
Sankofa Lessons from Africa and Letting a Thousand Flowers Bloom

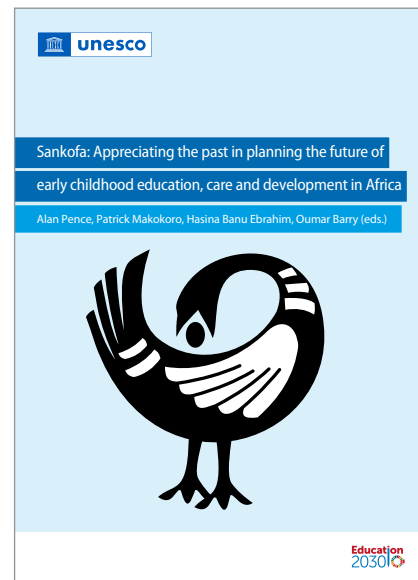
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In September 2018, I boarded the plane to leave my home and country Zimbabwe. My destination was the University of Victoria to study, begin my research, and write my doctoral dissertation. Following the requisite coursework, I began to think about the early childhood research interests that I could pursue. As I carried out my literature review, I became more drawn to history. I was interested in documenting the history of early childhood development in Africa. Specifically, my interest was in the work that early childhood networks in Africa had accomplished in the past three decades and how this had informed child development policy and implementation across the African continent.

In 2012, I helped establish an early childhood development network called the Zimbabwe Network for Early Childhood Development Actors (ZINECDA). This perhaps could be comparable to the Canadian Childcare Federation, an organization working with educators, funders, and policymakers in the provincial and federal governments. That is what ZINECDA set out to do in Zimbabwe and 12 years later continues to do. Early childhood networks became something I was interested in professionally as I saw the importance of teachers, policymakers, funders, and stakeholders in the education sector coming together to discuss challenges and opportunities in the sector. Following

Urie Bronfenbrenner's *Ecology for Human Development* (1979), I viewed ECE networks, and I still do, as important systems around children, supporting the little ones to grow, develop, and thrive.

As I honed in on my research topic I observed that the story of the network organization I had helped establish was just half of the story. There was a lot of work that had been done by other networks on the African continent, yet their stories were not available or had not been told. As I dug into repositories and searched for additional information, I realized that many of the elders and knowledge holders had sadly passed away without having left documents. Scholarly conversations with my mentor and academic advisor from the University of Victoria Professor Emeritus Alan Pence led to the UNESCO Tri-Chairs for Early Childhood Development and I collaborating on *Sankofa: Appreciating the Past in Planning for the Future of Early Childhood, Care and Development in Africa*. Sankofa is a mythical bird according to the Akan people (Ghana). The image of the bird shows its feet planted forward and its head turned backward with an egg in its mouth, representing the opportunity to look back, reflect, and then carry forward the wisdom from the past. The *Sankofa* volume carries a lot of history on early childhood development in Africa and provides some insights for other regions of the world.



Sankofa Lessons: African Approaches to Early Childhood Development

African approaches to early childhood development include engaging the child quite early through different types of simple cultural activities and rituals anchored by shared experiences. These activities promote child development and enrich creativity by providing opportunities where the child learns how to solve simple problems, use their imagination, and engage their curiosity and memory. This informs us that the process of creating knowledge is through transformation and the use of the countless opportunities that are available within the African setting. The concrete experiences from the rich cultural environment help the child during the early years and early enough for them to learn and

make meaning of the rich physical and human resources around them.

To address the well-informed child-rearing practices that are indigenous to Africa, it is important to comment on the long-standing Africentric philosophy guiding practices, styles, and strategies. Overall, the communal approaches and multiple child caring agents and contexts or situations explain the extent to which resilience is properly entrenched in the growing child's personality. The African child's ability to survive challenges and continue to learn and develop attests to these approaches and strategies. The collective child-rearing approaches mean the family and community, including the child, are partners in the process of development. Each person involved respects and is informed by the cultural norms and traditions. The extent of connectivity is not only vast but dynamic.

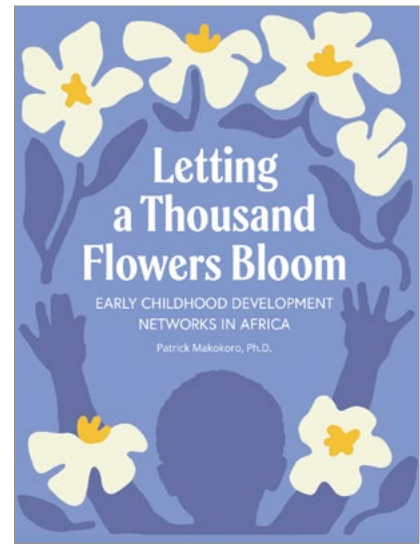
Eurowestern developmental theories originating from the Minority world* can hardly track the developmental processes in the traditional African society as they lack the explanatory mechanism to address the intricacies of knowledge indigenous to Africa and how it guides the paths to nurturing a responsible and socially competent individual. For example, child-to-child socialization practices are common practices where mothers have younger children of about age 3 to 4 to take care of a baby while she is working on the farm or doing house chores. In the Minority world, this can be easily winced at and perhaps a call made to child protection services. Although traditional childrearing practices are

changing due to modernization or globalization, core traditional values in child rearing are sustained (Evans & Myers, 1994). In Section 2 of *Sankofa* you can learn more about child development in the African context along with the role of early learning networks in advancing child development policy and practice on the African continent.

Beyond *Sankofa*, Letting A Thousand Flowers Bloom

While working on the *Sankofa* book, I received a timely invitation to work with UNESCO to work on the creation of the Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood. This strategy is a bold cross-national and inter-agency initiative to bring together all countries with a partnership of major international, regional, and national agencies, organizations, and networks to achieve a vision: "Early childhood fundamental rights and services are the foundation for achieving positive child development, family wellbeing, lifelong learning, and sustainable development." Therefore, all nations would be called upon to give their highest priority to investing in expanding and increasing access to early childhood development services by 2030. Canada has been making advances on this through its Canada-wide Early Learning and Childcare Plan focusing on specific jurisdictional priorities.

In December 2022 during a virtual meeting with early childhood network colleagues from southern Africa, I got spurred into action after a network leader mentioned that they were "tired of researchers coming from the West or Minority World to collect their data and write stories



about their children and communities without active participation of the local leaders and communities." Inspired by this meeting, I edited the book, *Letting a Thousand Flowers Bloom: Early Child Development Networks in Africa*, which was just published in March 2024. This book shows that early childhood development networks play a pivotal role in ensuring the holistic well-being and future success of our youngest citizens. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders including parents, educators, health care professionals, and policymakers, these networks create a supportive ecosystem that promotes optimal development during the critical early years.

Allowing a thousand flowers to bloom in early childhood development is crucial for fostering innovation, diversity, and inclusivity in programs and approaches. Just as every child is unique, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to early childhood development. By embracing a multitude of ideas, methodologies, and perspectives, we create an environment where creativity flourishes and

*Minority world means economically privileged countries that have a minority of the world's population. Conversely, Majority world countries are those with some of the highest populations.

where different needs and strengths are recognized and supported.

Through shared knowledge, resources, and best practices, early learning networks empower communities and help provide high-quality early childhood education, health care, and social support, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, health, and resilience. Investing in early childhood development networks not only benefits individual children and families but also yields long-term societal dividends, driving economic growth, reducing inequalities, and building a more prosperous and equitable future for all.

Takeaways for Local and Global Engagement

Global engagement in early childhood development is essential for fostering a brighter future for all children, regardless of their circumstances or geographic location. By collaborating across borders and sharing knowledge, resources, and best practices, we can collectively address the complex challenges that impact early childhood development worldwide. Investing in early childhood development on a global scale not only ensures that every child receives the support they need to thrive but also promotes social equity, economic prosperity, and sustainable development for entire communities and nations. Through international cooperation and solidarity, we can create a world where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential, laying the groundwork for a more just, prosperous, and inclusive society for generations to come.

Encouraging a diversity of approaches empowers communities to tailor early childhood development interventions to their specific contexts, cultures, and challenges, ensuring that they resonate with the children and families they serve.

Conclusion

Encouraging a diversity of approaches empowers communities to tailor early childhood development interventions to their specific contexts, cultures, and challenges, ensuring that they resonate with the children and families they serve. This approach also fosters a spirit of collaboration and mutual learning, as practitioners share insights and learn from each other's successes and failures. Collaboration, mutual respect, and shared learning are the cornerstones of effective early childhood development initiatives. By coming together across disciplines and cultures, we can combine our strengths, address our weaknesses, and collectively strive toward a future where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

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