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Unlocking Birth to Three: Context *Really* Matters

HB Ebrahim

It is undisputed that birth to three are foundational years during which the youngest in our society experience extraordinary growth that contributes toward their development and learning. High-quality programs direct efforts at building caring relationships, providing nurturing environments, and working in partnerships with families and communities. Developing responsive programs and equitable practices, however, is not straightforward. Contestations have been brought to the fore by dissenting voices to mainstream narratives that privilege certain ways of knowing young children, their primary caregivers, and practice with, for, and about them (Burman, 2008; Cannella, 1997; Nsamenang 2008; Okwany & Ebrahim, 2016; Viruru, 2001). In light of this, it is critical to ask: How has the dominant knowledge base for birth to three side-lined a focus on context? What does a case study of Africa suggest about contextual issues related to birth to three? How might we proceed for more affirming birth to three practices in a global and diverse world?

The conventional wisdom for programming and practice for birth to three comes from a Euro-American base that was traditionally informed by knowledge generated from the fields of biology and psychology. The scientific underpinnings of this perspective gave it the semblance of being the only authentic way to understand the socialization and care of young children as well as education practices for individual learning according to individual circumstances. The export value of the global scientific paradigm for the early years reached low- and middle-income countries through “best practice” templates attached to a variety of aid work mainly directed at the poor. This universal microlevel approach sidelined considerations of how young children’s development is affected by the historical, sociocultural, political, and economic contexts of childhood.

The African continent presents an interesting case for examining how the local context provides ideas for debate, critical thought, and expanded understanding embedded in framings of structural inequalities in broader society, specifically for children from birth to three. There is an emerging constituency of African scholars whose ideas cast child development and related practice as contextual and situated (Marfo et al., 2011; Nsamenang, 2008; Pence & Ashton, 2016). In a rare volume dedicated to birth to three in Africa, authors from 10 countries on the continent foreground the realities which not only complexify programming and practice for birth to three but also raise issues of systemic inequalities (Ebrahim, Okwany, & Barry, 2019).

Several authors discuss peripheral ideas related to who primary caregivers are and how they nurture young children’s growth, development, and learning. For example, Kamusiime (2019) brings alive the reality of teenage mothers in the urban poor locales of Kampala, Uganda who navigate an ambiguous space as child mothers within constrained social and economic circumstances. The motherhood and caregiving narratives show how the teenage mothers bond with their children and take responsibility amid the challenges they experience. A child-headed family structure is also a feature of African households affected by HIV/AIDs. This radicalizes the traditional practices of sibling caretaking in

African societies. Kakuru (2019) calls for engagement with older children's agentic capabilities of using their funds of knowledge to enact caregiving practices with young children. She is, however, quick to point out that these strengths must not deflect attention from the stark realities experienced in overburdened caregiving systems. The role of men is also an issue that has not been well understood in different cultural contexts. Nyamukapa (2019) notes that in indicators relating to participation of fathers in children's lives, attention is most often paid to biological fathers. However, older men in African societies play the role of social fathers who are part of the caregiving system. In the study of fathers in Zimbabwe, Nyamukapa uses indigenous concepts to portray the role of men in children's lives. For example, he shows how the care duties for men are guided by the concept of *kuchengeta*, which refers to the role of being a provider for the needs of children and the family. Some men use this conceptual framing to reinforce the view of the intimate work of child care as a cultural practice for women.

The use of interacting systems to shape early care and education is another important contextual issue. Because of the dominance of the single-generation carer in parenting, little attention has been paid to how collective parenting with multigenerational caregivers allows for resilient local knowledge and beliefs to inform early socialization. Zanafy (2019) shows how knowledge and practices are redistributed to uphold a communal culture in Madagascar. She therefore advocates for dialogue between generations to allow for the circulation and reinterpretation of knowledge by families for contemporary use. The issue of forced migration also continues to challenge how caregiving practices are framed and enacted. Harouna (2019) illustrates how the movement of Central African refugees to rural Cameroon creates hybrid practices that are developed from programs delivered by humanitarian workers, values from the home country, and experiences in the host country. He argues that although there is a belief that children are highly valued among the refugees, the reality says otherwise. Young children born out of wedlock are most vulnerable. Unwed mothers and children experience isolation, especially in religious communities.

So what do program developers and practitioners need to do to make context matter? A *reflective posture* is required for becoming aware of how personal bias and assumptions can lead to preconceived notions of children and families. There should be exploration of one's beliefs and a willingness to revise them in light of contextual evidence. Attempts should be made to *understand worldviews and structural issues* that influence certain ways of knowing and being in culturally diverse and poor communities. This means paying attention to their cultural hybridities, historical and current displacement, and unequal access to services and support. There should be a key focus on the *development of responsive strategies*. Access for diverse and inclusive participation must take into account whether the environment and practitioner skills are appropriate for underserved children, families, and communities. A *culture of respect for difference and equity* is essential. Organizational plans must include employing staff who reflect the diversity of the children and their families in affirming ways. Partnerships with families should be sought through genuine engagement in order to learn from them and improve programs and practices.

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