contribute a lot to the home care and nurturing of young children in the Malagasy educational context along with circles and network of friends and neighbours.

Indeed, even when day care centres exist in the neighbourhood and are accessible, most parents will not be able to afford the cost that tends to be exaggeratingly expensive. Despite the increase in schooling attendance rate, the monthly cost of day-care services vary a lot depending on the quality of services on offer as well as the neighbourhood where they are situated (between USD 6.60 = Ar 25 000 and USD 92.46 = Ar 350 000 according to the parental forum Kilonga.com: <https://kilonga.wordpress.com/creches-et-garderies/>). These amounts sound astronomical in contrast with daily household income (USD 0.66667 = Ar 2523.69) as per the World Bank report for 2020 which ranked Madagascar among the 3 poorest countries of the world. Parents are unemployed or are too absorbed with fending for the family, scraping bits and pieces of money here and there for food and clothes, to be able to provide an adequate education to their children (Rapanoel 2013, Randriamasitiana 2015). The majority of the population is living in extreme poverty and precarious conditions rendering them particularly vulnerable and unable to ensure the wellbeing and welfare of their own homes in spite of a strong will.

The precariousness of households is heightened by the Covid-19 context since many parents, especially those who depended on the informal sectors, lost their jobs, found their bread-



winning activities cut or had to take on other jobs to make ends meet. A telling example would be the case of a respondent that we will call Sara. Sara



and international organisations) as to their respective roles and inputs. A concern for the need to reinforce the localised aspects of education through the valorisation of Malagasy identity and culture, which fosters respect for elders, civic obligations and positive discipline, has



A closer look at the survey data will tell us more about the details of parenting practices



parents are at work or out for any reasons, children are left with family members or neighbours (54,5 %); recourse to professional and specialised institutions such as a nanny or a day care facility (23 %) is not a common practice. This is where community solidarity and support play a significant role in ECCE. A child cognitive development and early stimulation is entrusted in many hands, whether the hands are skilled or not. Parents have to rely on trust when it comes to leaving their kids with others since they do not have much alternatives.

This system of support and collaboration, though neither established nor recognised at a formal level, alleviates much of parents' responsibilities and pressure from time-consuming nurture care, especially working parents. Without this system of collaborative care and education, which is a form of co-parenting (Marfo et al. 2008; Harkness et al. 2009), many parents who have to make money and to attend to other duties will never be able to manage. Such a system should be explored and valorised as they contribute a lot in shaping and informing ECD for the vulnerable populations in LDCs.

Chart 2: Contrastive responsive caregiving

Source: Countdown to ECD, country profile, Oct 2020 (www.nurturing-care.org)

Source: Zanafy survey 2021

As public information about ECD is very limited (chart 2), parents are more or less left on their own with disciplining and inculcating values to their children despite help from extended family and community at large. Wyc



control due to fast-evolving technology and the influence of globalisation; and so, children need a stronger disciplining. The majority of parents (40 %) would first try verbal admonition or another type of punishment such as no snacks or grounded in the house for minor infractions. Some also used a form of pinching that are associated with grandmothers, 'tsongo' or 'tsipindy' (5 %)



deal with homework; there is no doubt as to the impacts of such a change in attitude and practice on the sustained wellbeing of the child.

2.3 Early learning and stimulation

In this section, attention is particularly focused on aspects of early learning and stimulation of the child at home. Though the economic and financial status of each household considerably define and limit the access of children to things such as playthings and books, informants' responses have shown that children are being stimulated with what objects or activities parents have at hand. This could cover colourful and musical play 'objects' as odd and singular as bottles, leaves and plants or cardboard as much as traditional games and nursery rhymes that are used to amuse and occupy the child.

The chart below indicates the rate of real or theorised improvements recorded in the field of early learning and stimulation at home:

Chart 3: Contrastive early learning

Source: Countdown to ECD, country profile, Oct 2020
(www.nurturing-care.org)

Source: Zanafy survey 2021

Given the expensive prices of books, the culture of reading has come to be associated by

Malagasy people

Malagasy identity and cultural side of the child. Some parents will take as option country-specific or fairy tales (15 %) considering that these are conceptually fit for young children. In any case, the curiosity, the stimulation and cognitive or emotional development associated with the book are rarely taken into account. Following the same pattern, when it comes to buying clothes, shoes



It is highly recommended to find this leader from the community of traditional or religious leaders who remain pillars of influence in the eyes of parents when it comes to education. As the data shows, within a context where unreliable political leaders and corrupted systems seem to prevail, the majority of parents (61,5 %) are dotting on religion and age old cultural values on which they can put their trust as the basic guiding principles in their parenting practices.

Besides the lack of public information on ECD, another priority is the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of access to support and services related to ECCE. Action here needs to address specifically the vulnerable and low-income families that are most often crowding the poor rural or semi-urbanised areas. These populations require proper services and facilities that are cost effective. Hence, the concept of a community-based or collective care centre. Not only does community-based centres considerably reduce the cost for ECE funding at a national level; but they will also allow parents and caregivers, who are among the primary stakeholders to children's education and care, to own the major aims of the integration of ECE into the educational system and fully engage in its successful achievement.

In the model of the care services provided in structures such as the Home Garden, the community pre-primary centres in the Republic of Cabo Verde; or the more modernised ECE Facilities of Tanzania which provide food, health and adequate materials and learning; the Collective Care Centres (3C) will provide inclusive and localised access to early stimulation and early learning for all Malagasy children aged 0-5. In order for the 3C to be convincing in the eyes of parents and caregivers, their full awareness and ownership are key. The belief that children are the most important wealth and duty of a nation is still very strongly held among Malagasy parents: '*Voalohan-karena ny zanaka*' (Randriamasitiana 2015:53). A belief that will ensure their voluntary participation and engagement for the success of the project. Any collective care endeavour has to be participatory and local-based as suggests the required ingredients for all equitable, impacting and sustainable form of change and development (Escobar 2008). A position which is reinforced by David Korten when he stated that development actions must be people-centred; calling on 'external development partners to support objectives chosen by the people, building communities' capacity to manage resources and meet local needs independently.'(1984) Indeed, just like parents and stakeholders from the other LDCs, Malagasy parents' full commitment to the goals of ECD will be boosted barden,



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