



INDIGENISATION OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PRACTICE THROUGH PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY

**Grant Mapoma Mwinsa¹, Mary Grace Musonda², Brenda Simalimbu³, Hilda Zulu Nthani⁴,
Getrude Chimfwembe Gondwe⁵, Leah Chipanama⁶**

Lecturers, School of Early Childhood education, Chalimbana University, Zambia

Email: grantenm@gmail.com

Cite: Mwinsa, G. M., Musonda, M. G., Simalimbu, B., Nthani, H. Z., Gondwe, G. C., & Chipanama, L. (2023). *Indigenisation of the early childhood education practice through playful pedagogy*. In A. D. Sikalumbi, W. P. Abwino, & B. Chirwa (Eds.), *Inclusive education: Unlocking the potential of every learner* (pp. 102–111). Mission Press, Ndola, Zambia.

Introduction

Play forms a significant part of children’s daily experiences and shapes their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. According to Wanderi (2011), play is a vital hallmark of people’s culture and education across generations. Children learn better when they are engaged in more playful child-centred activities that deliver content and foster holistic child development (Matafwali & Munsaka, 2011; Matafwali et al, 2012; Munsaka, 2011; Munsaka and Kalinde, 2017). Unfortunately, the education systems in most African countries including Zambia are inclined towards the Western philosophies that undermine the resourcefulness of indigenous knowledge (games) in accessing quality early childhood education (see Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017).

Country context on ECE in Zambia

Increased access to quality basic and early childhood education has been a top priority of the government of Zambia since independence (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020; Munsaka &

Kalinde, 2017). The Ministry of Education in Zambia recognizes the important role ECE plays as a foundation for learning (ESSP, 2017 – 2021). The Education Sector Analysis shows that the government's involvement in ECE has, in the past, been minimal and was limited to enabling individuals and organisations to establish and manage ECE centres. As such, the mandate for ECE was moved in 2011 from the Ministry of Local Government and Housing to the Ministry of General Education (MoGE). Until 2011, the government allowed a system of inconsistency and lack of uniformity in the implementation of ECE curriculum in the country vis-à-vis employment of qualified teachers among others (Nkosh, 2013). From 2013, the Ministry of General Education has been employing ECE teachers at a very small rate, making it difficult for all schools to have teachers in each classroom (MoGE, 2016). In 2014, the Ministry of General Education annexed ECE centres in government primary schools (MoGE, 2016) and made it mandatory for all schools to establish ECE centres. This was without regard to the existence of teachers, materials and space for commencement of ECE. As such, it brought several challenges among them access, participation, quality, relevance, equity and management of ECE provision in schools.

It is estimated that by the end of 2016, there were 2, 118, 289 children aged 3 to 6 years who were eligible to be in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres countrywide. However, only a staggering 160, 424 learners were attending preschool giving an average rate of enrolment at less than 10% of the total population of the target age group (ESSP, 2017 – 2021). From 2016 to present, the Zambian government has made certain strides in increased access, quality, equity, gender and inclusion in Early Learning (MoGE, 2020). According to VVOB (2020) however, Early Childhood Education attendance was still very low with an estimated 17.3% of children entering Grade 1 having experienced early learning out of over 2.3 million eligible children.

ECE in Zambia has by-and-large until recently largely been an urban phenomenon focusing on preparing learners to read, write and count in readiness for grade 1 (Mwanza-Kabaghe et al., 2015). The methods of teaching have largely been didactic

involving reading, writing and numeracy (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020; Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017; Mwanza-Kabaghe et al., 2015) lacking the playful aspect of ECE. Even though the last 10 years have seen significant improvements in the access to education for children between 3 and 8 years throughout the country, some challenges still exist, proving to be increasing (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020).

Early childhood education is still highly underdeveloped with a lot of disparities from community to community across sub-Saharan regions (Henning & Ogunyemi, 2020; Madondo & Tsikira, 2021). The disparities range from large class sizes, lack of teaching/learning materials, long distances to school, poverty, lack of learning through play, pedagogical skills in teachers, uncoordinated teacher training curriculum among others (Nakawa, 2020). As a result, it is proving to be impossible to make meaningful progress with regards to learning outcomes for children in pre-primary schools. This further compound the ability for learners to perform well in primary, secondary, tertiary and later in economic development of the country. It remains a challenge for teachers to practice modern recommended pedagogy in teaching and caring for children between 0 and 8 years of age.

Play in Early Childhood Education

Play in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a very broad topic that continues to generate serious discussions and debate (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011; Mtonga, 2012; Nxumalo & Mncube, 2019). Concepts such as ‘play’ have remained topical over a long period of time (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017). “Play is the business of childhood” or “play is the child’s way of learning” are statements that are still heard but they are becoming less convincing (Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022). Using such concepts as these above often encourages those who are opposed to play in education to dismiss it on the grounds that the idea seems too broad and vague to be a valid and useful basis for teaching and learning (Parker *et al.*, 2022)). According to Parker *et al.* (2022), it does not help when ECE programmes claiming to be play-centred lack a thoughtful rationale for their play policies

and practices or when low-level, unchallenging activities called “play” abound in their indoor and outdoor environments. This threatens the place of play in ECE by inviting misguided attacks on it and by encouraging educators to devalue play’s importance as a context and medium for development during the early years (Nxumalo & Mncube, 2019).

Even though play in the history of ECE has been viewed favourably as a cornerstone of learning (Froebel, 1887/1896; Pestalozzi, 1894/1915; Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978), there have always been its critics who advocate for more structured and direct instruction for children no matter the age (Johnson et al, 2012). Recently however, the debate has intensified in the educational context strongly influenced by early learning standards and assessment of academic attainments (Christie & Roskos, 2007). Greater concern exists that play in ECE is slipping away and that vigorous response is now needed to protect its important role (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Scholars and educators are encouraged however to balance the education structure of ECE by allowing learners to have flexible schedules that allow play and learning (Parker *et al.*, 2022). In fact, as guided by Parker et al. (2022), play cannot be separated from learning in ECE classes. Research by organisations in Zambia has encouraged the use of familiar materials in a model that is called TALULAR (VVOB, 2020). TALULAR is a model of teaching and learning in ECE that means Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020; VVOB, 2020). The locally available resources are usually the ones that use indigenous or traditional games in the classroom and outdoor activities.

Play and learning co-exist in ECE as children love playing and as such, the education curriculum should be designed in such a manner that allows both guided and free play (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020). Teachers plan and ensure that children take part in guided play and engage in activities that have a particular goal or aim in the lesson (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017). In free play, children use their own agency to decide what type of games they take part in. Teacher’s roles in this case are barely ensuring that play takes place in

a safe environment for all children. This type of play should involve use of indigenous games that are familiar to children of a particular locality.

Promoting ECE through indigenous games

Over the last three decades, a growing number of research in the global south provides convincing reasons on the importance of early childhood care and education in fostering national development (Matafwali & Munsaka, 2011; Matafwali et al., 2012; Mwanza-Kabagge et al., 2015; Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017). The structure, scope, implementation and programming of early childhood activities, serving day care centres and preschoolers remains in a wide variety as espoused by Munsaka & Kalinde (2017). The field of early childhood therefore, remains an exciting career that continues to be challenging, invigorating and sometimes tiring especially for the classroom teacher and caregiver (Follari, 2015). Education and cultural knowledge are intricately related since the content of education has value underpinnings in it and is associated with a particular culture (Limonya, 2020). Therefore, teaching and learning that infuses a child's cultural knowledge into curriculum has potential to enhance innovative constructivism and thinking in learners. As explained by Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, learning is determined by the context in which children learn, the social and cultural experiences and the way in which adults and other children, tools and resources support learning. Based on Vygotsky's theory, introducing plays that are alien to the children's physical and social environment can reduce the opportunity to maximize learning. It involves methods that are being encouraged world over as they are producing better results than the ordinary conventional method of teaching ordinarily applied in primary and secondary education (Darragh, 2010; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Munsaka & Matafwali 2013). Manani (1993) argues that play is a vital activity in which children learn what no one can teach them.

Wandera's (2001) study on the traditional games of the people of Mount Kenya supports the observation that games are a means to children and youth's education, a means to

their development as well as a means of maintenance of strong bodies. Wandera therefore recommended the formalization, adoption and promotion of the traditional games for their great instrumentality in education and other social functions. In an attempt to investigate the indigenous play and learning among the Turkana, a pastoralist community in Kenya Ngasike (2015) observed that as children engage in imaginary play with objects such as balls of camel dung, cooking utensils or stones, the objects are not only used as materials for play but are assigned meanings as well, enabling children to engage in higher order mental processes based on signs and language as mental tools. The author concludes that Turkana children's play can inform educators' thinking about appropriate pedagogy about African early childhood education. Mutua (2014) study on language games and language teaching in Kenya concluded that games are used not only for fun but more importantly for the useful practice and review of language lessons which leads to communication competence.

Dewah and Wyk (2014) explored the mathematical ideas that are found in the indigenous game of pada, common in Zimbabwe. The study demonstrates that mathematics ideas such as permutations, projectiles and inverse variations and behavioural aspects are found in pada and that indigenous games can be utilized by both teachers and children to develop a liking for mathematics. Nxumalo and Mncube (2019) investigated the use of indigenous games and knowledge to decolonize school curriculum and to refocus it to the ubuntu philosophy. The findings revealed that indigenous games are rich in ubuntu philosophy and that they should be used in school curriculum to instill ubuntu philosophy in children. The authors concluded that the use of ubuntu philosophy in the school curriculum stimulate critical thinking, creativity and promote collective rules in learners. Munyao (2010) investigated the traditional games of the Akamba people of Kenya and recommend integration of the indigenous games into school curriculum.

Mtonga (2012) studied the role of indigenous music in cognitive development of Zambian children. The study attempted to look at music and play activities as processes through which children gained knowledge and skills necessary for learning purposes as theorized

by Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978). Further, the study looked at play as “a gateway to children’s acquisition of a complex range of social, linguistic, cognitive, and ethical functions that are valued in adult life” (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011: 75). The study found that the decline or indeed absence of indigenous games and plays in most school curricula impacts the ability of learners being able to acquire indigenous knowledge, traditions and life coping strategies.

Benefits of indigenous games in ECE

Research evidence converges on the importance of indigenous games in pedagogy (Ngasike, 2015, Wandera, 2011; Ejuu, 2015, Sanga, 2015; Matafwali, 2020; Munyao, 2010). Cognitive, socio-emotional, physical and moral development for an African child occurs in a sociocultural mediated context through games and play (Mtonga, 2012). Young children learn the most important things not by being told but by constructing knowledge from themselves during interaction with the physical and social world with other children during play (Ngasike, 2015; Manani, 1993). Although indigenous games have been ignored in most curricula, they are important for holistic development of children, including; survival instinct, physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Since the play materials are made from locally available materials, integrating indigenous games is likely to enhance practical learner-centered approach to teaching and learning which ensures quality, inclusivity, and cost-management in education (Parker *et al.*, 2022; Sikalumbi, 2019).

The potential and relevance of indigenous games in enhancing contemporary childhood education in Africa, Zambia inclusive has remained unclear and under-searched (Henning & Ogunyemi, 2020). This has created a knowledge gap among ECD stakeholders on how to reorient content and pedagogy in early childhood education to context and culture. This gap in knowledge has sustained the systematic exclusion of many children from equal access to quality education at the foundational stage of development (Sikalumbi, 2023). The most affected of these are girls, rural and poor urban

children as well as children living with disabilities who are never included in the current education system.

Further, commercialized play materials which are costly and unfamiliar to rural children and the urban poor have made the situation worse for this category of children. Children miss out on developing their creativity when exposed to modern games whose materials are not assembled within their local environment. Therefore, this chapter is motivated by the need for teachers, parents, academics and other stakeholders in ECE to innovate and mobilize knowledge on indigenous games into the formal early childhood learning education by integrating indigenous games in curriculum content, instructional strategies, and assessment of learning to ensure holistic development of children.

In addition, parental engagement needs to be included in the overall assessment of children's wellbeing to support mitigation strategies for all children who display developmental delays. This critical approach also facilitates the development of mitigation strategies for children with special needs, often at the margins of early learning. Early childhood education should therefore be premised on three assumptions; i) that when children's learning is connected to their everyday experiences, learning is taken out of the classroom and embedded into contexts that make learning meaningful, ii) children's access to learning can be supported by the parents and other caregivers who spend much time with children, and iii) opportunities should be made available in order to increase access to basic education for all children through indigenous games. This early learning matrix is therefore expected to yield results that support holistic child development thereby building an innovative and self-motivated society that can contribute positively to personal, communal and national development.

This approach to learning is a sure path to increased access to quality education for both boys and girls as provided in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 target 2. This also would enable all learners regardless of their socio-economic standing in society to access quality education that promotes early development. The learning would be appropriate

as it would be useful to both rural and urban communities from low-income communities that cannot afford materials bought from stores due to financial limitations.

Conclusion

Children learn playfully through exploring their immediate rich linguistic environment. Games familiar to them promote greater opportunities for the acquisition of all necessary skills required in adult life. Therefore, indigenisation of all games in early childhood education through (talular) not only enhance creativity but also foster culturally appropriate constructivism. These assertions are supported by both local and global research. All training institutions of early childhood practitioners should ensure appropriate curricula and pedagogy that support playful learning at this very important stage of education.

References

Darragh, J.C. (2010). *Introduction to Early Childhood Education: Equity and Inclusion*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

Follari, L. (2015). *Valuing Diversity in Early Childhood Education*. Pearson.

Henning, E. & Ogunyemi, F.W. (2020). *From traditional learning to modern education: Understanding the value of play in Africa's childhood development*. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(2), 1-9.

Jones, E. & Reynolds, G. (2011). *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play*. Early Childhood Education Series (2nd. Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Lumonya, J.S. (2020). *A critique of Competency Based Curriculum: Towards Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Kenya*. A research project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Education, Philosophy of Education of the University of Nairobi, Nairobi.

Lungu, S. & Matafwali, B. (2020). *Play based learning in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres in Zambia: A teacher Perspective*. European Journal of Education Studies, Vol. 7, 356-368.

Marfo, K., & Biersteker, L. (2011). Exploring culture, play and early childhood education practice in African contexts. In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education* (pp. 73– 85). New York, NY: Routledge.

Matafwali, B. & Munsaka, E. (2011). *Programmes in Zambia: A case of four selected districts*. *Journal of Early Childhood Development*. Vol V, 109-131.

Matafwali, B., Munsaka, E., Mweemba, L. & Muleya, G. (2012). *Mapping and Evaluation of Early Childhood Care Development and Education in Zambia*. Lusaka: UNICEF.

Mtonga, T. (2012). *Children's Games and Plays in Zambia*. Lusaka: UNZA Press.

Munsaka, E. & Kalinde, B. (2017). *Laying the foundation for optimal outcomes in Early Childhood Education*. Lusaka: University of Zambia Press.

Munya, M.R. (2010). *Traditional Games of the Akamba of Kenya*. A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of science in the school of applied Human Science of Kenyatta University, Nairobi.

Mwanza-Kabaghe, S., Mubanga, E., Matafwali, B., Kasonde-Ngádu, S. & Bus, A.G. (2015). *Zambian Preschools: A Boost for Early Literacy?* English Linguistics Research. Vol. 4(4), 1-10.

Nilsson, M., & Ferholt, B. (2014). Vygotsky's theories of play, imagination and creativity in current practice: In: Gunilla Lindqvist's "*creative pedagogy of play*" in U.S. Kindergartens and Swedish Reggio-Emilia inspired preschools. PERSPECTIVA, Florinopolis, 32(3), pp. 919 – 950.

Ngasike, J.T. (2015). Take me to the dry (river): children play in the Turkana pastoralist community in Kenya. In J.L. Roopnarine, M. M Patte, J.E Johnson and D. Kushner, and David K (Eds.), *International perspectives in children play*, (pp. 103-113), Berkshire, McGraw-Hill.

Nkosha, C. (2013). Validation Workshop for Early Childhood Education, Kabwe.

Nxumalo, S.A & Mncube, D.W. (2019). Using indigenous games and knowledge to decolonize school curriculum: Ubuntu perspective. *Perspectives in education*, 36(2) 103-118.

Parker, R., Thomsen, B. S., & Berry, A. (2022). *Learning through play at school – A framework for policy and practice*. The LEGO Foundation.

Republic of Zambia, Ministry of General Education and Ministry of Higher Education, *Education and Skills Sector Plan (2017 – 2021)*.

Ruto-Korir, R. C. (2010). *Preschool teachers' beliefs of developmentally appropriate educational practices*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria.

Sanga, D.N. (2017). Factors affecting the participation of children in traditional games in Tanzania, *UTAFITI*, 1(2),131-148.

Sikalumbi Arona Dewin (2023). Success in research, the researcher's companion, Printgraphix Zambia, Lusaka.

Sikalumbi Arona Dewin (2019) Effects of Teaching Approaches on Entrepreneurial Skills Development: A Perspective of The Zambian Revised National Curriculum and Pedagogy, Chalimbana University Multi-Disciplinary Journal of Research, 1st Issue, Volume 1, March/ April.

Sikalumbi Arona Dewin (2022). The entrepreneurial cooperative, an economic measure to alleviate poverty in developing countries, Printgraphix Zambia, Lusaka.

UNICEF (2018). *Learning through Play: Strengthening Learning through Play in Early Childhood Education Programmes*. New York: UNICEF.

VVOB Zambia Office. *2020 Annual Report for Zambia*. [VVOB in Zambia | VVOB vzw](#)

Wanderi, M.P. (2011). *The Indigenous games of the people of the coastal region of Kenya and their related social cultural settings: A cultural education appraisal*. A draft research project sponsored by the organization of social science researchers of Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), Nairobi.

Wanderi, M.P. (2001). *The traditional games of the Mount Kenya region: A cultural education appraisal*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Kenyatta University, Nairobi.

Wyk, M.V. & Dewah, C. (2014). The place of indigenous cultural games by educators in teaching and learning mathematics. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 48(1), 189-197.