

Meeting Children Where They Are

Culturally Adapted Models of Early Childhood Education

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The compelling case for supporting programs that address early childhood education and development comes from many sources, including human rights, social justice, human development, and economic development (Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead 2009). An estimated 200 million children worldwide under age 5 do not reach their developmental potential, despite the obvious need for and proven benefits of early childhood programs (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007). Many such children, especially those in developing countries, have families that are socioeconomically disadvantaged. These children will be more likely to succeed in school, potentially earn higher wages, and become better future providers for their own children if they receive education and development interventions in the early years (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007).

As of 2005, the World Bank had invested nearly \$1.7 million in early childhood programs in 52 countries, 30

developing countries established government policies on early child development, and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) assisted with parenting programs in 60 countries (Engle et al. 2007). So why are so many children still left behind?

The issue of quality education

Enrollment in early childhood education programs in developing countries increased by 13.8 percent between 1999 and 2004, from 80 million children to 91 million (UNESCO 2006). Even as global access to education improves, it is clear that access is not enough to improve children's lives. In order to meet the needs of young children from diverse backgrounds and experiences, it is critical to improve the quality of education at all levels (UNESCO 2006).

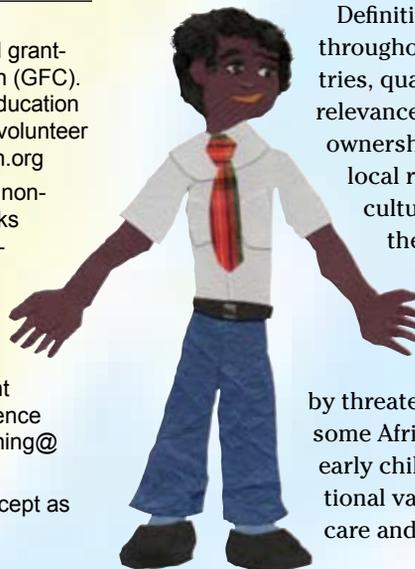
Definitions of quality in education vary throughout the world. In developing countries, quality education depends upon relevance: family participation, program ownership and guidance, and the use of local resources (human, natural, and cultural) must all be relevant within the context of a given community (Peralta 2008). Using imported education practices and programs may undermine the culture and alienate children by threatening their sense of belonging. In some African communities, for example, early childhood programs ignore traditional values and norms of shared child care and participatory education, opting

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instead to implement imported models of child care and education (Nsamenang 2008).

According to global studies of early childhood programs, there are several important characteristics of successful interventions:

- Integration of health, nutrition, education, social, and economic development
- Collaboration between government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and communities
- A focus on children whose families are disadvantaged
- Sufficient intensity and duration of programs
- Family-educator partnerships in support of children's development
- Opportunities for children to initiate their own learning and explore their surroundings through age-appropriate activities
- Blending of traditional childrearing practices and cultural beliefs with evidence-based approaches
- Providing early childhood program staff with systematic in-service training and practice, support and continuous supervision, observation methods to monitor children's development, and supportive theoretical and learning materials (Engle et al. 2007)

Incorporating these elements can seem daunting for programs in developing countries with limited resources, particularly those serving children from families of low socioeconomic status. But without quality, programs cannot maximize their impact even if access and enrollment increase. Early childhood programs must focus on an approach that fits their community context and integrates characteristics of successful early child development interventions.

Learning from grassroots organizations

Inspired by the vision of a world where all children grow up to be productive, caring citizens of a global society, the Global Fund for Children (GFC) supports and strengthens grassroots organizations that provide quality programs for children and youth in developing countries. At the Clinton Global Initiative in 2007, GFC made a commitment to apply its model with a focus on programs serving children under age 8 (see "About the Global Fund for Children," p. 17).

The three community-based GFC partners highlighted in this article are successfully meeting children where they are. Working in vastly different settings in Tanzania, Guatemala,



and Thailand, each program has adapted to the cultural context of its community in order to maximize its impact on young children. On this quick global tour, we will visit three continents—Africa, South America, and Asia—and learn how each organization is implementing high-quality, culturally adapted early childhood education programs.

Tanzania: Integrating traditional practices

Close to nine hundred thousand Maasai people live in Northern Tanzania and southern Kenya (GFC 2008). These nomadic cattle and sheep herders have fought to preserve their traditional lifestyle in the face of dwindling access to land and clean water. They also have a dire need for health care, as well as for education that can prepare the next generation to interact successfully with the modern world. The Maasai tend to feel threatened by modern influences and are wary of losing their customs and lifestyle.

The Monduli Pastoralist Development Initiative (MPDI) has worked since 2004 to help Maasai communities maintain their beliefs and systems while ensuring that children receive a modern education. MPDI's innovative Early Childhood Development (ECD) program targets Maasai children from birth to age 8 in the Monduli District of northern Tanzania. One of the teachers at MPDI says, "Children's confidence is built with their culture. Culture provides the foundation for formal education" (GFC 2008).

MPDI has established 36 culturally appropriate, community-based ECD centers serving over two thousand Maasai children. The centers are designed like *bomas*, traditional Maasai homes. They are clusters of round mud huts in a thatched fence compound. The centers combine modern-day and cultural education in this nonthreatening setting. The children learn Maasai songs, dances, and stories to help preserve their culture.

Teachers introduce counting with Maasai beads, and language arts with folk legends, songs, and verse. This intentional integration of heritage with contemporary curriculum helps establish trust with families and eases their fears about young children's participation in this early education setting.

The preschools are created and managed with local resources, teachers are nominated by the community, and grandparents serve as resource people.

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Typically, the teachers are uneducated, but MPDI trains them. Teachers lead activities in the children's native language but also introduce them to Swahili (the national language) to prepare them for primary school. The resource people assist with things like governance and management of the centers, community participation, and working collaboratively with all stakeholders.

The preschools have become community hubs. Local health care agencies send nurses to the centers to give medical care to children and their families. The centers are also used for adult classes and community activities.

Guatemala: Encouraging linguistic and ethnic diversity

Guatemala's 30-year civil war came to an end in the mid-1990s. One of the most marginalized, oppressed, and war-affected areas is the Ixil region, a remote mountain area largely populated by indigenous Ixil Maya. The government has not invested much in education in this region, so community members and nongovernmental organizations mobilized to fill the gap.

Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral y Multidisciplinario (Association for Comprehensive and Multidisciplinary Development), known as APPEDIBIMI, was founded in 1996. It provides bilingual early childhood education in the Ixil

and Spanish languages to more than twenty-five hundred indigenous children in 21 remote villages.

APPEDIBIMI is a leader in the development of bilingual education in Guatemala. The bilingual approach makes education more accessible for children and their parents. Most parents do not speak Spanish, and many cannot read or write in their native language. An early focus on Ixil highlights the families' indigenous status as a point of pride and importance, while Spanish instruction prepares children for the requirements of primary school and beyond.

APPEDIBIMI's bilingual model and culturally appropriate curriculum emphasize health, structured play, and intercultural education. The curriculum goals include developing children's social, motor, and reasoning skills; musical and artistic expression; and language and communication ability.

Initially, children are taught only in their native language. Spanish is introduced gradually as children make progress. For example, one day a morning greeting or simple instructions for hand washing may be given in Spanish instead of Ixil. The amount and complexity of Spanish instruction increases slowly. Therefore, children learn first in their native language so they can develop their identity, self-esteem, and basic communication skills. By gradually introducing Spanish, APPEDIBIMI aims to awaken in children an interest in learning the language. This approach also helps the children learn Spanish without fear or shame about their indigenous status.

APPEDIBIMI strongly emphasizes the involvement of parents, teachers, local and national officials, and other community members in the children's education. Teachers, parent groups, and village education committees collaborate to run the centers. Community acceptance is critical in any program, but even more so when working with populations that have been isolated from the rest of society due to ethnic discrimination and conflict. APPEDIBIMI is striving to ensure the success of its early childhood programs by



including a variety of actors in the education of the community's children.

Thailand: Making the most of community resources

According to the UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency), one hundred forty thousand Burmese refugees live in nine camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Over fifteen thousand people have been resettled in third-party countries over the last few years (UNHCR 2010). Those who still await resettlement abroad are prohibited by the Thai government to leave the camps. They depend completely on international agencies and local nongovernmental organizations for protection, schooling, health care, and food. They are neglected and displaced, and the young children among them are unsurprisingly the most vulnerable.

Since 1990, Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE) has been helping community-based organizations formed by Burmese women and youth. WEAVE assists organizations focused on health, income generation, and early childhood development and education. WEAVE's comprehensive early childhood program works with preschool learning centers in the refugee camps to make sure that the children receive essential support during their formative years. WEAVE emphasizes inclusive education and engages entire communities in program implementation.

This model is a prime example of programming

Parent volunteers come to each preschool daily to help prepare different kinds of fresh, nutritious food for the children.



adapted to meet the complex needs of displaced children through the effective use of community resources, including local materials and methods. WEAVE classrooms are wooden structures built on stilts with traditional thatched roofs, thus suitable for both the heat and storms of the tropical climate. The program trains women in the refugee camps as classroom aides and instructors. This not only meets the program's staffing needs, but also gets the community involved and invested in the program. Executive Director Mitos Urgel explains, "Over the last 20 years, WEAVE has learned that meaningful participation of families and communities leads to lasting support for early childhood interventions."

Families living in refugee camps have very limited access to basic services, including health, nutrition, and education. Thirty-six percent of Burmese children under age 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition (Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2008). This condition makes it difficult to fight disease and can result in developmental delays and learning disabilities. In this situation, the classroom can be one place to ensure that the children are properly fed.

WEAVE addresses malnutrition with its midday meal program, which feeds nearly three thousand children in 25 preschools. Parent volunteers come to each preschool daily to help prepare different kinds of fresh, nutritious food for the children. Children are healthier, more active, and ready to learn when their nutrition needs are met. A little bit of extra food at lunch helps to lessen the impact of one of the biggest obstacles these children face. The midday meal stems hunger and malnutrition and encourages families to enroll their children and send them to school regularly.



Making Early Childhood Programs Effective, Inclusive, and Culturally Relevant

Principle 1: Build on traditional child care practices

Practice	Impact
Use materials that show what children already know from their daily life and local culture	Ensures that toys and materials will be most relevant and effective (Peeters 2008)
Conduct programs in local-style buildings or structures	Makes children feel safe and comfortable in the learning environment
Blend traditional practices with elements of modern practice	Encourages family and community members to trust and support the program

Principle 2: Respect children's linguistic and ethnic diversity

Practice	Impact
Use local languages and culturally relevant references in materials and instruction	Integrates different cultures and traditions and also enriches educational content for all children (UNESCO 2006)
Use bilingual teachers or teacher assistants	Ensures that children feel a sense of belonging, identity, and understanding (Moromizato 2008)
Implement bilingual storytelling and reading	Develops children's literacy skills, which can be transferred from one language to another (UNESCO 2006)

Principle 3: Use and adapt community resources

Practice	Impact
Use the school buildings for community events	Creates trust, support, and acceptance of the program, while also meeting community needs
Use family and community members as aides and volunteers	Supports language and literacy development at school and in the home and meets staffing needs (UNESCO 2006)
Design, develop, and acquire supplies and materials locally	Integrates local resources and involves the community as stakeholders in the education of young children
Include health and nutrition education for children and their families	Models a healthy way of life within the community (Moromizato 2008)

Bringing it home: Meeting children where they are in your community

The lessons from these grassroots organizations can be applied to help early childhood programs be more culturally relevant in any country or setting (see “Making Early Childhood Programs Effective, Inclusive, and Culturally Relevant”). The most important things to remember are to

- Build on traditional child care practices—as evidenced in MPDI’s blend of traditional and modern values.
- Respect children’s linguistic and ethnic diversity—as implemented through APPEDIBIMI’s bilingual instruction.
- Use and adapt community resources—as demonstrated by WEAVE’s inclusive approach and focus on nutrition.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to culturally relevant early childhood education practices, but these three model programs show that identifying and incorporating cultural components of the community increase program effectiveness. This approach also improves the impact and outcomes of early interventions in the lives of young children.

About the Global Fund for Children

The Global Fund for Children’s vision is that all children grow up to be productive, caring citizens of a global society. To achieve this, GFC makes small grants to innovative community-based organizations that serve children and young people who are among the world’s poorest. To date, it has supported more than 450 organizations in 75 countries. Its complementary media ventures program harnesses the power of books, films, and photography to promote global understanding.

GFC scouts, supports, and strengthens organizations that

- are rooted in their community and operate with community input, involvement, and investment
- engage children and youth as active participants in their own growth and development
- tackle old problems in new ways, demonstrating innovation and creativity
- generate models, methodologies, and practices that can be adapted and applied to similar issues and challenges in other communities
- are recognized and trusted in their communities



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It is critical to have the support and participation of families and community members to help the program and the children reach their potential.

Conclusion

Research has proven the many benefits of early childhood education and development programs. Although much progress has been made in the last decade, many young children still do not have access to high-quality early childhood education. In many countries where government programs have failed, nongovernmental organizations and community groups have stepped in to fill the gaps. There is a lot to learn from grassroots organizations that are implementing innovative and culturally relevant early childhood programs.

Meeting children where they are is a key to success, as MPDI (Tanzania), APPEDIBIMI (Guatemala), and WEAVE (Thailand)—three of The Global Fund for Children's grantee partners—make clear. Culturally relevant early childhood interventions can improve educational access, quality, and impact. By paying close attention to the language, cultural norms, and special needs of children, programs can take simple steps to implement culturally relevant services. It is also critical to have the support and participation of families and community members to help the program and the children reach their potential.



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