

# Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge and Practice into ECCE: A Comparison of Programs in The Gambia, Senegal and Mali

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*Early Childhood Development (ECD) has emerged as a theme in international and African dialogue on education in recent years. UNESCO's Division of Basic Education Early Childhood promotes an integrated approach to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy development and review. The study examines how this is implemented in three West African countries, with similar cultural groups in their diverse populations: The Gambia, Mali and Senegal. In The Gambia there is thus far a proposal on how indigenous knowledge should be included in early childhood programs. The clos d'enfants [children's groups], in Mali demonstrates similar ideas through an international partnership with a local initiative program, developed in Bamako using mothers, local materials and toys made by the participants. Senegal's program combining local traditions and European pedagogical philosophies, the case des tout-petits [children's huts], came from the President. Analysis of these three cases suggests that these programs and proposals may be a springboard for UNESCO and partners to further develop ECCE with indigenous knowledge and practice in Africa.*

Early Childhood Development (ECD) has emerged as a theme in the international and African dialogue on education in recent years, though it is not the highest priority for governments or donors. The 1989 United Nations (UN) adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child began a more visible drive for early childhood development on the international stage. Closely following this, the Education for All (EFA) initiative from the 1990 World Conference on EFA in Jomtien, Thailand, the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and the development of the Millennium Development Goals in the UN, have all led to an increase in government policies and local initiatives in the domain of early childhood programs around the world. Most importantly, the first of the EFA goals in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action is “expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 8). From these international commitments and declarations, UNESCO's Division of Basic Education Early Childhood promotes an integrated approach to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy development and review. The African continent has also established a strong commitment to ECCE through the formation of the Working Group on Early Childhood Development in the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in 1993 and an Early Childhood Francophone Africa Regional Network (RAFPE) in 1996. Both groups have participated in regional training and policy development for ECCE in the region.

This paper will consider UNESCO's policy that promotes an integrated and local adaptation of ECCE programs and how it is implemented in three West African countries, with similar cultural groups in their diverse populations: The Gambia, Mali and Senegal. Beginning with an exploration of UNESCO's position on ECCE, the paper will briefly describe the benefits of preschool education programs and the idea of indigenous or local knowledge in education. The paper will then examine a study from The Gambia that shows how indigenous knowledge can be included in early childhood programs. In Mali ideas similar to those put into practice in The Gambia study can be seen in an international partnership with a local initiative program, the *clos d'enfants*, developed in Bamako involving mothers and using local materials and toys made by the participants. While the first two cases look at ground-up approaches, in Senegal the President

initiated a program combining local traditions and European pedagogical philosophies, the *case des tout-petits*. In conclusion, there will be a brief discussion of what UNESCO can continue or begin to do for ECCE and possibilities for further research on these three countries' ECCE programs.

### **What Is UNESCO's Concept Of ECCE?**

UNESCO defines early childhood as the time from birth to age 8. This is generally divided into two groups: 0-3 and 3-6/8. This paper, like most early childhood programs in the countries studied, will focus specifically on the later group or preschool ages 3-6. For UNESCO, ECCE should be holistic and relevant, involving the development of the whole body. This concept encompasses everything from a child's health, nutrition and hygiene to cognitive skills and social, emotional development. As documented in UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2001 (Bellamy, 2001) this is a critical time for a person's brain to be prepared for future learning not only through stimulation by educational activities, but equally by emphasizing healthy practices such as hygiene, vaccinations, and positive emotional stimulation. UNESCO encourages that national governments should approach policy formation for ECCE in phases and a through public-private partnerships (2006).

ECCE's numerous benefits begin with children being more prepared for their primary and hopefully continued education. ECCE can also provide a way to fight malnutrition and the spread of preventable diseases at critical moments. UNESCO emphasizes the importance of including parental education in any kind of ECCE program so that the positive effects reach the family and not just the enrolled child. In the policy guidelines it is noted, "the key to improving school performance is to invest in the families of young children" (Vargas-Baron, 2005, p. 4). The economic returns are not only very high for the child in the long term but also for the parents in the short term. Having a safe, stimulating environment to which a child can go, even for a few hours each day, allows a mother to participate more freely in economic activities outside of the home (UNESCO, 2006).

Generally the non-formal and private sectors have been the most active in ECCE but according to recent reports this may be slowly shifting. The 2007 Global Monitoring Report on EFA shows that there is very limited enrollment in ECCE, especially in Africa, where primary enrollments are still at low levels. Most programs that do exist serve urban areas and easier to reach populations. Currently, staff have very low levels of education, which UNESCO sees as one of the many areas of ECCE needing improvement (UNESCO, 2006).

UNESCO's role as a driving force behind the development of ECCE policies by national governments supported the creation of some guidelines for national ECCE policy planning. UNICEF and ADEA also supported these guidelines written by Emily Vargas-Baron. According to Vargas-Baron (2005), "the ideal ECD system is developed with full parental participation. Parents should become the first and best nurturers, stimulators and educators of their children" (p. 8). Furthermore, the ECD system should be comprehensive, continuous, culturally appropriate, and community based. Policy decisions should include local and national stakeholders in order to respect and ensure the cultural relevance of programs (Vargas-Baron, 2005). In order to understand the ideas behind cultural relevance it is essential to take a look at the ideas of local knowledge and practices.

### **What Does It Mean To Include Indigenous or Local Knowledge and Practices?**

Indigenous knowledge can be defined as a particular group's understanding of the surrounding

world, ways of sharing information or teaching, and ways of speaking and thinking that are passed down through generations (Easton, 2004). Within both formal and non-formal education traditional knowledge and practices can be woven together with other pedagogical practices. More often the non-formal and informal arenas see the use of indigenous practices while the formal system does not (Easton, 2004).

On the African continent, where former colonial systems of education are predominant, the desire to include indigenous knowledge and practice has continued to gain momentum since independence. The African Regional Framework of Action from Dakar calls for “community involvement in school decision-making and administration; employment of teachers in their own community of origin; curriculum reform toward locally relevant subjects; use of mother tongue as the language of instruction; the use of schools as community learning centers” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 24-34). The indigenous knowledge that should be included at the early childhood level begins with use of the mother tongue. One reason is that using a mother tongue tends to better increase literacy rates (Leautier, 2004). Traditional stories are also important tools to be used in ECCE programs as demonstrated by case-studies conducted by students of the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (Schafer et al. 2004). Schafer (2004) summarized findings from Uganda and Lesotho that emphasized the use of local stories as important to cognitive skills development and continuation of indigenous knowledge. Sagnia (2004) also promotes the use of songs, dances, and locally produced toys in ECCE programs in the Gambia as will be discussed below. Local ideas of parenting and children’s roles can and should also influence early education practices (Pence, 2004). In many of the documents read (Schafer, 2004; Pagano, 1999; Sagnia, 2004), the rise in urbanization has led to a change in family structure and loss of traditional practices, therefore increasing a cultural preservation argument for the integration of indigenous knowledge in education.

### **How Are Indigenous and Local Knowledge and Practice Being Included in ECCE Policies and Programs in the Neighboring Countries of The Gambia, Senegal and Mali?**

#### *The Gambia: Planning for action*

The Gambia is a very small country that lies on both sides of the Gambia River and is surrounded on three sides by Senegal. In a population of only approximately 1.7 million, ethnic groups and local languages include the Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, Jola, and Serahuli. The official language is English stemming from former British colonization. The Gambia was briefly federated with its neighbor as Senegambia from 1982-1989. Both are predominantly Muslim countries (CIA, 2007).

The education system is based on the British school system with a lower basic, upper-basic, secondary and tertiary. The government’s Department of State for Education (DOSE) Strategic Plan 2006-2015 calls for increased equitable access to and quality in education starting at the basic level through higher education. Local languages Wolof, Pulaar, Mandinka, Jola and Sarahule will be introduced as subjects throughout the system. In terms of ECCE there are currently 265 preschool structures serving a little over 1200 students. The Education Policy calls for the government to set guidelines for preschool educator training, work with NGOs and multiple sectors for an integrated approach, and encourage community participation in early childhood development. Language of instruction is to be the mother tongue. The national policy document on early childhood is still in progress (DOSE, 2006).

While the Gambian government has acknowledged the importance of the type of integrated ECCE promoted by UNESCO, there is not enough data on what is currently being done at the local

level. One case study was found through a major UNESCO partner, UNICEF. A UNICEF Banjul employee, Jenieri Sagnia, participated in the Early Childhood Development Virtual University through University of Victoria and in 2004 produced a study entitled "Indigenous Knowledge and Practices of Parents and Families Regarding Psychosocial Care for Children in Three Rural Communities in the Gambia: Implications for UNICEF Programming in ECD." This research project is an initial step in the policy process, and utilizes surveys, interviews and observations to determine what knowledge and practices for children are already in place in local communities in order to integrate these better with current international best practices of interactive learning through play and in the mother tongue. The study fits well with the 2005 Policy Guidelines sponsored by UNICEF, UNESCO and ADEA specifically to conduct an assessment of ECCE programming and policies in order to set a policy framework to fill any potential gaps. The guidelines aim for the "development of comprehensive, integrated and culturally appropriate [Early Childhood Development] ECD programmes and networks," (Vargas-Baron, 2005 p. 1)

Sagnia (2004) found that the Mandinka, Fula and Wolof communities he studied saw the social benefits of children's play even though there was also a belief that too much play would interfere with future success. Play was seen to make children happy and occupy them so parents could work. In all three communities children observed the work being performed by older members. Mothers would talk and sing to their very small children and carry them on their backs. Parents would sometimes play with children, especially mothers with their babies. Sagnia (2004) found that in the Mandinka group local toys were used in play, though they were limited. Gender differences included more physical games and longer play allowed for boys. Often, grandmothers and older children watched younger children. The grandmothers also were storytellers and singers, or filled in the comfort role of absent mothers (Sagnia, 2004).

All of these were examples of positive social interactions, emotional and cognitive stimulations beneficial to a young child's development that could be drawn upon in creating a preschool program in The Gambia. UNICEF already had a successful program, according to Sagnia (2004), in the Gambia to promote breastfeeding and hygiene within communities. This program was known as the Baby Friendly Community Initiative (BFCI). The formula for the initiative was "*Modern/scientific knowledge + local/traditional knowledge = credible knowledge*" (Sagnia, 2004 p. 85). The UNICEF participation in early childhood program would begin with the BFCI to work with communities in developing understanding of psychosocial development and ECCE. Sagnia (2004) suggests building on the indigenous practices and educating the communities on benefits of further opportunities for play in group settings with toys, sand, water, songs, dance and stories. Training should include local production of toys and the participation of grandmothers as childcare providers and storytellers for perpetuating traditional knowledge and also economic concerns of using what is available at minimal costs (Sagnia, 2004).

*Mali: An international partnership with local initiative spreads*

Mali is a much larger country than The Gambia that also borders Senegal. Mali and Senegal were very briefly federated at the time of their independence from France. The population of around 12 million is also highly multicultural and includes Mande (Bambara, Malinke, and Soninke), Peul, Voltaic, Songhai, Tuareg and Moor groups. French is the official language due to former French colonization, but the majority-spoken language is Bambara. As in The Gambia and Senegal, Islam is the predominant religion (CIA, 2007).

The education system is based on the French system with primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Language of instruction is French with local languages used in pre-primary and early primary



classes as a transition to French. There are approximately 51,000 children enrolled in 412 preschool structures in Mali. Of these, 64 *clos d'enfants* rely on strong community involvement in providing preschool care and education in some rural and urban settings (UNESCO, 2006). The most recent Educational Policy Letter in Mali calls for developing early childhood and its inclusion under the main heading of basic education (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, République du Mali, nd). A national policy document on ECCE was not found at this time.

Despite very low enrollment rates of five percent in preprimary programs, Mali has an important ECCE initiative that began in Bamako with UNESCO-FICEMEA and a local women's group and has now spread to rural villages in Benin, Niger and Senegal. The first *clos* was opened in Bamako in 1997 upon the request of Mrs. Diakité Oumou Fayé, President of the Jiguiya Association (Poli and Varier 1997, 2003). The idea of a *clos* combines local resources and traditions and "modern" pedagogical concepts in a formal setting (Poli and Varier, 1997). The author sees this as in-line with the ideas put forth by UNESCO's vision of ECCE and in the ideas presented in Sagnia's study.

A *clos d'enfants* is a place where 15 children, aged 3-6, are brought together in a safe, clean environment to socialize and learn. 15 women form five different groups of three mother-educators (*mères-éducatrices*), each including a younger future mother, a mother and a grandmother. The groups volunteer one day each week to take care of the *clos* and its activities. In the urban areas there is a small remuneration for transportation costs. Learning is in small groups through interactive play using games created by the volunteers. There is at least a healthy snack if not a meal provided each day. A garden and chickens at the site are recommended to be tended by all involved as an economic and educational endeavor. The *clos* structure and program emphasize the global development of the child on physical, emotional and social levels. One of the requirements is a clean water supply onsite. A further idea is that the trained mother-educators will take their knowledge of health and hygiene back into their family lives as well (Poli, 2003).

Looking at the management structures and the training sessions reveals the influence and importance of indigenous knowledge and practice for the *clos*. Before the *clos* is opened, the whole community is involved in deciding to adopt the model. The council of elders or other local leaders will choose a male representative who in turn chooses three mothers to form the local management team with him. A *clos* must be connected with a women's association. The community chooses the mothers and children. Training for the mothers is given by specialists, generally from Europe, over a one-week period where the women have a continuous dialogue beginning with what they observe children in the community doing on a daily basis. The women create game bags with local materials, for example clay beads and dominoes, puzzles from postcards, and cloth dolls. A simple structure to house the program is also to be built of local materials by the community. Women are further called upon to remember the games and songs, in the local language and from their own childhood, to be shared with the group and used in the *clos*. Throughout the training the women are asked to reflect on their activities, modeling the interactive learning methods that should be used with the children (Poli, 1997; 2001; 2003).

Save the Children's Strong Beginnings program is another example of a partnership program that incorporates local knowledge into current best practices. As with Save the Children's community primary schools, preschools are built based on village demand, and teachers are hired locally to run the schools. Pagano (1999) examines this program during a visit early in the implementation of the program at a school site at Foutière, in the southern rural part of Mali. The Strong Beginnings program uses Bambara beliefs, language and indigenous child-rearing practices (Pagano, 1999).

Pagano (1999) describes the local village chief, education committee and parents' opinions and expectations of the program as positive.

*Senegal: Presidential driving force creates a national ECCE movement*

Senegal is the westernmost country on the African continent. As mentioned above, Senegal surrounds The Gambia and shares a border with Mali. Similar in population size to Mali, at 12.5 million inhabitants, ethnic groups are shared with both The Gambia and Mali. Wolof, Pular, Mandinka, Serrer, Jola, Soninke are the most populous ethnic groups and the six national languages. French is the official language, as in Mali, due to former French colonization. As seen in the other country examples, Senegal is a highly Muslim country (CIA, 2007).

Because of a shared colonial past, Mali and Senegal have similar education systems from pre-schools through to the university level with French as the language of instruction, though the national languages are used in the pre-primary and early primary years. The ECCE sector currently includes 971 structures and over 78,000 students, though this is only 6% of the preschool age population. In Senegal, several ECCE programs have been tested, including community pre-schools for 3-6 year olds emphasizing health, nutrition and religion along with some instruction. This initiative of the Programme for Community Pre-school Education in Senegal in 1996 called for community and parental involvement, and volunteer "mother-assistants" with supervision at higher levels. This idea resembles that of the mother-educators in Mali's *clos d'enfants*. A health focused nursery school type model was tried from 1996-2000 in parts of Dakar where the younger children were taught in Wolof and the older group in French. Other programs included community nutrition centers and early childhood community awareness centers. In 2001 a Ministry of Family and Early Childhood (MFPE) was created (Rayna, 2003). ECCE is included in the current ten year plan PDEF from 2003.

The example this study will focus on is President Wade's *case des tout-petits*, or "children's hut" announced at the 2000 World Forum in Dakar. The move was made official in 2004 by a decree creating the ANCTP, National Agency of the Children's Hut, whose council has members from the majority of government ministries. This type of integrated approach has been advocated for by UNESCO. The *cases* are centers providing schooling, health and nutrition, and community education, which focus on children from birth to age 6 and their parents. The building is in a hexagonal form based on play areas for the five senses, and a mother's room for their education. There is also a kitchen, infirmary, office, storage space, toilets and courtyard. A diagonal bar structure from the ground to the roof symbolises a rooting in the local culture and reaching to others (ANCTP, 2007).

According to the official web site, (<http://www.case-toupetit.sn/>) the *case des tout-petits* encompasses a holistic and integrated approach to child development, promotes access for girls, handicapped and rural children while valuing and utilizing local cultural heritage through stories and singing with volunteer grandmothers. This latter concept is similar to the suggestions of Sagnia in The Gambia study. A trained animator is in charge of the children's educational activities with help from volunteers, mother-assistants and a religious instructor. A meal or snack is provided through other international health and food programs. Some also include gardens, similar to the Mali examples. Multimedia equipment is also part of the program. The vision of the *case des tout-petits* is to open access to an integrated early childhood program incorporating traditional culture and modern pedagogical tools through the creation of 28,000 *cases* by 2015 (ANCTP, 2007).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

It is clear that there is an increasing understanding and desire at the national government level to encourage and participate in ECCE in The Gambia, Mali and Senegal. While data is limited due to the limited number of ECCE programs and studies in the region, there is evidence and similarities from the case studies of ways to include indigenous knowledge and practice in an early childhood program that also promotes the whole child's development. Use of mother tongue for interactions, games, storytelling and songs were common ways of transmitting local knowledge across the three cases. Community participation, particularly by grandmothers, mothers and local volunteers, was seen as crucial to the success of the program and therefore encouraged in all three cases. Sometimes local building materials and locally made toys were also factors in the program plans. In all cases, programs seem to be built on traditional community values of raising children, supplemented by best practice ideas on health, nutrition and interactive brain stimulation to better prepare children for basic education.

The author recommends that UNESCO continue in its partnerships with FICEMEA, UNICEF and other groups to promote programs that respond to the holistic and integrated ideals of ECCE while taking into account local traditions. Perhaps there could be an increase in cross-border programs, as is the case with the *clos d'enfants* initiative, which has been taken from Mali to Benin, Niger and Senegal. The *case* example from Senegal is a much more expensive model because of the national scale and construction materials but the ideas incorporating child and community learning can be widely useful. Perhaps The Gambia may also see the fruition of Sagnia's recommendations.

A more complete understanding of the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the preschool programs of Senegal, The Gambia and Mali would require research on location or extended contact with local NGOs and perhaps schools due to the lack of available data. Ideally one could use surveys, observation, and interviews on location in several communities throughout the three countries, similar to Sagnia's study, for a truly in-depth look at the question of incorporating local knowledge in ECCE. One would also need to find data in actual ECCE programs on how language, childrearing/discipline, toys, games and other facets of local knowledge are currently being used. This would be an important step in facilitating the spread of such programs to other areas with Senegal, Mali and The Gambia as well as to neighboring nations.

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