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Interventions that Matter Start with Local Cultures: Issues and Strategies in Early Childhood Care and Education Interventions in Africa

Credit: National Today (https://nationaltoday.com/international-day-of-the-african-child/)

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List of Acronyms

CWG	Core Working Group
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PDB	Participant of Diverse Background
PDIE	Planning, Designing, Implementation, and Evaluation
RA	Research Assistant
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WEIRD	Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic

Definitions

Community	A group of people who share a common heritage, mode of life, values, customs, worldview, or needs who may or may not occupy the same geographical location.
Cultural artifacts	Physical or nonphysical resources resulting from a particular human institution, including language, music, stories, games, toys, foods, and medicines.
Culturally relevant ECCE Intervention	An intervention that aims to understand community aspirations for their children, and collaboratively design and implement ECCE interventions based on this understanding, while also respecting the community ways of living and offering skills that are relevant locally and globally.
Early Childhood	For the purposes of this resource, early childhood is defined as the period of life beginning from about age one (1) to about age eight (8).
ECCE Implementers	Non-profit organizations, international donors, program implementers, and government ministries working in the ECCE space.
Formal Schooling	Structured public education provided in a classroom setting by the government or a private provider, often using the curriculum designed by the government.
Participants of Diverse Backgrounds	A group of non-profit leaders, teachers, ministry officials, psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers in relevant sectors including education, economics, public health, and paediatrics based in Africa who contributed to this resource.
Project Cycle	The cycle of planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating an intervention – PDIE in acronym.

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Executive Summary

Introduction. Child development is a biocultural project, as caregivers seek to raise their children to be successful in their unique cultural environment. Developmental milestones, dynamics, and pathways vary across cultures. As such, early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs have a responsibility to ensure relevance to, and ownership by, beneficiary children and caregivers. The rise of so-called global frameworks for ECCE often inadvertently serve to characterize communities in non-Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries (and in Africa in particular) as lacking conducive home environments and knowledge to support optimal child development. The research underpinning these frameworks largely originated from WEIRD contexts. We assert that basing ECCE programming on these frameworks neglects indigenous wisdom and replicates cultural imperialism. Community ownership in ECCE programming helps promote respect for human agency of the beneficiaries, avoid colonialism of concepts and procedures, build upon local resources, and meet real community needs. This ultimately bolsters the success and sustainability of ECCE programmes.

Guiding principles. This resource draws from desk research and workshops as well as interviews with experts in ECCE in Africa to lay out guiding principles for ensuring cultural relevance in ECCE programming, as well as strategies for each stage of the program cycle. Culturally relevant ECCE programs should support children to form a cultural identity, while also preparing them to thrive in the formal schooling environment. They must extend ECCE access to underserved groups. Programs should respect local cultural values around early childhood and strike a balance of pursuing locally relevant and globally applicable ECCE objectives. ECCE interventions should target specific desirable developmental outcomes for children as well as their caregivers. There is already consensus on the value of incorporating local language and cultural elements (like stories) into ECCE programs. This resource calls on practitioners and policy makers to respect culture on a deeper level by understanding and incorporating community values and priorities around child development, and by working within and alongside local implementers.

Cultural responsiveness in the program cycle. Responsive programs are designed by, and not for, communities. Community representatives should play meaningful roles at all stages of the programme cycle. At the planning stage, community leadership is critical, centring the community in the process of identifying target outcomes and the strategies to achieve them. This includes conducting a needs assessment, involving government and community-level gatekeepers, and engaging local stakeholders in community consultations. At the design

stage, design teams should build the program from the ground up based on needs assessment findings, rather than retrofit existing models to the new context. Design teams should include diverse representation from the community, particularly from underserved subgroups. The design process should take an assets-based approach, leveraging available human and material resources, as well as community values and practices, towards achieving ECCE objectives. Programme goals and audiences should be specific and targeted, especially with regards to expected behaviour changes. Subgroups in the community, particularly women, youth, people with disabilities, and minority groups, may require nuanced strategies to equitably meet their needs.

Community leadership is key to effective implementation of culturally relevant ECCE programming. Regular cycles of implementation, evaluation, and adaptation ensure program quality improves over time by allowing programme teams to capture positive deviance, respond to changing realities, hone the model for sustainability, and incorporate lessons learned into future iterations. The implemented model should deliver culturally relevant content, including indigenous language(s), materials, value systems, and practices. Implementation should strive not for fidelity to the initial model, but for responsiveness to community needs and aspirations which may change over time. Evaluations should involve community members in data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings, and should leverage existing community structures such as common gathering areas and weekly schedules. Given the predominance of quantitative evaluation tools developed and validated in WEIRD contexts, and the risk of carrying over cultural assumptions in adapting these tools to African contexts, we recommend qualitative or mixed methods to evaluate programme effectiveness. Evaluations should aim not at comparability of findings, but at meaningfulness of findings to the community and to the central questions of the study.

Conclusions. ECCE programming is an opportunity to invest in the future of children, caregivers, and communities to thrive in their own cultural environment and beyond. Interventions designed without community involvement perpetuate the cultural imperialism of colonial and missionary history. Indigenous cultures are integral part of the 21st century, and ECCE programmes must be rooted in respect for community values, priorities, and practices. We hope this resource demonstrates that there exist expertise, examples of strong programs, and concrete approaches to ensuring cultural relevance in ECCE.

1.0 Introduction

1.1Background, Purpose, and Structure of the Resource

The purpose of this resource is to provide practical strategies for designing and carrying out early childhood care and education (ECCE) programming with – and not for – communities. Our audience is ECCE implementers: international development donors, policymakers, program implementers, and government ministries. The resource offers strategies for understanding community aspirations for children, and collaboratively designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that respect community ways of living while offering skills that are relevant locally and globally.

To source practical strategies, we conducted a literature review of ECCE programs in Africa and interviewed practitioners of various programs that seek to ensure cultural relevance. This resource is highly practical. It links research and intervention practices and brings together researchers and practitioners with on-the ground experience in culturally relevant ECCE. The resource has two main components: a literature review on cultural relevance in ECCE, and principles and strategies drawn from interviews with practitioners in the field of culturally relevant ECCE. We also provide a list of key issues of focus (see **Appendix A**) to guide the process of ensuring cultural relevance in ECCE programming in Africa.

The role of donors and international nonprofit organizations vis-à-vis the community tends to seem hierarchical, with funders and their direct partners having decision-making power over program design, including what they would include from the community. Participation can be enacted by involving some community members as local experts who are chosen by the community itself for their wealth of knowledge about the local childrearing practices; such persons should participate in the decision-making process at all the stages of the project cycle. Similarly, ECCE implementers should work with the community to identify local needs that differ from initial program objectives, in order to adapt the program to real needs and build stronger buy-in.

2.0 Cultural Influence on Child Development

2.1 Introduction

In developing this resource, we used a *people-centred approach* to development, as ECCE interventions can be conceptualised as vehicles for delivering social transformations. Consistent with the person-centred approach, Korten (1990, p.67) defines development as "a process by which the members of society increase their personal and institutional capacities

to mobilise and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life, consistent with their own aspiration." Thus, ECCE programming is a process by which community members "increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilise and manage" local resources (e.g., linguistic, communicative, material, situated cognitions of everyday living, etc.) to "produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements" in the quality of life for children and adults in a manner consistent with their own aspirations and ways of living (Korten, 1990, p.67).

This resource also applies the *human activity system analysis* (Engeström, 1987, van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2013a), particularly in need assessment and implementation. With respect to ECCE, the human activity system comprises the *subject* (young children and parents or caregivers who are the target of the intervention); *a community* (local individuals with shared interest in childcare), *tools* (naturally-occurring and human-modified resources in the community); *rules* (spoken and unspoken regulations, values, conventions and norms); *division of labour* (assigned roles and power relations in the family and community at large); *an object* (aspects of childcare in the community needing improvements); and the expected *outcome* (targeted improvements in ECCE to arise out of the intervention (Vlaenderen & Neves, 2013a). These elements should be identified and discussed thoroughly at each stage of the program cycle of planning, design, implementation, and evaluation, in collaboration with the local community. Program teams should identify and facilitate consensus-building when conflicts and contradictions arise between the activity system and the intended intervention and among the subsystems (elements of the activity system), as well as among stakeholders with various roles and power relations in the system.

Use of local childcare knowledge in ECCE is essential for cultural relevance. Using local knowledge "as inspiration for the development process does not, however, imply an uncritical acceptance of all local knowledge as worthy of preservation and a rejection of all external knowledge… as inferior." (van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2013b, p.453). There are "many examples of the shortcomings of local knowledge as well as the pragmatic usefulness of external knowledge." (van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2013b, p.453). We encourage program teams to work with local communities to assess the strengths and shortcomings of local and external knowledge and combine both knowledge systems in the pursuit of desirable ECCE outcomes. In cases where communities decry local ECCE practices, we encourage users of this resource to work with communities to identify alternative approaches to complement, substitute, displace or modify them. Alternative practices (or the central ideas constituting the practice) must still be indigenous and serve to achieve the same or improved purpose as the

undesired practices. Attempts should not be made to privilege external knowledge over the local knowledge on the principles of childcare, as is often the tendency among international development donors, policymakers, and ECCE implementers, as well as government ministries. However, we acknowledge the usefulness of biomedical and other related knowledge in ECCE when contextualised.

2.2 Defining culture

Culture is a complex term with multiple definitions (see Bennett, 2015; Hofstede, 2001; Raeff et al., 2020; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Hofstede (1994, p.5) has defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." Spencer-Oatey (2008, p.3) views culture as "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour." Similarly, Kluckhohn and Kelly (1945, p.97) defined culture as "all those historically created designs for living, explicit, implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of men". Culture is the way a group of people lives including their religious practices as well as the totality of their life's pattern. The debates on the definition of culture mostly revolve around whether culture refers to shared values and beliefs alone or if it refers to both shared ideas and shared behaviours (Harris, 1999; Hofstede, 2001). Overall, culture has been treated in two ways: 1) as a mental or cognitive phenomenon constitutive of what members of a social group "know, believe, think, understand, feel or mean about what they do" and 2) behaviourally in terms of actual or observed actions as opposed to what people say they do or expect to do (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p.22).

Cultural variations can be linked to contextual parameters, which form specific milieus. Formal educations seem to be an organizer of different cultural milieus. One of these milieus has been studied extensively: Western middle-class families with a high level of formal education, late entry into parenthood, few children, and nuclear households. Despite dominating published research, this milieu only constitutes about 5% of the world population, leaving other cultural contexts comparatively understudied (Nielsen et al., 2018). There is some published research available about children's early socialization environment in the cultural milieu of rural farming societies in non-Western countries. Individuals in this context often hold a lower degree of formal education, become parents early in life, have many children, and live in extended multigenerational households (see Keller & Kärtner, 2013).

International ECCE interventions tend to target the latter milieu yet be informed by the psychology of the former and designed by people who originate from the former milieu. It is important to recognize that countries cannot be equated with cultural milieus, as they host multiple cultural milieus and diverse populations. It is equally important to understand that the aforementioned rural milieu is not a deficit variant of the Western middle-class milieu of a society, but is rather just another cultural model.

Spencer-Oatey (2012) has outlined the following as the key characteristics of culture: 1) culture manifests at different layers of depth including observable artefacts and behaviours, values, basic underlying assumptions, 2) culture affects behaviour and its interpretations, 3) culture (learned and specific to a group or subgroup) can be differentiated from both universal human nature (inherited and universal) and unique individual personality (both inherited and learned but specific to individuals), 4) it influences biological processes, 5) it is associated with social groups, 6) it is both an individual construct and a social construct such that it is a group-level construct with individual differences, 7) it is dynamic, 8) it is a descriptive not an evaluative concept, 9) it is not homogenous, 10) it is not uniformly distributed among members of a group. Table 1 below lays out several theoretical models of culture.

Credit: Humanium (https://www.humanium.org/en/the-day-of-the-african-child-2020-child-friendly-justice-in-africa/shutterstock_667950202/)

Table 1: Some models of culture

	Schein's Levels-of-Culture	Hofstede's Dimension of National Culture	Douglas' Grip-Group Typology	Triandis' Vertical vs. Horizontal/Individualism vs. Collectivism Typology
Summary	Schein (2004) argues that there are three levels at which culture manifests: artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and underlying assumptions.	Hofstede (1994, 2011) presented a framework that distinguishes national cultures along six dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long term versus short term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint.	Douglas (1978) identified two dimensions long which cultures can be described. These were ***grip*** (whether the members of the social group are allowed limited behavioural options or sufficiently enough liberty to act freely) and ***group*** (whether members of a social group place the interest of their group over and above their personal interests). When the highs and lows of these dimensions are combined, four types of cultural worldviews emerge.	Triandis (1994) argued that culture can be primarily collectivistic or individualistic. However, it can take two forms (vertical and horizontal). Four distinct value orientations emerge when combined (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). These orientations are horizontal individualism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism, and vertical collectivism.
Key components	**Artifacts.** They are the observable elements of the culture that we see, hear and feel such as clothes, language, food, arts, etc. **Espoused values and beliefs.** Espoused	**Power Distance**. This relates to how people in different societies react to the inequality in power. **Uncertainty Avoidance.** This relates to the tolerance for an unknown future. **Individualism versus Collectivism.** It relates to how	**Egalitarian worldview.** It is characterized by a low degree of grip and a high degree of group. Such people prefer to be highly absorbed into their group activities but behavioural options available to them are not limited by the group norms.	**Horizontal individualism.** People in such societies tend to differentiate themselves from other members and tend to be distinct from groups without any desires for achieving a special status. **Vertical individualism.** Such people tend to differentiate themselves

	justifications for those artifacts. **Underlying assumptions.** The 'unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings' that serve as the 'ultimate source of values and actions' (Schein, 2004, p.26).	integrated one is into primary groups. **Masculinity versus Femininity.** It relates to a preference in society for achievement, assertiveness, and material rewards for success as opposed to a preference for cooperation, modesty, and relationships. **Long Term versus Short Term Orientation.** It relates to the choice of focus of one's efforts as focusing on the future or the present and past. **Indulgence versus Restraint.** This relates to the gratification versus control of human desires associated with life enjoyment.	**Hierarchical worldview.** It is characterized by a high degree of both grip and group. Such people belong to highly bonded or communal groups and tend to have limited range of behavioural options (defined by their groups) from which to choose. **Fatalistic worldview.** It is characterized by a low degree of group and a high degree of grip. Such people tend to have limited behavioural options from which to choose and feel restricted by a social group to which they do not feel any sense of belongingness. **Individualistic worldview.** It is characterized by a low degree of both group and grip. Such people tend to prefer not to be embedded in group activities while at the same time, preferring to have unlimited liberty to act freely.	while desiring to achieve a special status through competitions with others. **Horizontal collectivism.** People in such societies tend to value interdependence without any desires easily to submit to authority. **Vertical collectivism.** People in such societies tend to value interdependence as well as competition with out-groups

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Culture

There are different models about or theoretical perspectives on culture (see Table 1). One of the models of culture of relevance to this resource is Schein's (2004) levels of culture analysis. When culture is treated at the level of artifacts, ECCE interventions that strive for cultural relevance tend to only make use of discrete cultural elements such as language, food, songs, rhymes, games, riddles, and tongue twisters. True cultural relevance incorporates the espoused beliefs and values as well as the underlying assumptions of the culture into the ECCE interventions (see Box 1; Keller at al., 2018; Scheidecker et al., 2021).

Box 1: Superficial Treatment of Culture

The teacher at an ECE facility in a low-income, marginalized community might address the parents and elders in their local language, granting them the respect due to a host by a visitor from abroad. She might even include some local songs and games in the curriculum of the facility. But if, at a deeper level, she rejects the host community's child-rearing priorities and principles, preparing the children only for success in school, extracting them from their home community, her engagement with local culture is not genuinely respectful.

Source: Reflections by Robert Serpell, November 29, 2021

This resource is mindful of the need to respect cultural values and norms while acknowledging diversity on the continent and the reality of changing African contexts in the face of globalization. African societies have been characterised as *collectivistic* (Hofstede, 2011), though Gyekye (2003), an African philosopher, argues that it is more appropriate to characterize African cultures as *communal*. Collectivism describes cultures in which the individual is seen as subordinate to a social group such as a state, a nation, a race, or a social class. Communalism describes cultures that integrate communal ownership and unions of highly localized independent communities. However, this characterization is not homogenous nor is it uniformly distributed among Africans. Culture is a complex way of life of a community in a cultural ecology; even in the same community, the members may be diverse in their outlooks. For instance, there are differences between urbanised Africans with more years of schooling and rural Africans with fewer years of schooling (see Bandura, 2018; Jukes et al., 2021b; Keller, 2016). How does one reconcile the fact that Africans with more years of schooling tend to be more individualistic within a communal setting? Keller (2016) provides a useful framework for merging the autonomy of individualism and relatedness of

collectivism or communalism. She is of the view that urbanization and formal education or schooling have the potential to impact autonomy more than the relatedness of an African; therefore, urbanized Africans with more years of schooling tend to fit an "*autonomous relatedness*" description. On the other hand, rural Africans with fewer years of schooling tend to position themselves towards *hierarchical relatedness*. It is expected that as more Africans receive formal education and become urbanized, the cultural orientation of African societies will relate more to autonomous relatedness. The strategies described in this resource prepare programme teams to gather and analyse information at all stages of the programme cycle to ensure responsiveness to evolving cultural norms.

2.4 Early Childhood Care and Education as a Biocultural Project

There is a growing trend towards greater sensitivity to culture in understanding human development (Miller et al., 2021). Child development is a biocultural project, and culture plays a key role in early childhood development (Keller, 2016; Keller at al., 2018; Morelli et al., 2018; Oppong, 2015; Scheidecker et al., 2021; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014; Weisner, 2002; Keller, 2017; Jukes et al., 2021b). Culture is expressed through the goals, expectations, and aspirations of adults in the community for their children as well as behavioural norms and scripts that define everyday practices such as play, discipline, toilet training, socialization, feeding and sleep routines and educational outcomes (Bornstein, 2012; Ejuu et al., 2019; Harkness & Super, 2002; Wadende et al., 2016).

While all stages of human development are critically important, early childhood is a period of rapid physical, cognitive, and socioemotional growth with an impact for future development (see Oppong, 2020a; Hyde & Kabiru, 2006; Irwin et. al., 2007; Richter et. al., 2017). Developmental dynamics, timing of developmental milestones, developmental pathways, and precursors and consequences vary across cultural contexts (Keller & Kärtner, 2013; Weisner, 2002). Biology interacts with culture to influence the type of person a child will grow into as an adult (Nsamenang, 2006). The cultural influences that children are exposed to from birth affect their socioemotional, physical, cognitive, spiritual, and moral development (Abo-Zena & Midgette, 2019; Albert & Trommsdorff, 2014; Shahaeian et al., 2014; Weisner, 2014).

ECCE programming in Africa that applies superficial adaptation of precast frameworks and packages, with minimal integration of indigenous wisdom, is reminiscent of a missionary and colonial past (Shizha, 2015). Efforts to apply so-called universal practices and values to child development in contexts other than those from which those practices originated are ethically

compromised (Keller at al., 2018; Lansford et al., 2016; Morelli et al., 2018; Oppong, 2015; Scheidecker et al., 2021; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014; Weisner, 2002). While formalized ECCE emerged in the nineteenth century through kindergartens, home-based learning centres, and nurseries in much of Europe and the Americas (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007), ECCE has historically been informal and managed by the child's family, general homestead, and community members. Effective and culturally relevant ECCE programmes can contribute to building foundations for responsible and productive members of society.

A case has strongly been made to indigenize ECCE within the African contexts (Oppong, 2015; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014). Leveraging African cultural resources such as stories, games, songs, and dance and the engagement of older children in caring for younger siblings has demonstrated positive outcomes for children (Mukela, 2013). Given the importance of social responsibility in many African contexts, Nsamenang and Lamb (2014) have argued that older children caring for their younger siblings contributes to their intellectual development in their cultural environment. As stimulation comes from extended family and peers, young children's home stimulation in rural African contexts are often richer than urban, nuclear family settings (Scheidecker at al., 2021). Indeed, the nature of family functioning (nature and degree of communication, cohesion and flexibility) has also been shown to support the development of reasoning and math skills, implying that home stimulation is crucial for cognitive development (Lin et al., 2019). Culture influences teaching practices through the pedagogical goals and behavioural patterns that are valued and expected in each cultural context (Jukes et al., 2021b). When teaching practices fail to respond to the cultural context, learning outcomes are compromised. Adaptation of teaching practices must begin with the identifying key principles of learning that underpin pedagogy, followed by adaptation of pedagogical approaches to the cultural context (Jukes et. Al., 2021b).

Using indigenous languages in ECCE increases children's access to indigenous stories, riddles, games, and songs, facilitates children's acquisition of curricular content, offers greater opportunities for parents and community members to participate in implementation, and enhances program sustainability (Benson, 2004; Trudell & Young, 2016; Mukela, 2013; Pence & Shafer, 2006; Schafer et al., 2004). However, many African parents (especially those living in urban areas) prefer and demand instruction in a language of wider communication accorded official status at national level (e.g. English or French), as these

languages offer children an advantage in the postcolonial economy, as described on page 20 of this report (Serpell, 1993; Serpell & Mukela, 2019). Urban and rural families may have differing needs in terms of language. ECCE interventions should undertake community needs assessments to inform planning around language use.

Non-indigenous ECCE and parenting practices and standards in Africa are currently spreading through experts as conduits for propagation of 'global' standards, known as epistemic governance, by large international organizations (see Bekele, 202; Yearley, 2008). These programmes often overstate their evidence base, causing harm to the target communities and their children (Oppong, 2015, 2019; Scheidecker et al., 2021). For example, the research underpinning the Nurturing Care Framework claims that 250 million children worldwide under age five in low and middle-income countries are failing to achieve their developmental potential (Britto et al., 2017; Scheidecker et al., 2021). This number is derived from estimated rates of stunting and poverty, rather than assessments of developmental outcomes (let alone culturally relevant assessments of developmental outcomes). Wide publication of the claim that children across Africa are failing to meet their developmental potential furthers negative portrayals of African communities as poor and inadequate. Organizations that proliferate programs that apply a global standard without adequate contextualization have the intention to do 'good'. However, such international practices continue to perpetuate cultural imperialism in African education systems, negating the indigenous ECCE and parenting practices that are expressed in African histories, literature, and popular culture (Shizha, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to do 'good' better through attending to the culture of African communities at the various stages of the ECCE programming. This resource provides recommendations on how to achieve this at the planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating stages of the program cycle.

3.0 Methodology

This project utilized two methods. First, we conducted interviews with participants of diverse backgrounds (PDBs) and second, we profiled culturally relevant ECCE interventions in Africa. We present the details of each method below.

3.1 Interviews and Analysis

PDBs are individuals with rich field experience in planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating culturally relevant ECCE interventions in Africa. We recruited PDBs from each of

four sub-regions - North, Southern, East, and West & Central Africa (see Table 2 below) – representing Ghana, Botswana, Zambia, Nigeria, The Gambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Tunisia, and Uganda. They represent diverse profiles, including active leaders of local associations, educators, ministry officials, and academics in relevant sectors. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling upon recommendations from members of the project CWG and an officer at the Nairobi-based Africa Early Childhood Network.

Table 2: Participants' Characteristics

Gender	Sub-Region	Institution
Male	Southern Africa	Independent
Male	Southern Africa	Education/Public
Female	West & Central Africa	NGO
Female	West & Central Africa	Public
Female	Southern Africa	Education/Public
Female	East Africa	NGO
Female	East Africa	NGO
Female	East Africa	Education/Public
Female	North Africa	Education/Public
Male	East Africa	NGO
Female	West & Central Africa	Education/Private

n = 11

The interviews were conducted by CWG members and the project leads. The aim of the interviews was to ascertain the PDB's perspectives on how culture has been or can be used to inform ECCE interventions in the PDB's country or sub-region, and especially interventions with which they have been in direct personal contact. Interviews also explored attributes of successful and unsuccessful interventions with varying levels of integration of cultural context. Interviews were conducted in English or French with English translation from research assistants.

To analyse interviews, we applied a "realist/essentialist, inductive, semantic and descriptive approach" to thematic analysis in six-steps (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 226; also see Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcribing interview responses, we 1) read and re-read transcripts and

noted initial ideas, 2) generated the initial codes through segmenting and labelling interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, 3) compiled the codes into potential themes, 4) reviewed the themes, 5) defined and named the themes, and 6) produced a preliminary report.

3.2 Analysis of culturally relevant ECCE interventions in Africa

We identified and evaluated culturally relevant ECCE interventions in the four sub-regions through journal articles, technical reports, government policies and white papers, and PDB interviews. We selected 20 interventions from among 180 screened for each sub-region, resulting in a pool of 80 different culturally relevant interventions. We analysed these interventions to compare their location, sample size, objectives, main components, results, integration of cultural elements, and how these elements contributed to overall success. An empirically driven content analysis approach was used to identify codes and develop themes on how culture was used in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the ECCE interventions (see Stemler, 2015). The themes matched those identified by PDBs, described below under the guiding principles.

3.3 Workshops

We organized a series of workshops in regional sub-groups and with all participants to discuss the findings of the qualitative data analysis. Core working group (CWG) members first led sub-group workshops with PDBs and RAs of each sub-region. We then organized a whole-group workshop at which all the CWG members, PDBs and RAs shared conclusions from each sub-group workshop for discussion and inputs.

4.0 Results

Our analysis resulted in recommendations to ECCE stakeholders for improved cultural relevance. We offer guiding principles that apply to all stages of the program cycle, and strategies that are specific to planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating ECCE interventions in Africa.

4.1 Guiding Principles

Three themes emerged from our thematic analysis: challenges, characteristics, and success indicators of interventions. The guiding principles described below were derived from these themes. Application of these principles can help ECCE-focused organizations, policy makers,

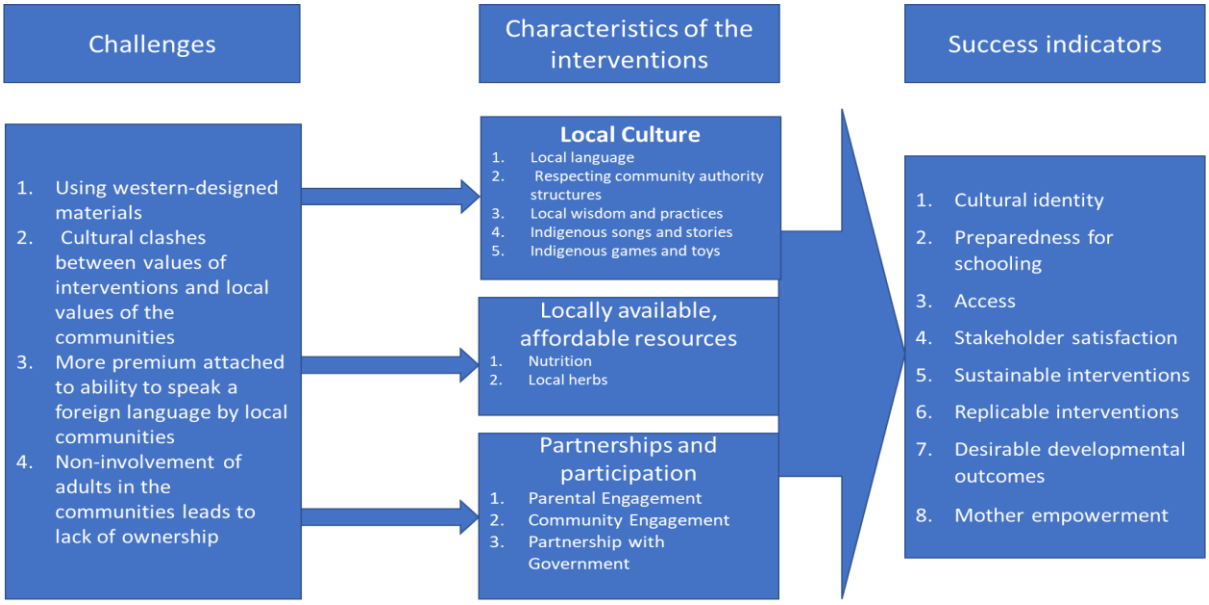
and practitioners, ensure cultural relevance and sustainability in ECCE programming in African contexts. The themes are defined below and in Figure 1.

Theme 1: challenges. Challenges that impede successful design and implementation of culturally relevant ECCE interventions include the use of Western-designed materials, clashes between values espoused by interventions and by communities, greater premium placed on the ability to speak non-indigenous languages (such as English or French), and minimal involvement of community adults in planning and designing interventions.

Theme 2: characteristics of interventions. Culture has informed ECCE interventions through the integration of cultural artifacts (such as language, songs and stories, games, and toys), knowledge and practices, and authority structures. Culturally relevant interventions leverage locally available, affordable resources such as foods, herbs, medicines, and didactic materials. They use participatory methods and partner with caregivers, community, and government stakeholders.

Theme 3: success indicators. ECCE interventions in Africa are successful to the extent that they contribute to cultural identity formation, prepare children for formal schooling, increase ECCE access, satisfy implementers, are sustainable and replicable, improve developmental outcomes, and empower caregivers.

Figure 1: Themes and sub-themes derived from analysis of interview responses



Cultural identity formation

Identity formation is essential for child development, for which culture plays a critical role (Cooper, 2014; Pumariega & Joshi, 2010; Raman, 2006; Tamayo & Tenjo-Macías, 2019). Effective ECCE interventions in Africa assist children to develop a sense of cultural identity. We encourage policymakers, organizations, ministries, and donors (hereafter referred to as ECCE implementers), as well as caregivers, to go beyond incorporation of cultural artifacts into ECCE interventions and offer opportunities for children to reflect on and appreciate their own cultural identities. This helps ensure continuity of diverse identities and fight cultural and language extinction. We acknowledge the complexity of ethnic identity and language in urban African communities and encourage celebration of diversity in urban settings (Njwambe et al., 2019).

Preparation for formal schooling

PDBs emphasized the importance of promoting behavioural preparedness for formal schooling through ECCE interventions. By "formal schooling", we refer to structured public classroom-based learning provided by the government. Early childhood education (ages 0-5) is often not formally provided as part of the formal schooling systems in Africa. Formal schooling has become a key feature of modern African societies, such that most African governments and parents or caregivers expect children to receive some form of formal schooling. African children encounter multiple systems of socialisation, including indigenous African and Western values through home and school environments. Formal schooling is infused with a Western didactic model of education. This can complement or displace indigenous ways of learning, with displacement increasingly common as Western educational models purport to prepare children for the workforce in peri-urban and urban areas (Kasese-Hara, 2013). Formal schooling ascribes to itself an economic value in both rural and urban Africa that feeds into community aspirations to equip children with skills to participate in the postcolonial labour market and economic system. PDBs emphasized that ECCE must uphold indigenous values while also offering skills that are locally and globally relevant. As ECCE interventions must respect community aspirations, we acknowledge the importance of school readiness (and, in turn, workforce preparation) in ECCE programmes. Given that this resource is limited to early childhood, we do not address the critical need for indigenization of formal public-school systems in Africa.

School readiness has been conceptualised to have three dimensions: 1) children's readiness for school, 2) school's readiness for children, and 3) familial and parental readiness for school (UNICEF, 2012). However, as identified through PDB interviews, we emphasize ECCE's capacity to prepare young children for formal schooling. ECCE programs build physical (gross and fine motor), language, cognitive (literacy, numeracy and executive function), and socioemotional skills in participating children, that prepare them for formal school learning. See Box 2 for a discussion on cultural relevance in socioemotional learning. ECCE can also gradually introduce pre-schoolers to some structures and norms of formal schooling activities (such as activity timing and the role of a teacher) in order to help children transition from the home to school environment. In choosing pedagogical approaches, ECCE program designers should take cultural norms and community ways of teaching and learning into consideration (Jukes et al., 2021b). For example, in Cameroon, a program observed that children thrived in cooperative games rather than competitive ones, in accordance with non-hierarchical cultural norms that emphasize collective well-being over individual achievement. The program opted to offer learners opportunities to work in groups to solve problems that simulate real life through games. Attentiveness to community norms and child education practices is critical at the needs assessment stage to identify ideal pedagogies.

Box 2: Culture and socioemotional learning

Socioemotional skills are closely linked to societal values, which vary from one context to another (Anziom et al., 2021; Berg et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2016; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Jukes et. Al., 2021a). The majority of published measurements that conceptualize SEL have been developed and validated in predominantly WEIRD countries (Humphrey et. al., 2011). While procedures exist for their adaptation to new contexts, cross-cultural and context-specific norms are seldom provided (Humphrey et. al., 2011). Using these tools as a starting place for analysing SEL in indigenous communities risks carrying over assumptions about valuable skills from one culture to another. That said, there are certain SEL skills that tend to be valuable in formal schooling environments, including the "ability to follow classroom rules and procedures; ability to keep attention focused; … social cognition, regulation of emotions and behaviour" and "Attitudes towards learning such as task persistence, creativity, initiative, curiosity and problem solving" (Louw & Louw, 2014, p.237). By focusing on these SEL skills, in addition to ones that are valued in the community's home environment, ECCE centres can serve as a bridge between the home and the school (Anziom et al., 2021).

Increasing access to quality ECCE

The African Union's (AU) continental educational strategy enjoins each member state to increase access to ECCE for all African children (AU, 2016). Similarly, its *Africa's Agenda*

for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children stipulates that, to foster healthy child development, member states should ensure that every child partakes in quality education (AU, n.d.). As a result, ECCE interventions in Africa should aim at widening access through increasing the number of ECCE provisions and the quality of those provisions (Ejuu et al., 2019). Historically, global rapid expansion of formal education has favoured increased access among mainstream populations, with poor, rural, minority group, and conflict-affected populations left at the margins (Global Partnership for Education, 2015). ECCE implementers have a responsibility to advocate for marginalized populations to ensure that ECCE programs prioritize equity and attention to localized needs, particularly as they are scaled up for wider application. Indicators of quality should be co-developed with communities during needs assessments that inform planning of the ECCE intervention.

Respecting local cultural values

Given the role of culture in child development, ECCE interventions should integrate the cultural values of the communities in which they are implemented (Keller, 2021; Keller et al., 2018; Morelli et al., 2018; Oppong, 2015; Scheidecker et al., 2021; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014; Weisner, 2002). This requires attention to values, pedagogies, and underlying assumptions that may otherwise be at odds between the program and the community (see Box 1). Programs must not only tune into these deeper cultural norms, but also respond to the cultural diversity and with-group variations in cultural orientations (see Box 3). By integrating community members at all stages of the program cycle, and by conducting thorough needs assessments, ECCE practitioners can tune into local norms and reflect them in programming. To avoid token representation, community members should fill leadership roles with meaningful decision-making authority and should represent diverse subgroups of the population We encourage policy makers, international organizations, and ECCE practitioners to spend time with the communities and make a concentrated effort to understand their values before introducing interventions to them. When the intervention is based on a pre-cast model, it is important for ECCE practitioners to compare the values of the communities and their interventions to identify the middle ground around which consensus can be built in order to adapt the program to the context.

Box 3: Cultural Diversity Across African Regions

The African continent comprises sovereign nations with diverse populations, and consequently different societal structures and ways of living (Bennett, 2021; Schnose, 2014; Woods, 2019). Countries in Africa are regarded as "some of the most culturally, economically, politically, and historically diverse countries in the world" (Schnose, 2014, p.147). That being said, sub-regions within the African continent also share some fundamental commonalities (Bennett, 2021); at a deep cultural level similar cultural themes and value systems are evident, and communities can appear quite similar (Nsamenang, 1992; S. Oppong, personal communication, 2021). The design of culturally anchored programs can address both surface (e.g. language, dietary preferences, music) and deep (e.g. social and psychological aspects of culture including core values and beliefs) dimensions of culture (Resnicow et al., 1999). However, culture also reflects the society in which people currently live; as such, while communities maintain historically rooted cultural practices, they may also adapt them or develop new ones over time to fit changing circumstances (Cole & Packer, 2019; Super & Harkness, 1986). Social changes influence parenting practices and therefore yield cultural adaptations, which in turn influence patterns in children's development (Greenfield, 2009). Parental decisions about behavioral strategies to adopt in supporting children's development occur in the context of particular environmental constraints (Ngwaru, 2014). For example, in a recent study of parental expectations for children with disabilities, there were several overlapping themes expressed by urban-living parents in Zambia and Ghana, but also specific themes unique to each cultural context that reflected longstanding cultural beliefs about the etiology of disability (Washington-Nortey & Serpell, 2021).

Communities are organized in ways to ensure children become competent members of their society and culture (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994; Super & Harkness, 2010). It is critical to attend to the substantial cultural heterogeneity that exists across societal contexts, as remote, urban, and rural areas are characterized by underlying sociodemographic processes (Greenfield, 2009). A good example in African countries is the emergence of "peri-urban" communities that sit on the fringe of cities or towns, and are often defined by migration, a condition which uniquely affords both constraints and opportunities. Researchers have long understood that culture influences norms and practices within families and local communities with respect to how power is used and distributed (Trickett, 2011). As such, to integrate different cultural practices into early childhood programs and interventions requires close attention to the power structures that exist within a community in tandem with aforementioned cultural nuances. One of the key aims of this resource is to advocate for design and implementation processes for ECCE interventions to take into consideration communities' variation at various levels, and attend to within-group diversity. Each community should be engaged in ECCE programming that is tailored to their unique context, even if communities live in the same country or in a sub-region with other communities that have received a particular type of programming. If this is not common practice, ECCE stakeholders run the risk of alienating parents, or worse: fostering resentment or resistance to ECCE programming (Ng'asike, 2014).

Source: Reflections by Leonne Mfolwe, Rose Opiyo and Zewelanji Serpell. December 9, 2021

Target improvement of desirable developmental outcomes

ECCE interventions should work together with the local communities to jointly identify and achieve desirable developmental outcomes. Much of the child development research that serves as the basis for design of ECCE interventions in international development programs in Africa took place in WEIRD countries. Even when interventions are adapted to new contexts, they still risk carrying over cultural baggage and assumptions from the contexts in which they were originally designed. For example, the developmental course follows a different logic from one context to another, and developmental milestones differ across communities, based on cultural emphases (Gelfand et al., 2013; Keller & Kärtner, 2013). This particularly includes socioemotional development, but also cognitive, language, and motor development. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of attachment theory and dyadic play with primary caregivers in global ECCE programming, research demonstrates that children in many African contexts spend more time in polyadic play with a diverse range of caregivers that includes older siblings (Keller et. al., 2018). This requires policy makers, international organizations, and ECCE practitioners to work with local communities and parents in the planning stages of the interventions to understand their needs and aspirations for their children. Doing so will ensure that the interventions address real priorities of the communities and avoid inadvertently creating new problems.

Empowering caregivers

ECCE interventions should aim to improve outcomes for children and caregivers and empower caregivers through information-sharing and income-generating activities. Home caregivers, notably parents and especially mothers, play a key role in child development (Blank, 1964; Jeong et al., 2021; Misca & Smith, 2014). In many African contexts, extended family members and peers also play significant caregiving roles for children. While mothers are often placed at the centre of ECCE interventions, it is also important to involve other diverse caregivers in children's lives. As Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey (1875 – 1927), a Gold Coaster (present-day Ghanaian) and the Father of African Education, once declared in the 1920s: "No race or people can rise half-slave, half-free. The surest way to keep a people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. If you educate a man, you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family [nation]" (Jacobs, 1996, p.47). Dr. Aggrey's assertion must be understood in historical context to emphasize the importance of empowering caregivers. Thus, empowering caregivers and ensuring caregiver

well-being would help ensure that a good nurturing environment is created for the development of the child in all its aspects.

Pursuing locally responsive and globally competitive ECCE objectives

ECCE should build both locally and globally relevant skills for children. PDBs emphasized the importance of rooting ECCE in children's own culture, and of developing skills that help children engage with others outside their communities on an empowered footing. For example, while many parents are aware of the benefits of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, many also firmly believe in the value of their children gaining proficiency in a non-indigenous language of wider communication (like English or French). This often creates tensions between ECCE implementers that seek to apply best practice per published research, and caregivers who see mother tongue as restricting their child's future opportunities. ECCE interventions should find ways to respond to local needs while preparing the children for a globally competitive world, and respect parents' aspirations for their children. For example, ECCE programs can use the mother tongue as the language of instruction, while teaching oral language skills in a non-indigenous language. This requires understanding cultural identity, globalization, and the needs of the communities in the planning process to ensure that caregivers are satisfied with ECCE interventions.

Pursuing inclusion and cultural responsiveness

ECCE programs should pursue inclusion of children with special needs in a culturally sensitive manner. Inclusion in ECCE is a broad issue that is addressed here only very briefly. In part, it entails attending to the needs of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) or special needs through identification, recognition, and tailored support. IDD is considered as "a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence). This results in a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), and begins before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development" (WHO, 2020, para. 1). The *Aspiration 6* of the AU's (n.d.) *Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children* requires that:

> Children with learning, mental and physical impairments are included and given the necessary support to complete primary and secondary school; as far as possible, the principle of inclusive education is fully implemented; where appropriate, special-

needs schools are opened for children with mild to severe learning, mental and physical impairments (p.14).

Children with IDD should be identified early in a culturally sensitive fashion to avoid judging children in Africa with WIERD standards (see Box 4, Box 9, and Box 13). ECCE programs

Box 4: Recommended Resources for Inclusive ECCE

Armstrong, R. W., Rosenbaum, P. L., & King, S. M. (1987). A randomized controlled trial of a 'buddy' programme to improve children's attitudes toward the disabled. *Developmental medicine and child neurology*, *29*(3), 327–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8749.1987.tb02486.x

Paget, A., Mallewa, M., Chinguo, D., Mahebere-Chirambo, C., & Gladstone, M. (2016). "It means you are grounded" - caregivers' perspectives on the rehabilitation of children with neurodisability in Malawi. *Disability and rehabilitation*, *38*(3), 223–234. https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2015.1035458

Save the Children. (2006). Children who have Disability in Early Childhood Care and Development Centres: A Resource Book for Teachers. Save the Children in Sri Lanka. https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/ECCD_Disability_Manual.pdf

Stone-MacDonald, A. & Butera, G. (2012). Cultural beliefs and attitudes about disability in East Africa. *Review of Disability Studies*, *8*, 62-77. https://www.rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/110/367

Stone-MacDonald, A. (2012). Cultural Beliefs about Disability in Practice: Experiences at a special school in Tanzania. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, *59*, 393-407. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912x.2012.723947

Stone-MacDonald, A. (2012). Learning Daily Life and Vocational Skills in Natural Settings: A Tanzanian Model. *The Journal of the International Association of Special Education*, *13*, 26-38.

Stone-MacDonald, A. (2012). Preparing Children with Developmental Disabilities for Life in the Community: A Tanzanian Perspective. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, *47*(3), 255–268. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23879963

should include culturally sensitive screening for IDD to ensure inclusive ECCE, particularly among children aged 5 to 8 years, and plan for culturally relevant and locally available support systems for these children (Dickson et al., 2020).

Given that inclusiveness is a cross-cutting issue, strategies for incorporating inclusive ECCE should be integrated throughout the program cycle. At the planning stage, programs should include objectives related to culturally responsive inclusive ECCE. At the design stage, programs should establish approaches for identification, diagnosis, and support for children with special needs. Where possible and available, programs should also include special education specialist or clinical/counselling psychologist skilled in culturally sensitive childhood neurodevelopmental assessment. At the implementation stage, programs may adapt their activities and offerings based on the case load of children with IDD, in cooperation with

community members. The key recommendation is that the programme design and training/orientation of hands-on personnel for its implementation should prioritise inclusion of children with IDD and resist the notion that such children are ineducable or unworthy of education, or a threat to the well-being and education of other children in the programme.

Program evaluation should include qualitative and quantitative measurement of change with respect to the culturally responsive inclusive ECCE objectives. Distinguishing quantitative evaluation (such the use of standardized surveys, psychological assessment tools, etc.) from qualitative evaluation, Fink (2005) again summarizes the latter as follows:

> Qualitative evaluations collect data through in-person interviews, direct observation, and review of written documents…These evaluations aim to provide personalized information on the dynamics of a program and on participants' perceptions of the program's outcomes and impact (p.14).

Evaluation needs will depend on whether children with special needs were identified during the implementation. Evaluation steps should begin during the planning stage: at the time of conceptualization, design, and selecting measures, and should include staff qualitative evidence. Qualitative evaluation data should identify the mechanisms through which the program was supposed to lead to the desired outcomes, and where and how those outcomes were achieved, and why and how they were not achieved. Program impact analysis should include qualitative data on subgroups of staff and participants analysing why some may have shown desired outcomes and others not. The intentions and daily practices of staff, children, and caregivers are key to qualitative evaluations while qualitative data are a key to the process of continuous improvement and step by step implementation changes to get closer to community and program goals.

4.2 Strategies for culturally relevant ECCE programming

In this section, we describe how these guiding principles can be applied at each stage of the program cycle. Here, the planning stage refers to the process of developing the program theory of change and results framework, including analysing root problems, identifying program goals and outcomes, and defining major program components to achieve these outcomes. The design stage pertains to building out program activities, including who will deliver the intervention, what methods and modalities they will use, target populations, and program timing and dosage. Implementation entails delivering the intervention on the ground,

managing the day-to-day operations, and collecting formative data to inform adaptations. Evaluation refers to measuring progress towards program objectives through qualitative and quantitative means.

Planning with and for the community

Every intervention begins with planning. Planning involves formulating a set of objectives, strategies to achieve those objectives, and how the intervention will be evaluated. Planning should include development of a conceptual framework that lays out a logic model for achieving intended changes, which serves to justify money and resources.

The planning process should begin with a needs assessment. Planning with and for the community means centring the community in identifying desirable ECCE objectives and the strategies with which to achieve them. It is common practice for major donors and large international organizations to begin the planning process with a proposed intervention drawn from global frameworks, published research, or experience in another context. However, the community – and not the intervention - should be the starting point for the planning process. Without deeply understanding and attending to the needs of the community, ECCE interventions risk rejection (for example, the community may accept it due to expected economic incentives but not participate as intended), failure to achieve intended outcomes, unintended negative effects, low community ownership, and becoming unsustainable. We propose an iterative planning process with three components: 1) community needs assessment, 2) formulation of ECCE objectives to address the identified needs, and 3) building consensus on the strategies to achieve the objectives.

Conduct a needs assessment

A complete needs assessment is the first step in the planning process. Despite the name, a needs assessment should incorporate community visions for their children's future, strengths they wish to build upon, and resources to leverage, in addition to needs. Where possible, ECCE implementers should encourage communities to bring forward their needs with respect to ECCE so that a systematic investigation can be conducted to clarify needs and prioritize those that require external support to address.

- ✓ *Rationale*. There is no replacement or shortcut for designing interventions to match the context and needs of the target community. Global published research often makes general claims about child deficits in the early years and interventions that are

beneficial in early childhood. For example, the nurturing care framework notes that 250 million children are at risk of not meeting their full developmental potential, and proposes a series of interventions including responsive caregiving, nutrition, and early stimulation (play) to remedy this deficit (Britto et al., 2017; Chunling et al., 2016). Using this literature and generalizing deficits to a specific community risks ignoring local needs and nuances, and perpetuating stereotypes of African communities as a monolith with inadequate early childhood care.

- ✓ *Purpose*. The needs assessment should cover community aspirations for child development, enablers and barriers to these aspirations, key stakeholders, resources to leverage, and visions for children's futures. Needs assessments should go beyond verifying the validity of a preselected model. It can be tempting to enter a community with an existing model and use the needs assessment data to validate it (which constitutes a form of confirmation bias). However, seeking consent for an external model does not allow the community sufficient opportunity for input, and does not allow the design team adequate insights to develop an effective intervention for this particular population. Requesting community input on adaptations to an existing model is also inappropriate for a needs assessment, as it limits discovery to the pre-set parameters of the model. Starting with the community's own vision and needs ensures their lives are at the centre of the planning process.

- ✓ *Scope.* The needs assessment should centre assets rather than deficits, and look broadly at family life, childhood, and the environment that children grow up in. A broader field of inquiry helps design teams appreciate the diversity of views in the community, fill in blind spots, identify community leaders, and avoid negative unintended consequences. Assessments should use qualitative tools, complemented by quantitative tools as appropriate. Community asset mapping (identification, recognition, and utilization of existing local community's governing structures and human resources) is equally relevant to consider here. For example, traditional birth attendants available in local communities have been leveraged in Ghana and Kenya to provide child and reproductive health services to caregivers.

- ✓ *Participation.* Design by (and not for) communities maximizes responsiveness. Ideally, members of the community co-develop needs assessment tools and protocols, participate in data collection, and co-lead data analysis. Community teams should

equitably represent diverse subgroups, with particular attention to gender, ethnicity, language group, age, disability, and socioeconomic status. Community leadership from the earliest stages helps program teams co-create models tailored to their needs. In many low-income communities, individuals may expect financial returns for their participation. Any compensation to participants should be determined in advance with input from community leaders that can advise on the consequences and ethical considerations of financial incentives.

Engage appropriate stakeholders

- ✓ *Ensure proper gatekeeping roles of community leaders, government officials and local academics*. A key process in screening out undue external influence on local culture is gatekeeping. Gatekeepers determine what gets talked about, what decisions that are made, what objectives are valued, and which interventions in general become accepted into a country and a local community (see Box 5). This role implies that the gatekeepers have a responsibility to see to it that ECCE implementers engage communities to study and reconcile their intervention goals and objectives with the community aspirations for their children, and genuinely respect the community's child-rearing priorities and principles.
- ✓ *Involve stakeholders in community consultations*. Traditional leaders, community elders, influential community members, and caregivers are key stakeholders to involve in the planning process for ECCE interventions. Compared to parents, traditional elders are more likely to know, have an appreciation for, or understand the general concerns of the overall community. Therefore, community leaders, elders, or influential community members ought to be engaged in the identification of community ECCE needs, determination of solutions to the ECCE issues in their communities, formulation of the ECCE intervention objectives, and formulation of general strategies to achieve the ECCE objectives. In addition, a cross-section of caregivers ought to be part of the planning process alongside elders. The consultation process should ensure equitable representation of subgroups within the community, especially women, youth, minority groups, and people with disabilities. There is a need to especially involve mothers, given that they tend to have unique perspectives on their children's developmental needs, and are also often the central figures in child-caring in most African societies

Box 5: When government officials renege on their gatekeeping responsibility

We present excepts from a 2017 TED Talk by indigenous knowledge expert Dr. Chika Ezeanya-Esiobu on "How Africa can use its traditional knowledge to make progress".

Dr. Ezeanya-Esiobu describes an encounter with her supervisor at her job:
My boss said that he likes to go to Africa to negotiate World Bank loans and to work on World Bank projects. And I was intrigued so I asked him why. He said, "Oh, when I go to Africa, it is so easy. I write up my loan document and my project proposal in Washington, DC. I go to Africa, and they all just get signed. I get the best deal, and I'm back to base. My bosses are happy with me." But then he said, "I hate going to Asia…" and he mentioned a particular country. Asia and some of these countries, he said, "They keep me for this, trying to get the best deal for their countries. They get the best deal. They tell me, 'That clause will not work for us in our environment. It is not our reality. It is just so Western.' And they tell me, 'We have enough experts to take care of this. You don't have enough experts. We know our aim.' And they just keep going through all these things. By the time they finish, yes, they get the best deal, but I am so exhausted, and I don't get the best deal for the bank."

She then reflects on a subsequent experience with a World Bank negotiation in Africa:
I was privileged to sit in on a loan negotiation session in an African country. I had most Euro-Americans, you know, with me from Washington, DC. And I looked across the table at my African brothers and sisters. I could see intimidation on their faces. They didn't believe they had anything to offer the great-great-grandchildren of Mungo Park [the White negotiators from the World Bank] …They just sat and watched. [They said] "Oh, just give us, let us sign. You own the knowledge. You know it all. Just, where do we sign? Show us, let us sign." They had no voice. They didn't believe in themselves.

Our observations:
This case highlights the need for African government officials to acknowledge and actively play their role in protecting the interests of their nations and people in international negotiations, including negotiations about ECCE projects. Africans must trust their own wisdom and accept that they also have the right and responsibility to speak for themselves and the people they represent, even if they are merely the recipients of loans and grants.

Source: TED. (2017, October). Chika Ezeanya-Esiobu: *How Africa can use its traditional knowledge to make progress* [Video]. YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=28sa2zGgmwE

Designing with and for the community

Design refers to the process of laying out an intervention's structure, components, personnel, and methods. Cultural consciousness requires applying community ideas, values, and resources to the design process. The objective of design is to create a program that is meaningful to the community: that adds value, meets a real need, engages key implementers, and generates desirable results. The desk reviews, PDB interviews, and expert discussions yielded the following design principles.

Use a bottom-up design approach. PDBs strongly recommend developing interventions from the ground up in collaboration with communities. International organizations often set objectives and design ECCE interventions based on published literature or government reports. While we highly recommend designing from the ground up beginning with the needs assessment, we understand that ECCE implementers may be under constraints (from a donor,

for example) in terms of the intervention design. If this is the case, we recommend engaging the community to adapt the intervention to the community's needs and culture on both superficial and in-depth levels.

Be specific. Interventions should be highly targeted towards specific objectives. Interventions with numerous components may spread their resources thinly, cause confusion, or be subject to mission creep (i.e. expanding the objectives to include too many unrelated or unfocused objectives). ECCE interventions often target behaviour changes by caregivers or care providers who work with children. Behaviour-change programs that are specific and focused are more likely to generate results. A clear focus makes it easier for communities to engage and for ECCE implementers to track success. An individual's behaviour tends to be rooted in their culture, environment, and community. As such, peers exert significant influence on one another's behaviour. Behaviour change is easier to achieve by directing individuals towards a desired behaviour rather than away from an undesired one. Rather than seeking to eradicate a particular behaviour or practice, interventions can promote alternatives. Design teams can work with communities to develop alternative behaviours and practices, compare them to existing ones, and arrive at consensus on the preferred way forward.

Define the target audience. Programs require clarity about who they intend to target and serve. A community may contain subgroups along socioeconomic, ethnic, language, gender, and disability lines. Each subgroup may have unique needs or views on child development. Being clear about the intended beneficiaries of the program will allow design teams to refine the intervention to their particular needs. Design teams can collaborate with community members, particularly individuals that are members of existing authority structures, to identify high-needs groups and opportunities for model adaptation to different subgroups, while remaining attentive to respect for local cultural norms.

Apply an assets-based lens. An assets-based lens focuses on strengths (jointly defined with the community without imposition of external standards), and views diversity in child rearing values, ideas, and practices as positive assets. Approaches that apply an assets-based lens include appreciative inquiry, human-centred design, and community asset mapping. Assets to consider may include the following:

- ✓ *Human resources*: Programs should map local experts and allies, and design for their participation. Human assets include the people that have the skills or authority to advance the identified child development objective. For example, a project seeking to

deliver information on antenatal nutrition could work alongside traditional birth attendants as trusted experts to identify needs, develop messaging and communications channels, and reach target audiences.

- ✓ *Values.* Programs must ensure programming respects community values. Community child rearing practices are rooted in generation of wisdom, and are attuned to the particular environment that the child grows up in. The design team must build the intervention around these values to ensure programming helps children and families thrive in their environment, and to carry their identity with pride in new environments.

- ✓ *Foods*: Programs can survey the nutritional value of locally available foods and feature them in nutrition campaigns, income-generating activities, and school feeding programs. Foods that are already available in the community are more likely to have continued use, contributing to program sustainability. For example, an initiative in the Alimosho Local Government Area of Lagos State and the Ijebu North Local Government Area of Ogun state in Nigeria trained caregivers on food preparation practices that increase nutritional value of existing dishes by incorporating vegetables, fish, and soya. An evaluation of the impacts of this program is forthcoming.

- ✓ *Materials*: ECCE programs, particularly in education, should inventory locally available materials for teaching and learning in the design process. Learning environments conducive to play and discovery have a variety of engaging learning materials for students to manipulate. Locally sourced materials enhance the quality of learning environments at a low cost. Classrooms or centres with locally derived materials more closely resemble the home environment, rendering them more welcoming and familiar to young learners. Children are more likely to find similar learning materials in their homes and neighbourhoods, allowing them to replicate classroom games and extend classroom learning into the home. Examples of local materials include baskets, beads, bottles, bottle caps, and natural materials like stones, sticks, leaves, and sand.

- ✓ *Language*. Using a language children and adults speak and understand is the most effective way to deliver information (Benson, 2004; Trudell & Young, 2016). Creating materials in a lingua franca like French or English may be efficient, but this limits information access to only those who are proficient in these languages, which

tends to be those who have higher levels of schooling, live in urban areas, or have greater access to resources. Using local language has numerous benefits: beneficiaries can more easily access information, feel more welcome, and are better able to contribute their ideas to help improve the program. In areas with language diversity, choice of language may be sensitive, and multiple languages (ex: dominant and minority-group languages) may be necessary to make information accessible to both groups. Design teams may consider conducting a language mapping exercise to identify languages to use.

Box 6 describes the Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide program, which endeavored to use a community-led design process to achieve both superficial and deep cultural relevance.

Box 6: Community-led design under the Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide program

Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide supports Baka communities in Cameroon to create preschool centers. The Baka are an indigenous population that historically draw their livelihoods from forest foraging activities. The program is led by ASTRADHE, a nonprofit civil society association with Baka people in leadership roles that has a history of working with Baka communities, with technical and operational support from US-based nonprofit Two Rabbits. Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide engaged Baka communities to lead the design process in three ways.

1. The Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide needs assessment included formal focus groups and informal conversations with Baka staff members' friends and family to ascertain what it means to be "educated," obstacles to achieving this vision, and resources that can be leveraged to support education.
2. Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide uses continuous cycles of monitoring, analysis, and adaptation. Rather than strive for strict fidelity of implementation, the program team identifies opportunities to adapt the program to capitalize on positive deviance and reflect changing realities.
3. To avoid applying external models of socioemotional development, ASTRADHE and Two Rabbits conducted a qualitative study to understand community priorities for socioemotional development, and to develop a socioemotional learning framework specific to the Baka community.

Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide incorporates cultural artifacts such as music, language, and materials, as well as deeper pedagogies and community roles, for example:

1. Communities insisted on Baka representation among teaching staff. Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide uses interactive audio instruction so that they can serve as teachers despite low adult literacy rates.
2. Outside of school, children learn through observation and participation in subsistence activities, so Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide engages learners in group activities based on real life scenarios.
3. Because Baka society prioritizes communal welfare over individual advancement, Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide structures learning games to be collaborative rather than competitive.
4. The study on socioemotional development revealed an emphasis on children's responsibility to help others, particularly elders. As such, Dɛ̀ngbɛ̀ Bide stories and activities feature children supporting the needs of elders around them.

Leverage local power structures

Collaboration with leaders through existing power structures allows ECCE implementers to leverage credible individuals and institutions to reach the broader community.

Local power structures often serve a gatekeeping role. Their approval or rejection of a program can trigger the broader community's approval or rejection. These structures provide more than just a green or red light: they also influence how information is communicated to the broader community. Attentiveness to power dynamics when entering the community is key for demonstrating respect and gaining broad buy-in through appropriate channels. Design teams should conduct a stakeholder analysis with communities to identify key individuals and institutions, their roles, and how they interact with one another and with young children.

Local power structures may be comprised of community elite, with little representation from marginalized groups. Design teams may be tempted to confront or alter these structures in favour of a more equitable sharing of power. Instead, our findings indicate that it is more impactful and sustainable to work within and alongside existing structures. Cultures and institutions are dynamic, comprised of individuals with varying views and interests. Design teams can leverage local leaders and institutions to engage the broader community, support them adapt to serve the needs of the community, and create opportunities for meaningful engagement with diverse groups.

Implementing with and for the community

Implementation refers to the day-to-day delivery of an intervention on the ground. Culturally relevant ECCE programs are implemented by, and not on behalf of, target communities. While presented as a distinct phase of the program cycle, implementation should incorporate regular cycles of planning, design, delivery, and evaluation to ensure continuous adaptation to realities on the ground.

Community leadership. PDBs emphasized the importance of community participation in implementation (see Box 7 and Box 8). Programs with community members in implementation roles capitalize on these individuals' ability to be responsive to needs that arise and to iterate based on observed needs. With individuals that the community trusts at the helm of the program, the intervention engenders broader trust. Examples of community engagement in implementation includes employing caregivers as early childhood teachers, working with traditional birth attendants in perinatal care and mobilizing youth and young

children to provide care and education to their peers (Serpell, 2019). However, meaningful community engagement goes beyond assigning implementation roles: it also means that decision-making authority rests in community members' hands, requiring organizations to cede power over programmatic direction, funding, and evaluation that has traditionally been the purview of program management teams that are external to the community itself.

Box 7: Senegal's Case des tout-petits (Soudée, 2009)

In Senegal, *case des tout-petits* or "children's hut" is a community preschool model created in 2004. In order to attend to holistic child development, *cases* provide schooling, health services, nutrition, and broader community education services, targeting children aged 0-6 and their families. *Case des tout-petits* governance includes diverse representation at the government and community levels. Its governing body, the National Agency of the Children's Hut, includes council members from government agencies across sectors. At the local level, preschools engage community involvement, particularly through mother volunteers assisting in the classroom. A trained animator leads educational activities, with support from the mothers or other volunteers.

The *case* prioritizes upholding local cultural heritage through its curriculum, values, and caregiver engagement. To symbolize being rooted in the local culture and reaching out towards others, many *Case* buildings have a diagonal bar structure that extends from the ground to the roof. Children at the *Case* receive regular meals, with foods often coming from an attached school garden. The *case* system seeks to offer holistic and inclusive services, promoting access to early childhood development services for girls, children with disabilities, and those living in rural areas. In Senegal, the President in 1996 called for community and parental engagement in early childhood care and education.

Box 8: Mali's Clos d'Enfants (Soudée, 2009)

The *Clos d'Enfants* or "children's house" program in Mali engages community members to use local materials and homemade toys to facilitate culturally relevant early learning. In Mali, French is the official language, and early childhood education is considered part of the basic education package. Through a UNESCO-supported program, *"clos d'enfants"* were created to mobilize communities to provide ECCE.

The *clos d'enfants* combines local resources and international pedagogical concepts to provide quality preschool education rooted in the child's cultural context. Through the program, communities identify 15 "mother educators", comprised of five grandmothers, five mothers, and five young women who do not have children. These women form five groups of three, comprising one woman from each age group. Each group facilitates one day of learning per week using games and activities of their own creation and provides a healthy meal or snack to children.

To navigate complex gender dynamics, the *clos d'enfants* operate through existing power structures. A male community leader chooses three mothers, and together they comprise the *clos d'enfant* management team. The community chooses the 15 mother educators, who are then trained by a mix of local and European early childhood specialists. The program mobilizes mothers' wisdom and complements it with external practices and information to create enriching holistic early learning environments.

The program began in Bamako, and has now spread to villages in Benin, Niger, and Senegal, exemplifying the value of replication programs developed by and for African communities.

Continuous adaptation cycles. Cultures are dynamic. Culturally sensitive programs should reflect the possibility that cultural dimensions are likely to change over time. Commonplace labelling of African cultures as "traditional" implies that African ways of life as obsolete or backwards, when in fact they are an integral part of the present day. Gender roles, language varieties, social norms, and child rearing practices evolve continuously with time within a culture, and also are likely to vary among individuals in the same cultural context.

While programs tend to emphasize fidelity of implementation as a prerequisite to measuring their success, we advocate for a departure from this approach. An emphasis on continuous evolution and responsiveness, rather than adherence to the initial model, allows programs to become increasingly effective over time. Co-design of an intervention is just the beginning of the cultural adaptation process. Program teams should engage in continuous cycles of design, implementation, and evaluation throughout the life of the project. This practice is valuable in the following ways.

- ✓ *Continuous improvement.* Regularly reviewing program performance and reflecting on possible adjustments allows teams to continually refine the model to better achieve its target objectives.
- ✓ *Responsiveness to change.* As contextual factors shift, program teams can use cycles of design, implementation, and evaluation to revisit underlying assumptions and adjust the program to meet needs that arise. This is particularly important in areas experiencing active or recent conflict, to ensure the program reflects the latest conflict dynamics and community needs.
- ✓ *Community ownership for sustainability.* When community members contribute to the initial program design, they are creating a theoretical program model they believe will work. Seeing the program in practice allows communities to have a clearer sense of what it means to run the program. Regular opportunities to adapt the model allow communities to use this updated understanding to reassign roles, mobilize resources, and shift program approaches to meet their needs and realities. Engagement with community structures is not an initial phase, but a fixture of continuous program improvement.
- ✓ *Capture positive deviance.* Community members who are in implementation roles will naturally adjust their approaches to meet the needs that they see on the job. A

monitoring visit may conclude that the intervention is not operating effectively, when in fact community members are implementing the model differently in order to better serve the target population. Similarly, the intervention may appear to operate as intended, but it is only serving a small segment of the target population. Continuous cycles of implementation, learning, and adaptation offer opportunities to capture natural adaptations and integrate them into the broader model, and correct negative divergent practices early on.

Evaluating with and for the community

Interventions usually end with an evaluation. According to Fink (2005, p.4), "the purpose of program evaluation is to provide information on the *effectiveness* of *programs*, or *interventions* so as to optimize the *outcomes*, *efficiency*, and *quality*". Thus, evaluation helps us to answer some important questions such 1) Did the intervention achieve its desired objectives? 2) Did the intervention result in some unintended negative consequences? 3) Was the intervention the best use of the resources compared to its cost and to other interventions? and 4) Would the effects of the intervention be long-term?

We are of the opinion that there is no psychological assessment tool that is free from cultural baggage. Most existing tools are constructed based on mainstream Western models of child development (see Box 9). Though some non-verbal intelligence tests such as Raven's Progressive Matrices are usually presented as "culture-free" and even "culture-fair" tests, they are heavily reliant on the symbols of one culture only (Greenfield, 1997). "Culture-free" means that the tests do not use language as the major dimension and do not rely on knowledge that is always culturally informed. "Culture-fair" means that particular cultures are not privileged through the test, because their knowledge is targeted. For instance, the symbols in the Raven's Standard Progress Matrices are familiar to Western children but may not be familiar to non-Western children and the reliance on analytical abilities also favours particular cultures and formal school-based education. There may not be pure "culture free" instruments, but there are developmental and maturational indicators that matter for communities most everywhere. These include physical development, clear delays in developmental behaviours, clear indicators of disability that may require intervention, and a host of related others. We should aim for relevant measures of common concerns most everywhere in the world as well as those specific to the communities. See Box 10 for an example of evaluation methodologies on a WASH program in Zambia.

Box 9: The Search for Culturally Relevant Approaches and Methods for Evaluating ECCE Interventions

Existing tools, even when they are culturally adapted, rely on instruments developed in western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) contexts and are based on a particular developmental logic that follows the developmental course of children from those contexts. Thus, adaptation and bias reduction are mainly statistical in nature. The extant research can be summarized as follows (this is not an exhaustive summary):

If we use instruments developed in WEIRD environments and adapted to local use, we may leave out important dimensions of the constructs. There is ample evidence in research about intelligence that demonstrate this point clearly. For instance, research about early language development (sound production in babies) with the Bayley Test (there are local adaptations, e.g., in India) may not adequately capture the vocal developmental pattern of a culture (see Wermke et al., 2013, 2016). The developmental course in a particular cultural context may follow a different developmental logic, based on local cultural emphases of development. The so-called gross motor precocity (which is an ethnocentric term taking the WEIRD pattern as the norm) is based on different developmental expectations and different emphases. What predicts a particular developmental achievement may not be the same across cultures (see Keller & Kärtner, 2013). The same construct may be differently defined in different cultures (see Oppong, 2020b). Attachment is an example but also memory research (Becke & Bongard, 2018; Keller, 2018). The assessment situation and the social conventions for communication in these situations may pose further problems. Equally important to question is the major emphasis on infancy as the window for developmental opportunities. This concentration is not backed up appropriately by research, although this is the common understanding. Each and every developmental phase is important.

Source: Heidi Keller's reflections on the search for culturally relevant evaluation tools. December 1, 2021.

While this resource does provide an overview of evaluation techniques, it offers insights to guide the process of engaging in culturally relevant programme evaluation with and for the community. In view of this, we recommend the following guidelines:

Use qualitative methods as the primary mode for culturally relevant evaluation. Qualitative evaluation techniques are essential for integrating cultural models in the outcome and impact assessment, as questions can be derived from local understandings. Assessment in this case does not aim at comparability but meaningfulness of the intervention to the local community. Strong methods include direct observation, focus groups, and individual interviews. As already indicated, the absence of genuinely culture-free approaches and methods (and we do not aim for such culture-free instruments) makes it imperative for policy makers, international organizations, and ECCE implementers to utilise methods that allow for understanding issues within their cultural context. Qualitative methods can be paired with quantitative ones, provided the tools are contextually and developmentally relevant.

Box 10: Evaluation of a Baby Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Pilot Study in Rural Zambia (Reid et al., 2018)

Intervention

A pilot community-built Baby WASH play-yard was designed and implemented within CARE USA's Nutrition at the Center programme in rural Zambia. A baby WASH educational programme was first implemented in the participating villages. Out of six villages, the CARE staff co-designed with the village leaders and community members from three villages through a participatory session. The following considerations were taken into account in the design of the community-built play-yard: 1) separation of the infant from contaminated soil in the household yard; 2) physical safety for the infant; 3) visibility into the enclosure while the caregiver performs household chores; 4) accessibility for caregivers and others to get in and out of the enclosure; 5) space for the infant to crawl and walk inside the enclosure; 6) reflection of the community context; and 7) visual stimulation for the infant while inside the enclosure.

Evaluation Methodology

A concurrent mixed-methods design in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected at the same time, separately analysed, and interpreted together was employed. The household were visited three times over 2 weeks to assess the uptake of Baby WASH practices and play-yard use. Three data collections were conducted at the sixth, seventh, and eight weeks. At each data collection period, spot observations, checklists, and interviews were utilised to gather the relevant data. These observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Tumbuka language by trained observers who were fluent in Tumbuka; they used detailed observation guides, checklists, and pre-written semi-structured interview. More specifically, the evaluation centred around how the households did the following: 1) used the play-yard; 2) found the play-yard and mat feasible; 3) cleaned the play-yard and mat; 4) followed safety protocols around the play-yard, including adult supervision at all times; and 5) perceived their family's and community's support of the play-yard. For the quantitative analysis on the data generated using checklists and observations, summary statistics were generated while thematic analysis was performed on interview data.

Involve stakeholders in the evaluation. The process of evaluation should interview community leaders, elders, or influential community members. Their feedback serves to authenticate and validate responses received from parents, caregivers, and teachers with regards to intervention efficacy and cultural relevance. This allows for triangulation of sources, i.e., "gathering data from different types or level of people e.g., individuals, their family members…" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). Thus, parents, ECE teachers, and community leaders (or community elders or influential community members) are the primary sources of evaluation data. Equally important is member checking. This entails presenting the results and the conclusions drawn to members of the community studied or cultural key

informants of that group for validation, to ensure their agreement in how they are portrayed, and to offer them the opportunity to enrich the findings.

Use existing structures for data collection. We recommend that in order for the evaluation process to integrate into familiar structures for the communities involved, policy makers, international organizations, and ECCE implementers must gather their evaluation data through preferred and existing community structures. This is to say that customary modes and locations in which communities meet to discuss issues of concern be used in the evaluation processes. The days that are set apart as meeting days or 'non-working days' in different communities ought to be used to conduct data collection. Traditional gatherings, which are used for arbitration, social interaction, and plan activities of the village, could be used to give community leaders, elders, or influential community members and caregivers the opportunity to understand and evaluate the interventions (see Box 11).

Box 11: Professor Eric Alan Hanushek, 2021 Yidan Laureate in Educational Research

In a discussion moderated by Barbara Bruns (on Sunday December 5, 2021), Prof. Hanushek was asked about what he would do with the Yidan Prize money. He indicated that he is going to establish a fellowship programme for African educational economists to build their capacity in education evaluation and designs for improvements.

Our expectation

This initiative is very important as Africa is likely to benefit from a cadet of evaluation experts. However, they are also more likely to focus on quantitative evaluations given that educational economists are known to principally apply quantitative methods (see Blauw, 2020; Malhotra & Bazerman, 2005), sometimes ignoring qualitative evaluations. For instance, the US National Bureau of Economic Research (n.d., para. 1) views educational economics as studying "the effect of education on individuals' earnings and other outcomes, as well as the effect of educational inputs and education policies on student achievement." In this respect, this resource is essential to such a capacity-building initiative by Prof. Hanushek. Therefore, the fellows would potentially also benefit from a focus on culturally relevant ECCE evaluation as it is being recommended in this resource. Thus, collaborating with both local and international cultural experts in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and early childhood education would help to address the knowledge gap.

Source: https://yidanprize.org/global-community/laureates/eric-a-hanushek/

Give preference to qualitative evaluation, but for comparability's sake, consider mixing with quantitative evaluation. Box 12 provides a summary of the benefits of methods pluralism and useful resources for mixed methods. While it is preferable for evaluations to use qualitative methods, policy makers tend to assume that "Credible empirical evidence consists of

outcome data, not of mechanism data" (Malhotra & Bazerman, 2005, p.19). Further, 'in the policy arena, policy makers often request evidence that the problem being discussed actually matters in practice – not just in theory. They want the smoking gun. Put another way, too often, the "dangerous intersection" sign only goes up after a pedestrian is killed at that particular intersection.' (Malhotra & Bazerman, 2005, p.20). In other words, policy makers look for changes in counts/frequencies or amount of something quantifiable. In the case of ECCE programs, this can be quantitative changes in physical, socioemotional, language, basic literacy skills, basic numeracy skills, and other cognitive domains as well as the financial benefits and cost as solid evidence of improvements due to ECCE interventions. This forces ECCE implementers to speak in the preferred language of policy makers –

Box 12: Methods Pluralism for Understanding ECCE Interventions

All interventions, no matter how well-intentioned and planned, will not have lasting impacts if those interventions cannot live within the daily routines, activities and beliefs of the families and institutions who could benefit. By integrating mixed qualitative and quantitative methodologies, research evaluations will learn why interventions fail or only partly succeed once implemented, what mechanisms actually worked in local context, and which aspects of an intervention were taken up into daily cultural and learning activities. Statistical power, significance and normed assessments are useful as part of evaluation, but interpretative power (Brady et al., 2018), meaning-centered significance, and contextual relevance are just as or more useful in planning, implementing, assessing, and understanding interventions in a local community (see Box 9 and Box 10).

Understanding community intentions, accounts, practices, and incentives are essential to the scientific study of learning (Lee, et al., 2020, p. xvii). Mixed qualitative and quantitative methods capture the likely balance between more widely shared, uniform beliefs and practices, and the "organized diversity" of beliefs and practices that also are present. One size seldom fits all. Indigenous, local ways of knowing (Gone, 2019) rely on mixed methods. Race, culture, class, religion, gender, and other social structural biases are embedded in methods and too often remain implicit and unexamined. So rather than asking, "Why mixed methods", the question is why would only a single kind of method even be proposed, instead of requiring plural methods, which are already widely used and proven to provide added value (Hay, 2017; Weisner, 2005; Weiss, et al., 2019)?

Source: Tom Weisner's reflections on mixed methods approach to ECCE evaluations. December 7, 2021.

Recommended resources for mixed methods approaches in ECCE:

Weisner, T. S. (2011). If you work in this country, you should not be poor, and your kids should be doing better. Bringing mixed methods and theory in psychological anthropology to improve research in policy and practice. *Ethos*, *39*(4), 455-476. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2011.01208.x

Yoshikawa, H., Weisner, T. S., Kalil, A., & Way, N. (2008). Mixing qualitative and quantitative research in developmental science: Uses and methodological choices. *Developmental Psychology*, *44*(2), 344–354. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.44.2.344

presenting what looks, from the perspective of policy makers, like pieces of persuasive evidence as well as the evidence upon which they are likely to make decisions (Blauw, 2020). As a result, culturally adapted quantitative tools of assessment could also be utilised to supplement the qualitative evaluations.

Box 13 outlines quantitative assessment tools developed in Africa. In addition to these, the following quantitative indicators may also be considered: 1) change in the number of young children with access to ECCE offerings; 2) change in the number of young children abused (where abuse has been culturally defined); 3) change in the number of young children with access to adequate nutrition (where adequate nutrition is jointly defined); 4) change in the

Box 13: Some Culturally Adapted Quantitative Tools for Assessment built in Africa

The following ECCE tools should be used with caution as they are based on the developmental logic that follows the developmental course of children in WEIRD contexts. We, therefore, caution against the uncritical use of these tools as they are not fully based on African conceptions and models. We recommend an emphasis on qualitative methods.

1. Kilifi Developmental Checklist (Kenya)
2. Kilifi Developmental Inventory (Kenya)
3. Developmental Milestone Checklist (Kenya)
4. Malawi Developmental Assessment Tool (Malawi)

Recommended Resources:

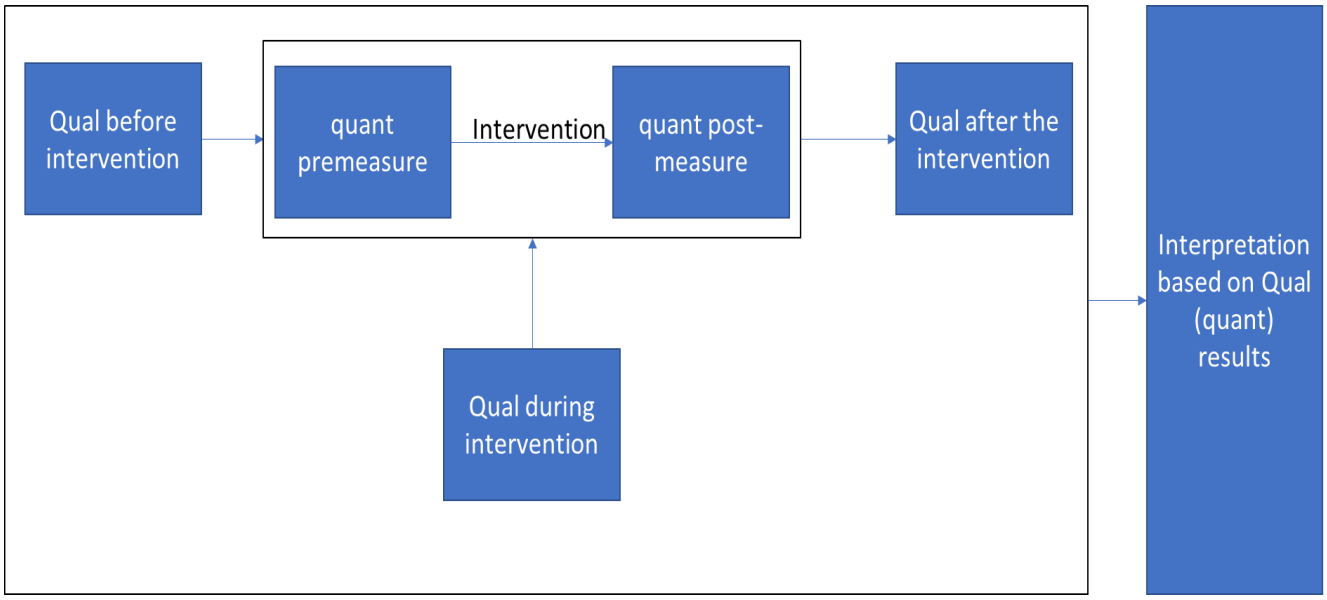
1. Anziom, B., Strader, S., Sanou, A. S., Chew, P. (2021). Without assumptions: Development of a socio-emotional learning framework that reflects community values in Cameroon. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *9*, 602546. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.602546
2. Kitsao-Wekulo, P., Holding, P., Nanga, K., Mutisya, M., Okelo, K., & Ngware, M. (2021, August). The Protocol for Child Monitoring Kenya - Infant/Toddler (PCM-IT) version: Construction and validation of a multiple-domain child assessment for use in Early Childhood intervention Programmes. *SocArXiv Papers*. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/xvz9n
3. Jukes, M. C. H. Mgonda, N. L., Tibenda, J. J., Gabrieli, P., Jeremiah G., Betts, K. L., Williams, J., & Bub, K. L. (2021a). Building an assessment of community-defined social-emotional competencies from the ground up in Tanzania. *Child Development*, *92* (6), e1095-e1109. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13673
4. Oppong, S. (2020). Towards a model of valued human cognitive abilities: An African perspective based on a systematic review. *Front. Psychol. 11*:538072. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.538072
5. Sabanathan, S., Wills, B., & Gladstone, M. (2015). Child development assessment tools in low-income and middle-income countries: how can we use them more appropriately?. *Archives of disease in childhood*, *100*(5), 482–488. https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2014-308114

number of young children with access to quality child health services (where quality is jointly defined by stakeholders); 5) number of caregivers trained in different domains; 6) change in parental or mother or household income; 7) change in the number of households sending the young children to ECCE centres; 8) change in the number of young children transitioning to primary school; 9) change in the number of young children whose development (physical, socioemotional, language, etc.) corresponds to or exceeds the cultural expectations of the host

community; and a host of related others. In all of these quantitative indicators, joint definitions with and by the community would make them more meaningful. To adopt a mixed methods design, a nested or embedded mixed design approach in which a quantitative method is nested within a qualitative approach is recommended

Figure 2 illustrates such a nested mixed design and suggests that qualitative data should be collected to inform the planning and design of the interventions. Quantitative and qualitative data should be collected before and after implementation to track progress of delivering the planned intervention (i.e., process evaluation). Finally, qualitative data should be collected on the success of the intervention at the closure of the project. Interpretation of the data should be based on the qualitative data supplemented by the quantitative data collected as part of the process evaluation.

Figure 2: An Embedded Intervention Model Emphasizing Qualitative Components



Source: Adapted from Creswell and Clark (2007, p.68). In the original model, Creswell and Clark (2007) placed emphasis on the quantitative components.

It is important that interviews, focus group discussions, and observations become the key means of evaluation. However, where possible, it is important for any quantitative tools to be used to be developed within the culture based on community's child-rearing priorities and principles as well as cultural developmental milestones. It is perhaps useful here to remind ourselves that some qualitative information can be summarized in numerical form, and most quantitative data can be summarized in terms of qualitative text capturing the findings and interpretations of those data.

5.0 Conclusions

This resource seeks to present lessons learned and strong practices from ECCE implementers about how to ensure that interventions are culturally responsive. Our goal is to lay out practical strategies for promoting meaningful community leadership and engagement in designing and carrying out ECCE programming. We provide guiding principles that cut across all stages of the program cycle, as well as strategies for each individual stage. Together, these comprise concrete, feasible steps that program teams can take to ensure programs uphold community aspirations and values for child development.

The sector of international development is biased to the detriment of community agency. Donors and the implementing organizations they fund tend to be primarily based in WEIRD countries. Donors set the agenda for how funds are used, including program goals, grant conditions, and success criteria, while implementing organizations manage the flow of resources, the implementation process, and the relationships between individuals and organizations to respond to donor requirements. Neither tend to have roots in target communities and program agendas are set with minimal community involvement. Program scopes are often ambitious, with short cycles and budgets stretched thin to achieve them. Work is frequently rushed, especially in the planning and design stages. Pressure to implement as quickly as possible means little opportunity for meaningful community consultation, let along meaningful engagement or leadership. The result of these dynamics is a neocolonial structure that has a tendency to apply global frameworks to communities supposedly in need without significant input on their part.

Meaningful engagement of communities in all stages of the program cycle yields three principal benefits. First, it upholds respect for human agency, which must be any intervention's utmost guiding principle. Community members must have more than just input into program elements; they must play meaningful roles throughout the program cycle, and have true influence over programmatic direction. This includes respecting pluralism by ensuring equitable representation across subgroups within the target population. By applying ideas laid out in this resource, communities can take the lead in defining their needs and aspirations for their children. At the planning stage, participatory needs assessments allow communities to identify what would contribute to greater well-being, moral direction, and fulfillment for children and families. At the design stage, communities can identify what an

ECCE intervention could contribute to helping them meet these needs and achieve their vision. During implementation, communities must have the opportunity to influence continuous program adaptation in order to meet their evolving needs, context, and vision. Evaluations should provide insight into the value the program provided to the community, using qualitative and/or mixed methods. Many programs strive for application of global frameworks to new contexts, and many evaluations aim to assess change in child performance across developmental domains on measures that are comparable across countries. We assert that responsiveness to real needs and meaningfulness to the community are more valuable goals.

Second, it positions programs to effectively leverage community assets. Communities have abundant resources that support child development; engaged communities can better identify and mobilize these assets. While programs commonly integrate cultural artifacts such as local songs, foods, toys, and languages, we encourage programs to understand and incorporate culture on a deeper level. This includes dynamics of teaching and learning, values, and roles of community members.

Third, it allows the sector overall to avoid replicating colonial dynamics through ECCE programs. It is not our assertion that programs, organizations, and professionals from WEIRD countries have nothing to offer to ECCE in Africa. We contend that these actors have excessive influence over the goals and design of ECCE programming in Africa, to the detriment of community agency and program quality. The result is a colonial dynamic that reduces communities to recipients of programs that may not be based in real needs, and which may impose external values and norms. We hope that this resource offers concrete strategies for breaking down these power dynamics to engage in truly collaborative program partnerships. We also hope that this resource can empower actors in the sector to advocate to donors and implementing organizations for healthier program-community relationships. As an indigenous father in Cameroon stated when asked why he believed his village's preschool should include teachers from his community: "who knows how to raise your child better than you can yourself?"

Cultures and communities are constantly evolving, and so is the field of ECCE. Strategies for ensuring cultural responsiveness will also surely evolve over time. It is the responsibility of each individual professional to hold ourselves and the organizations we work with to a higher

standard with regard to local engagement and cultural responsiveness, to bend the arc of the sector towards greater community agency.

Credit: Tropicana International School (https://www.tropicanainternationalschool.com/gallery/cultural-day.html)

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Appendices

Appendix A

List of Issues of Focus for ensuring cultural relevance in ECCE in Africa based on the PDIE Model

1. Planning with and for the community

1.1 Start with the needs of the community to identify the intervention objectives based on community needs assessment. Conduct community assets mapping in addition.

1.2 Design with and for communities if you have predetermined interventions. Conduct community assets mapping to aid the process.

1.3 Ensure proper gatekeeping roles of community leaders, government officials and local academics.

1.4 Involve stakeholders in community consultations. Traditional leaders, community elders, influential community members, and caregivers are key stakeholders to involve in the planning process for ECCE interventions.

1.5 Add a culturally responsive inclusive ECCE objective to your set of intervention objectives and fashion out a general approach to dealing with the identification, recognition, and provision of necessary culturally available and relevant support to these children throughout the project cycle. Make it a point to make provisions for screening children with special needs. This can change if no child with special needs is identified during the implementation.

2. Designing with and for the community

2.1 Base design on findings of needs assessment. Base the rationale, purpose, and scope of the interventions on community participatory needs assessment.

2.2 Apply an assets-based lens. Identify assets such local human resources, values, foods, language, and materials/artifacts that already exist in the community.

2.3 Leverage local power structures.

2.4 Be specific. Design teams should set specific and targeted goals and should refrain from doing so before obtaining a clear understanding of community needs and aspirations from the needs assessment.

2.5 Define the target audience. Programmes require clarity about who they intend to target and serve.

2.6 Add a component for a culturally responsive inclusive ECCE, a special education specialist or clinical/counselling psychologist skilled in culturally sensitive childhood neurodevelopmental assessment and make provision for the process of culturally sensitive identification, recognition and provision of the needed culturally responsive support to children with special needs.

3. Implementing with and for the community

3.1 Community leadership. Programs that place community members in implementation roles to capitalize on these individuals' ability to be responsive to needs that arise in the community, in order to iterate based on observed needs.

3.2 Culturally responsive content. To reiterate points emphasized in the planning and design sections, programmes should leverage existing resources in their implementation. This includes using local materials to make teaching and learning tools, incorporating local music and storytelling, working through existing authority structures.

3.3 Continuous adaptation cycles. Culturally sensitive programs should reflect the possibility that cultural dimensions are likely to change over time. Practise the following:

a. Continuous improvement. Regularly reviewing program performance and reflecting on possible adjustments allows teams to continually refine the model to better achieve its target objectives.
b. Responsiveness to change. As contextual factors shift, program teams can use cycles of design, implementation, and evaluation to revisit underlying assumptions and adjust the program to meet needs that arise.
c. Community ownership for sustainability. When community members contribute to the initial program design, they are creating a theoretical program model they believe will work. Seeing the program in practice allows communities to have a clearer sense of what it means to run the program.
d. Capture positive deviance. Community members who are in implementation roles will naturally adjust their approaches to meet the needs that they see on the job. A monitoring visit may conclude that the intervention is not operating effectively, when in fact community members are implementing the model differently in order to better serve the target population.

3.4 Roll out the intervention activities in respect to the culturally sensitive ways of identifying, recognizing, and supporting children with special needs according to your schedule. If no child with special needs is identified, there is no need to continue all the intervention activities in respect to inclusive ECCE.

4. Evaluating with and for the community

4.1 Qualitative evaluation is the primary mode for culturally relevant evaluation. Evaluations of interventions must be by means of qualitative evaluation, particularly through direct observation, focus discussions, and individual interviews.

4.2 Stakeholders to involve in the evaluation. The process of evaluation should engage community leaders (or community elders or influential community members) to authenticate the feedback received from parents or caregivers and teachers.

4.3 Use existing structures for data collection. Communities have structures for doing most things, including days for community meetings and meeting places (e.g., market squares, chief's palace, etc.). We recommend that in order that the evaluation process would not be foreign to the communities involved, policy makers, international organizations, and ECCE practitioners must gather their evaluation data through the preferred and existing community structures.

4.4 Preference should be given to qualitative evaluation, but for comparability's sake, it may be mixed with quantitative evaluation.

4.5 Both qualitative and quantitative evaluations should capture data on the culturally responsive inclusive ECCE objectives determined during the planning stage. Thus, the evaluation design should also include measurement (through qualitative or quantitative means) of change in respect to the culturally responsive inclusive ECCE objectives; this should occur during the planning and designing stages. Here again, the activation of this aspect of the evaluation depends on whether children with special needs were identified during the implementation.

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