

Chapter 2

Dilemmas of Rights-Based Approaches to Child Well-Being in an African Cultural Context

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The title of a recent early childhood development book, *Africa's Children, Africa's Challenge* (Garcia, Pence, & Evans, 2008), captures the interest and concern for Africa's difficulties with its huge child populations. The child and adolescent cohorts exceed 60 % in many African countries (Nsamenang, 2002). Fourteen of the eighteen countries in the world whose population of children ages 0–14 years is 45 % or more are African (CIA, 2007). About 20 % of sub-Saharan Africa's total population of children below 6 years of age is seriously at risk. While Africa's mortality rates are declining, they are still the highest in the world. The children who survive are not thriving optimally. Of those who survive through age 6, nearly one-third are chronically malnourished, weighing only three-fourths of the weight standard for their age (Britto, Engle, & Alderman, 2007). About 35 % of the children are stunted in growth from persistent malnutrition before their third birthday. The worst case scenario in most sub-Saharan African communities is even more disquieting than the overview of the state of Africa's children depicted above.

The appalling condition of the African child is obvious and undeniable, and it seems odd to think that extreme life circumstances only partially explain the hardship of Africa's children. If we could apply a truly fair cross-cultural, context-sensitive happiness index, we might discover Africa's children to be among the world's happiest sample of children, perhaps oblivious to their adversities. One significant but usually unthinkable source of Africa's difficulty with its next generations is the “intervention factor.” This is a multilayered state of affairs that has seldom been mentioned, much less scrutinized. By “intervention factor,” I mean all or any effort, act, idea, and practice such as policies, research, education, child rights

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convention, and services development that are extraneous to the child's status quo and introduced by individuals, governments, interest groups, and communities, including the local, national, and international development communities, to bring Africa out of its quagmire of underdevelopment and poverty. The intent of such interventions is to launch Africa on a sustainable path to measurable development in terms of quality of life, resources transformation, and societal progress, typically against indicators external to African cultural circumstances and sociohistorical experiences. This statement is not tantamount to a rejection that Africa and Africans should not compare on league tables of nations and human development. Instead, it is a plea that the signals for such comparisons ought to be culture-fair and context-valid and have not been, hitherto.

This chapter takes a glimpse at the intervention factor in Africa's difficulties with giving its children—the future hope of their families and nations—"a good start in life involving nurturing, care, and a safe environment" (African Ministers and Representatives of Ministers, 2005). However, it seems rational to first examine the African childhood context and key issues underlying such interventions. For example, why should we critique goodwill interventions intended to uplift Africa? Are Africa's prolife values really adversarial to proper care and effective guidance of development, or is it that the moral imperatives and existential realities within which Africans value and socialize children differ from those that frame interventions based on child rights approaches? Why can't Africa garner the means to optimize the care and development of its children? If Africa were to work out suitable policies and programs and build effective capacity for enhanced productivity and networking (Pence & Marfo, 2004), in whose "image will those programs take shape? Will they emerge from within Africa or from outside" or is their origin a mute point (Nsamenang, 2008, p. 135)?

Overview of Childhood in an African Cultural Setting

Parental values organize daily parenting routines for child and family life (Harkness & Super, 1996). Parents' cultural belief systems channel elements of the larger culture to children. Accordingly, childhood in Africa is best visualized within an African theory of the universe, which envisions a circular path to human ontogenesis in three phases, identifiable more by cultural imperatives than by the biological markers that trigger them (Nsamenang, 2008). *Social selfhood* is an experiential reality, the physically existing human being that begins with conception and connects the two metaphysical phases of *spiritual* and *ancestral selfhood* (Nsamenang, 1992b, 2005). The existential self or social selfhood, the primary subject content of developmental science, develops through seven stages—namely, prebirth/neonatal, social priming, social apprenticing, social entrée, social internment, adulthood, and old age/death (Nsamenang, 1992b, pp. 144–148). The ontogenetic phases I discuss in this chapter cover social apprenticing, social entrée, and the early period of social internment. These phases correspond to the conventional developmental stages from the toddler years to pubescence.

An African theory draws from life journeys in African cultural settings (Serpell, 1993) to recognize the transformation of the human newborn from a biological entity into a viable cultural agent of a particular community en route to adulthood. As children develop, they gradually and systematically enter into and assume different levels of personhood, identity, and being (Nsamenang, 2005). Children are not born with the knowledge and cognitive skills with which to make sense of and to engage the world; they learn or grow into them as they develop (Nsamenang, 2004). Based on perceived child states and milestones of human ontogenesis, Africans assign sequential cultural tasks to the stages of development they recognize. In this way, they organize child development as a sociogenic process, with cultural beliefs and practices that guide systematic socialization, education, and the expectations required for each ontogenetic stage. Accordingly, we can interpret child development as the acquisition and growth of competencies in the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains and the moral maturity required to competently engage in the world, implying the family, community, and the society at large.

With the lens of availability to and the amount of awake-time spent with children, we qualify the African peer group as the most handy companion, socializer, and caregiver during the toddler and childhood years (Nsamenang, 1992b). This is possible because African participative pedagogies embed educational ideas and caregiving practices into family traditions, children's daily routines, and interactive processes (Nsamenang, 2004) in a manner that rapidly and systematically transforms the child into a cultural "agent" of his or her own developmental learning from an early age (Nsamenang et al., 2008). Children "extract" the social, emotional, practical, cognitive, relational, and other situated intelligences from the activity settings of the home, society, and peer culture through contextual embedment and active participation and less through explicit instruction. In so doing, they "graduate" from one activity setting and participative sector of the peer culture to another, steadily maturing toward adulthood. The "extractive" processes they employ are similar to the interactional-extractive learning process described by Piaget (1952) but differ in being entirely child-to-child interstimulation and mentorship. That is, the mentors in the children's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) are not adults but peers, who initiate and promote significant self-education and developmental influences.

African parents, caregivers, and peer mentors use tacit cultural techniques and strategies that provoke the cognitive faculties to induce behavioral and affective changes and adjustment to knowledge and skills acquisition and social situations. They trigger and prime children's agency, such as that incited by not providing direct answers to children's queries or curiosities (Nsamenang, 2004). If a child asks for an explanation of how a parent or mentor performed a specific skilled activity or procedure, the characteristic query would refer to whether the child does not "see" or "hear." This translates literally into anticipation that "You are expected to observe, notice, learn, and understand what and how to do what I did. You don't have to ask me. Learn!" Accordingly, most African parents "responsibilize" children from an early age by teasing and assigning livelihood duties and engaging them in real-life interactions. In African family traditions, instances in which children engage in

nonsense or pretend play are rare indeed. Instead, they undertake productive play, often within the peer groups of neighborhood and school, but these ubiquitous developmental spaces have not been researched. The participative pedagogies and interpersonal processes of child-to-child interactions and encounters preclude lonesome sovereignty but embrace and support relational individuation and social integration through “child work” in familial and social life (Nsamenang, 2008).

Social and intellectual transformation in the individual is brought about by participation in family and societal life (Rogoff, 2003). African families guide the social and cognitive transformation of children through child work, which is a pivotal mode of preparing the next generation in African cultures. The family and the child understand it as useful to the family and necessary for the child’s developmental learning (Nsamenang et al., 2008). It is graduated on the culture’s perceived developmental trajectory and the child’s level of developmental competence (Nsamenang, 2005, 2008). The showpiece of participation is agency or personal responsibility and commitment to mature into and make progress toward one’s prompted, desired, or imagined endpoint(s) of development (Nsamenang et al., 2008). Africa’s enduring traditions of child work encourage children “to become independent at a [very] early age, and this independence is fostered and enforced by letting a child do even difficult things on his own” (Munday, 1979, p. 165). African families do not traditionally tolerate child abuse that is not synonymous to child work, the participative mode of education, and civic sensitization (Nsamenang, 2008). Participatory learning is open to abuse and, indeed, has been abused by individuals and families. The confusion between child work and child abuse is only one of several issues that “problematize” the intervention of childhood in Africa, however.

Intervention of Africa’s Childhood at Issue

The hub of Africa’s difficulties is the dilemmas that derive from the tensions intrinsic in the *mélange* of local and global imperatives that now live together in the same individuals and communities (Nsamenang & Dawes, 1998). The hybridism inheres in the interfaces of Africa’s heritage of three significant world civilizations from Eastern, Western, and indigenous sources (Mazrui, 1986). Most analyses of Africa’s undesirable condition tend to position the African source of this heritage as inimical to development and progress and Western legacies as unproblematic, emancipatory solutions to the continent’s multiple challenges. The non-fit of some Western models is often not considered. For instance, in its classical form, the inclusive fitness paradigm does not seem to fluently explain why sub-Saharan Africa sustains the highest fertility of any world region (Smith, 2004) when the continent is said to lack the mettle and depends on foreign aid to cater to its offspring. It is not quite evident what justifies intervention on behalf of African children—the adversities they suffer or the high fertility rates of most African communities?

Should Africa “stand against” the maxims and spirit of “the current of received wisdom” or continue uncritically to receive “those things that are given to” its

“present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable” (Rose, 1999, p. 20)? Of course, Africans have benefited enormously and continue to gain from values, lifestyles, and technologies imported into Africa, especially from the West. However, we also need to gain from Foucault’s (1980) insight that everything is not bad, but everything is potentially dangerous. This wisdom obliges critical appraisal of even the “best” of intentions or the most benevolent attitudes and behaviors. After all, scientific evidence alerts us to the possibility of unanticipated outcomes from research procedures, given that every study is a kind of intervention. Even the legitimate duties of researchers, nation states, charities, and organizations, including the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions, ought to be critiqued (Nsamenang, 2007). The huge variety of childhoods reinforces such a critical spirit in order to avoid or at least reduce the “construction of a knowledge which is exclusive of many other knowledges” (Urban, 2006). “Questioning the expectation that academic research can provide knowledge as base for political decision and, in consequence, administrative and managerial action does not mean, of course, to deny the importance and possibilities of research in this field in general” (Urban, 2006, p. 1). To be useful, research ought to be context-responsive!

Discourse on child development and the “quality” of childhood care and services inspired by and framed within the dominant mainstream narratives generally pathologize African forms of childrearing and child guidance. LeVine’s (2004, p. 163) research in Africa revealed that African reproductive ideologies and parenting practices were built on “alternative patterns of care based on different moral and practical considerations” that constituted “normal patterns of development that had not been imagined in developmental theories.” Similarly, Zeitlin (1996) explained how the feeding habits of Nigerian parents that non-Africans regard as counterproductive are useful. By contrast, Weisner, Matheson, and Bernheimer (1996) thought that American parental beliefs on the importance of early “stimulation” for optimal child development could lead to an unnecessary concern about the earliest possible interventions for children with developmental delays. Serpell (1994) concluded from a review of *Human development in cultural context: a third world perspective* (Nsamenang, 1992b) that it espoused a theory of the universe that diverges from that which informs contemporary Western developmental science. Thus, the huge diversity in parenting practices results in differentiation in desirable child outcomes. Moreover, Africa’s sociogenic developmental trajectory “differs in theoretical focus from the more individualistic accounts by Freud, Erikson, & Piaget” (Serpell, 1994, p. 18). Ngaujah (2003) felt that Africa’s peculiar theories and the developmental processes and practices that follow from them cogently posit the impetus to look at Africa from a different perspective in the field of psychology and human development. The most appropriate framework would be a learning posture (Agar, 1986) framed by the scientific method, as a generic approach that could “discover” new methodologies, new ways of understanding, and new concepts about development and situated intelligences, for example, in any culture and context.

A largely unexplored feature of efforts at development and quality of child life in Africa by both local and foreign interest groups and agencies is that Africa’s “progress” is being planned “almost entirely on foreign aid” (Nsamenang, 2007, p. 7), against the

evidence that “donor presence remains uneven across the world’s poorest countries” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 21). Africa is and has always been a low-priority world region (Nsamenang, 2007), and a scrutiny of such attitudes toward Africa might implicate UN agencies. The humanitarian and sociopolitical crises in Africa such as those in the Darfur, Kenya, Somalia, and Zimbabwe tend to be seen as self-inflicted, often without any attempt to locate or diagnose their remote or immediate external triggers and deep-seated causes. Further, natural resources in Africa have forever been exploited by and for foreign interests, with minimal to no benefit to Africans. Indeed, Africa is rich in natural resources and human capital but cannot muster the funds to give its next generations a decent start in life. A moral hub and social Darwinian motive drape the “aid” Africa receives from some foreign partners who gain huge profits in unfair trade and exploitation of Africa’s reservoirs of material and human resources, through intriguing strategies. This sorry state of Africa prompted Frederick Masinde to muse: “If Africa could be granted an additional 1 % share in global trade, she would earn for herself much more than she is currently being given in foreign aid” (Barsby, 2006, p. 52).

If suitable policies and effective programs were to emerge and be sustained in Africa, how might they be achieved? How would the imported imperatives from which Africa can no longer escape mesh with or be crafted into stark African realities to output a serene, conducive developmental environment? We reason with Smale (1998, p. 3) that work that focuses on addressing these and similar questions connotes the dilemmas, which characterize rights-based approaches to child well-being in African cultural settings and may support “the need for changes in attitudes, approaches, methodologies and service provision” therein.

Dilemmas in Rights-Based Interventions in Africa

Africa’s ways of thinking about children and their development are regrettably subverted by developmental science theories and principles that are deeply “psychologized” and increasingly homogeneous and Western derived (Pence & Hix-Small, 2007). They depict maternal influences as if they were the single most determinant nurturing force in childhood. But the psychological and sociological realities of children in much of Africa from toddlerhood diverge remarkably from this theoretical positioning and purportedly science-based assumptions and practices. LeVine (2004) insinuates that developmentally appropriate practices have been crafted and proselytized in the semblance of science-based knowledge in a formula based heavily on American middle-class ideology and cultural values. Gould (1981, p. 22) adds that theories like scientific “facts are not pure and unsullied bits of information, culture also influences what we see and how we see it.”

Both African and expatriate scholars almost uncritically apply imported theories and methods in Africa, largely ignoring the values that guide African parenting ideas and educational praxes. This implies that the orienting values and methods that now frame an emerging developmental science in Africa are Euro-western conceptual systems and techniques. In this sense, conceptualizing early childhood

research and intervention in contemporary Africa within a narrative that is saturated with Euro-western developmental metaphors and ethos in the face of Africa's developmental precepts and practices is a real "struggle," a fraught matter indeed.

From their toddler years, most African children are more appropriately seen immersed in sociological networks wherein parents or other adults only partially play a nurturing role in children's daily routines and direct developmental inputs, as the sibling or peer group and the peer culture increasingly become more salient as a dynamic developmental space in homes, neighborhoods, and school settings. The social world of African childhood typically is a multiaged, mixed-ability, interactive context that contrasts with that focused mainly on the microsystem of parent-child, child-teacher, and practitioner-child gaining greater force in the childhood literature. Given the high density of siblings per African family, as supported by 4.7 siblings in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon (Nsamenang, 1992a) and a West African range of 4.5 for Cameroon to 7.0 siblings per family across other countries to Ivory Coast (Ware, 1983), toddlers in Cameroon, in particular, and West Africa, in general, are more likely to experience daytime interaction with peers or siblings rather than with adults or "busy" mothers (Ogbimi & Alao, 1998) and significant but often distant or absent fathers (Nsamenang, 2010).

As childhood is being forced into the central agendas of African governments (Pence, 2004), Africans are being alerted to notice how participation "furthers children's survival, protection, and development, and how children as rights-bearers actively contribute to our society as a whole" (Cook, Blanchet-Cohen, & Hart, 2004, p. 1). It is, therefore, plausible to juxtapose the continuing disapproval and condemnation of African forms of children's participation against the accentuating interest in "children's participation at different levels" (Alfageme, Cantos, & Martinez, 2007) enshrined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]. Young people's right of participation is approved and outlined in Article 12 and 17 (UNCHR, 1989) of the UNCRC and states that children have a right to be heard and considered in decisions that affect them. The CRC, therefore, ensures that children have their place in civil society, along with opportunities to contribute, exchange ideas with other social players, and be consulted about matters that concern them (Alfageme et al., 2007). Yet, the "productive" participation of Africa's massive generations of children and adolescents in the lives of their families and communities has been stigmatized as child labor by international advocacy and child rights interveners. We acknowledge, sadly, that various forms of child labor, child abuse, and child enslavement increasingly are intolerably sneaking into Africa's developmental task of child work. This is what ought to be intervened into extinction but not the hands-on responsibility-training component of childhood work that the CRC incidentally stirs and that should be injected as the participatory component of education curricula.

The CRC has opened a new era to redefine childhood and denounce the "discourse of vulnerability" (Golden, 2005, p. 79) and "the dichotomy adult/child" that sets children aside into an adult-designated zone of non-adults (Munday, 1979, pp. 162–165). The institution of the school further segregates children from society, and there is lingering doubt if this institution is still "the protected world of children

and childhood” (Golden, 2005, p. 80) as it was designed to be. The extent to which adults still effectively safeguard this protected space is the greater doubt. Consequently, it is essential to explore alternative spaces and pedagogies that can responsabilize and empower children and adolescents into self-protection and self-motivated learning.

The convention has “emancipated” children from traditional understandings of childhood and citizenship, which ignore or limit children’s autonomy, their knowledge and concerns about the world in which they live, and their ability to organize, manage, and decide about many aspects of their lives (Hart, 1997; Nsamenang & Lamb, 1993). In brief, the CRC has broken the traditional paradigm of considering minors as non-capable people (Alfageme et al., 2007) to begin priming their recognition as valid citizens with cultural differences, ideologies, identities, knowledge, and particular forms of learning and relating (Hart, 1997). Indeed, young people are new generations capable of participating in the dialogue of knowledge. Our role as adults is to “sharpen our listening ability and become mediators so that they [i.e., children] may exercise their right to produce knowledge about the reality that they face” (Corona & Morfín, 2007, p. 112). The first challenge in the social reconstruction of childhood is to reflect on how to intervene, not to replace or bypass, Africa’s patterns of children’s participation but on how best to build and enhance more cohesive and productive communities of Africa’s next generations. The second challenge relates to how to incorporate and actualize young people’s voices into discourses and interventions (Corona & Morfín, 2007, p. 112). It is from the platform of participative productivity that we can hope to truly position Africa’s next generations—children and youth—as a reliable and hopeful bridge to Africa’s uncertain future.

Are rights instruments and the practices they inspire unproblematic?

The Ambiguities in Rights Instruments and Practices

Various tensions are perceptible with both the interpretation and implementation of the CRC, in general, and its articles on children’s participation and cultural identity, in particular. The nature of children’s participation invoked by the relevant CRC articles and how to judge its appropriateness and efficacy are not obvious, particularly in the face of the convention’s provision on rights to a cultural identity and heritage. In the African world, cultural identity includes child work during childhood. Children’s participation represents an important societal challenge that leads directly to the polemics of the social participation of minors—a topical issue today, but one on which Africa has long been chastised and condemned. It is not clear if the participation specified in Article 12 is inconsistent with children’s participation in indigenous African family traditions. Further, “it is a great irony of the contemporary world that while children of the Third World have far too much work and very little time to play, those of the industrialized countries lack opportunities for meaningful work” (Hart, 2002, p. 2). Today, one hears a repeat of Ellis’s (1978, p. 50) curiosity “whether in Britain too little is expected of children, their activities being

restricted almost entirely to play” in informal exchanges and insinuations by Western media. Also ironic is that while middle-class children of the cities of the Southern Hemisphere do not have time to play, increasingly their parents dare not let them play, because the growing violence of these cities, a natural response to the enormous social inequities that increasingly characterize contemporary life, leads parents to lock their children inside housing complexes or sheltered family residences, denying them freedom of association and interaction with peers and with a diverse, natural environment (Hart, 1997).

The CRC has proposed a major shift in the social representation of children, who are not defined in terms of “problems” or “victims” but as active social agents (Alfageme et al., 2007). This means that children have rights and are judged capable of striving to achieve these rights if they are denied or violated. Children’s pursuit of their rights would be found to vary by cultural and family circumstances and self-perceived agency of child, as a function of developmental stage and poverty index. However, there are anxieties, first, over “all those who are concerned about sustainable development but have not worked with children before” (Morales, 2007); second, over the not-so-clear link between those who write and talk about childhood and those struggling to improve the lives and life circumstances of children because of the disturbing gulf between theory and practice, rhetoric and relevant, effective intervention. Reid’s (2006, p. 18) viewpoint is that the CRC was “developed far from the lived experience of children, their families, and communities.” In addition, it is not quite obvious whether implementers of CRC still consider the family “the best promoter, provider, and protector of children’s rights” or if international human rights instruments are (Claiborne & One, 2007). Reid (2006) differentiates parents from advocates, arguing that a growing body of powerful interest groups of “experts” and professionals has “captured” children’s rights. The media has supported this trend, which effectively silences and enfeebles families, opening the way for advocacy for the group care of like-aged preschool children (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008) instead of fostering genuine efforts to strengthen existing community structures that reach children in the cultural contexts in which their communities would fully participate (Lanyasunya & Lesolayia, 2001).

Conclusion

Childhood is a complex social phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present (Giddens, 1976). The CRC has instigated “a new paradigm of childhood sociology,” but “the process of reconstructing childhood” (Prout & James, 1990, p. 9) in the image of the CRC is as yet unclear. How the reconstruction would handle the inclusiveness of the variety of childhoods across the globe to ensure appropriate contextual participation and cultural identity is a fraught matter. Where would the reconstruction situate Africa’s timeless traditions of family-based participation and self-construal? The responsibility training of African children through participative learning is analogous to the fate of African-enduring

breastfeeding practices, which were intervened into irrelevance and replaced with formula feeds but are now being advocated back into practice as the state-of-the-science nutrition for the first year of life.

While Euro-western cultures view child care skills as a specialized task of adulthood, African cultures separate the learning of childhood skills from the life stage of parenthood and position sibling and peer caregiving as a domestic task for children to learn (Weisner, 1987) as part of their own developmental knowledge and skills acquisition (Nsamenang et al., 2008). African children are accredited partners in family life and communal affairs in the protection and caregiving roles they take as part of sharing family duties (Nsamenang, 1992a; Weisner, 1997). This state of childhood opens up a disposition to figure out how best to strategize the enhancement of the African peer culture that handles and creates child-to-child opportunities for significant learnings and development into an ingeniously transformative children's and adolescents' participative spaces. More than any other region of the globe, focused attention is required in Africa to research, understand, and boost the responsible participation of African children and adolescents in the livelihoods of their families and communities instead of devaluing and intervening them into extinction "as being anti-progressive and somewhat outdated" (Callaghan, 1998, p. 30).

The "growing imposition of a particularly Western conceptualization of childhood" (Prout & James, 1990, p. 9) on Africa's starkly different circumstances not only pathologizes but also stigmatizes childhood in low-status Africa. The call to "always contextualize our study findings, our policies, our programs in the sociohistorical and cultural contexts from which they arise" (Hoskyn, Moore, Neufeld, LeMare, & Stooke, 2007, p. ii) is in recognition that "human development always occurs in a specific cultural context" (Dasen & Jahoda, 1986, p. 413). It underscores the significance of context and culture and the need to notice, accept, and be inclusive of the huge variety of childhoods that international child rights instruments appear to subvert. The complexity of childhood in Africa today is exacerbated by a triple inheritance (Mazrui, 1986), which "no existing theory fittingly explains it and no antecedent evolutionary template exactly corresponds to its triple-strand braid" (Nsamenang, 2005, p. 276).

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