

Influences of family and social/cultural environments on early learning

Louis K. Banda

UNICAF University of Malawi.

***Corresponding Author**
Louis K. Banda

UNICAF University of Malawi.

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Abstract: The provision of early education is the backbone of all other educational levels. The inability by the learner to attain this critical early stage of education becomes daunting for the learner to comprehend some concepts in the later stage of the educational process (Baum et al., 2019). This is one of the reasons early education provision has become an important aspect of every society around the world (Kiende & Orodho, 2019). It is therefore the role of childcare practitioners to pay attention to the differences arising from culture, family, and other environments when handling learners in the early stages. Different parents adopt different parental paradigms (Adhe et al., 2020). The parenting dogma can influence the development of the child leading to either positive or negative educational outcomes. The role of parenting is an important factor for a child to fully develop to the potential. It is widely known that the life of parents affects greatly the general well-being and education of a child (Setiawan et al., 2020). Children do not grow in isolation but rather in an interconnected and interactive cosmos that relies on various factors including culture and family. As children grow in different cultural environments, they receive and learn from the surrounding environment. It becomes critical, therefore, to understand the different cultures, beliefs, and environments affect and influence the early learning of learners. Literature suggests that family has a great influence on the early learning of children leading to implications on the learning of children, pedagogical methods to be employed, teacher training, and policy framing.

Keywords: family, culture, education, learning, pedagogy, early education.

Education/Early Education

Empirical evidence show that education is key to national development and therefore the provision of early education is equally imperative (Aksu Ataç & Taşçı, 2020). The provision of early education is now considered as the backbone of all other educational levels. When a learner misses the critical early education stages, it becomes daunting for the learner to comprehend some concepts in the later stage of the educational process (Baum et al., 2019). This is one of the reasons early education provision has become an important aspect of every society around the world (Kiende & Orodho, 2019). Early education contributes to a nation's endeavor to meet the educational aims and other initiatives such as Education for All (EFA), quality early childhood education, compulsory education, and support for local and international frameworks in the promotion of education.

According to Kiende & Orodho (2019), the foundation for all education is hinged on the early education. While it forms the basis of all education, early education also provides positive developmental experiences and independence for the learners. As a result, the learner benefits greatly from early education as they gain skills and abilities necessary for future learning and academic performances (Nurani et al., 2020, Adhe et al., 2020, Morgan, 2019).

Globally, there are efforts aimed at providing quality basic education supported by frameworks such as the Convention on the

Rights of Children, Education for All, and Sustainable Development Goals. At the center of the provision of every school around the world is the promotion of the rights of children, protection, development, and participation of all children (Byrne, 2022). It therefore means, there is a shift of attention to learning to enable the learners to gain the capacity to help them progressively acquire knowledge on their own through gaining skills and attitudes that help themselves and others to advance in learning.

While it is understood that early education plays a critical role as the foundation for education, the implementation is influenced and affected by a number of environments. As proposed by the ecological systems theory, different environments have an impact on the early learning of a child. Such environments include family and social/cultural environments. It is therefore imperative that childcare practitioners pay attention to the differences arising from culture, family, and other environments when handling learners in the early stages (Legkauskas & Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, 2021).

Ecological Systems theory

Crawford (2020) acknowledges that the environment of the learner remains a salient niche that contributes meaningfully to early learning. This aligns well with Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) who developed an ecological systems theory to explain how everything in a child and a child's environment affects the development and growth of the child. The theory is illustrated in the figure below.

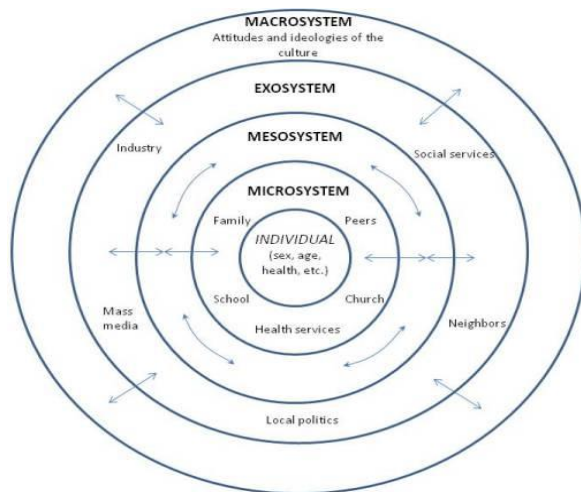


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

The social ecological theory put forward by Bronfenbrenner describes the relationship that exists between the learner and their environment (Martínez-Andrés et al., 2020). There is a strong connection between the learner and the environment where the learners find themselves. The elements at play in the relationship and the connection between them form the framework known as the ecological system theory (Uskul & Oishi, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory recognizes that child development is one of the complex systems of intertwined relationships that is influenced by happenings in the surrounding environment, including the family, the school, culture, laws, and traditions. At the center of the theory is the presupposition that the environment is considered to have a bearing on the mechanisms involved in the development of a child (Uskul & Oishi, 2020).

The theory suggests that the environment surrounding the child is arranged in structures referred to as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystems. These systems are said to be interrelated and have some levels of influence on the child's development and early education.

The interaction in the microsystem is often personal and is very crucial in supporting the child's development (Crawford, 2020). A strong fostering relationship with the environment, for example, teachers tend to have positive effects on the child while an indifferent and unaffected environment, leads to the production of harmful effects on the child. Through the mesosystem, a child's microsystem is influenced by another environment to influence the child's development. As highlighted by Bradford (2021), teachers and parents can work together to influence the child's development. On the other hand, the exosystem encompasses the formal and informal structures in the social setup, which in themselves do not surround the child but indirectly affect one of the microsystems. Such structures may include schools' external stakeholders, parents' friends, and the media. The macrosystem is the component that looks at how cultural elements have a bearing on the development of the child. These include already established society including a culture where the child is found while developing. Such elements may include social status, wealth ethnicity, and poverty, geographical location. Children living in low-income countries, for example, have a different environment from those living in developed countries (Widyawan et al., 2020). In this final and fifth level, the structure of the theory encompasses all changes that

occur in the environment over a child's lifetime that have a bearing on the development of the child. These changes include starting school, having parents divorced, or moving to a new location or a new house.

Influence of family on early education

A family is the basic unit of the society. Xie (2021a) and Roostin (2018) have similar definitions of what constitutes a family by defining a family as a group of one or more parents and their children living together. The importance of this social structure cannot be overemphasized. As asserted by Rey-Guerra (2022) and Xie (2021a) a family that offers a safe environment, nurturing and stimulating has the potency to bring about long-term benefits to the children of development and well-being. Concurring the assertion, Setiawan (2020), highlights that there is empirical evidence that a positive family environment facilitates early physical development in the young thereby influencing early learning.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that different parents have different child-rearing beliefs and ideologies regarding the rearing and upbringing of their children (Roostin, 2018, Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). Such ideologies may have roots in and originate from social cultural context, parental beliefs entrenched in the family genealogy and even learning from other cross cultures. In China, for example, parents play a huge role in ensuring that children exhibit appropriate and acceptable behavior and therefore, the lack of display of appropriate behavior by children is regarded as a sign of poor parenting. On other extremes, parents are sometimes chastised for the lack of manners and good behavior of their children (Wang et al., 2022, Su et al., 2020).

As asserted by Hasanah & Deiniatur (2020), the beliefs about child rearing by parents have a direct influence on parental practices. Commenting on the sentiments, Xie (2021a) argues that the way parents influence their home learning environments has a direct influence on the micro-level context in which children are exposed to conditions that foster learning. The outcomes of such family environments allow them to lean on beliefs, values, and expectations for which children learn and what outcomes of development are expected. A study by Lemon & Hayes (2020) highlights that children are more likely to take up the role of the teacher than playmate when parents get engrossed in home-based play activities with their children. This is also true as asserted by Setiawan (2020), that those parents are more recognized as authority figures who are supposed to be respected all the time.

Families with a rich connection network and a rich network of support have an upper hand in managing factors that enable child development and early learning. As a result, social relationships between parents and children develop and maintain learning. For so long, the family has been regarded as a manifold institution comprising several factors ranging from beliefs to learning resources and a bank of wisdom (Roostin, 2018). Taking into consideration the complexities associated with family institutions, the family environment, and the influence it has on the development of a child, the influence it has on a child would unquestionably differ from one institution to the other. Therefore, a family unit should not be perceived as a universal unit but rather as a case-specific system.

Rey-Guerra (2022) has another perspective on the influence of family on early learning. He cites that a family with a larger

number of children is presumed to have fewer resources remaining for the children's well-being. In addition, he notes that there are differences between urban and rural families and even for single-child families. Children may also develop certain kinds of traits owing to the family structures (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). Some children exhibit other superior cognitive skills when raised alone in the family while others exhibit other superior cognitive skills where there are siblings.

Parents with multiple children usually show some parental stress and less positive parenting, ultimately affecting the general child development level. Because of the dynamics, different families adopt certain types of parenting beliefs and practices that in turn influence and affect the development and learning of the child. The ability of the child and individuals to interact effectively and to display appropriate and acceptable etiquette is also influenced by the family environment (Hasanah & Deiniatur, 2020). Also as highlighted by Diniz (2021), children's social competence is largely influenced by family characteristics and parenting styles.

As suggested by Hasanah & Deiniatur (2020), children with siblings have considerably better social competencies than those children with no siblings. Earlier on researcher already established that the size of the family had a direct implication on the allocation of the available resources and this had a ramification on educational performance and early learning. It becomes correlational that there are better outcomes on the development and education of a child when there are more parent-child interactions because a better family environment for children is cognitive and development.

Other factors identified as being associated with parenting, include being the biological parents of the child, parental mental health, and sharing a family where there are adults. According to Hasanah & Deiniatur (2020), positive parenting is largely associated with where there are biological children in the family. Low-quality parenting skills tend to be common where there are non-biological children in the family.

In addition, a family where there are already adults in the family, a common scenario in most African set up, is supportive and this affects positively the quality of life of children leading to positive educational outcomes. On the other hand, parents who have protracted mental problems tend to have low parenting skills affecting negatively the educational outcomes of the children. Other factors affecting the family environment include poverty that lead to parents being occupied with providing for the children leading to a gap between parents and children as the parents are always occupied and do not have time to build relationship with their children. Malawi is among the poorest countries in the world. Most families are poor and the status quo of families greatly influence the early education of the children (Malawi, 2002).

Cultural influence on early education

Children do not grow in isolation but rather in an interconnected and interactive course that relies on various factors including culture. As children grow in different cultural environments, they receive and learn from the surrounding environment. It is dire, therefore, to analyze how different cultures, belief, and environment affects and influence the early learning of learners (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020).

Different environments provide different support and knowledge to the parents and this enhances the abilities to help the learners. Unquestionably, parents are pivotal in shaping the behavior of their children helping them to integrate and interact with society (Mullea et al., 2020, Tarigan & Stevani, 2020). The effects of cultures has a bearing the thinking patterns and behavior of learners. Likewise, the interaction between learners themselves helps the learners to gain, internalize, and practice the applicable rules and expectations of society. The kind of physical surrounding of the child and parents also plays a significant part in influencing the well-being and early learning of the child (Raikes et al., 2020).

Culture is defined as a set of 'shared understandings' and 'shared expectations' (De Boeck et al., 2019). As asserted by Ashurova (2021), children and learners are therefore shaped by beliefs, goals, normal activities, routines, and traditions prevailing in cultural communities. At times of it all, culture is made visible and explicit through clothes and food, crafts, and sometimes music while on the other hand, culture remains invisible and expressed through values meanings, and philosophies that underlie a particular culture (Xia et al., 2023, Wee et al., 2023, Alhosani, 2022).

Yang & Li (2022) highlights that, initially, culture was regarded as a characteristic that had a minimal influence on the development of human beings, however, in reality, it is now regarded as a process variable that is part of learning and development. By taking this view, it is noteworthy to note that the cognitive development of the learners is aided by 'stuff' made up in a particular culture (Alhosani, 2022). Cultural 'stuff' are practices developed and are considered to have survived through generations by cultural communities and these include including traditions, schemes, norms, technologies, objects, symbols values and these are the fundamental stuff that make up culture and are the intermediaries that form the cognitive development (Weckström et al., 2021). Furthermore, Wee (2023) asserts that it is almost impossible for the mind to develop without the cultural context. Cognitive development makes sense of, and draws meaning from the world of an individual and from the meanings are culturally specific. Culture, therefore, allows the individual to have access to the tools for organization and understanding of the world in a way to gives meaning to others (Cohen Kadosh et al., 2021).

In addition, culture goes beyond from only affecting the behavior leading to cognitive development to affecting the brain by allowing it to function concurrently with the social context (Cohen Kadosh et al., 2021). It is uncommon therefore for an individual to be influenced by cultures in their thinking and what, or how to think and what possibilities to take. Based on this philosophy, other psychologist regards the cultural process as a joint human pilgrimage among people, and this can be understood through observing children and learners in their routine activities where they make sense of the world and ascribing meaning to experience with cultural symbols (Yang & Li, 2022).

Weckström (2021) asserts that cultural understanding challenges the orthodox thinking that children only learn from their families but also from many settings, where they learn and develop. Children criss-cross through myriad social settings such as religious institutions, home schools, preschools and other areas they meet various cultural norms and different ways of thinking. As children pass through the setting, they construct their own identities and understanding of their world. The assumption of

cultural equilibrium, primarily thought in the home has been shifted to dynamic changes across the contexts (Weckström et al., 2021)

The way Learners employ cultural stuff attained from eclectic sources affects their self-concept, self-expression, self-esteem, social skills and relationships, how they develop cognitive abilities, approaches to learning physical development, language, and literacy skills and these have an implication on early learning. Conventional thinking presupposes that families that stress the concept of individualism tend to influence their children to develop the tendency to think independently as they respond to personal needs and wants. They also tend to have attributes that allow them to solve problems independently (Gelbar et al., 2018). Cultural environments that emphasize individualism tend to influence children to make decisions based on their own choices (Wee et al., 2023)

On the other hand, children coming from parents who take on a collective orientation tend to influence the children to develop self-concepts that are connected to others. Such children tend to act and think with consideration for the wants and needs of their extended families and communities from which they are part (Banks & Banks, 2019). It has to be borne in mind that while cultural values may play a critical part in the lives of individuals and learners, choices made by children are largely made in the confines of communal obligation and tend to reflect on the wider picture of the community expectations (Alhosani, 2022).

Considerations to learning

The influence of family and culture therefore, has implications on how children are expected to learn in the classroom. An understanding of family and culture affects the educator in many ways. As opposed to regarding learners as passive receivers of family and cultural aspects, children should be regarded as agents in the process of teaching and learning using and adapting the family cultural stuff at their disposal (Dela Fuente, 2021). The nexus between family, cultural environment, and early education should not be seen as unrelated but rather as a dynamic relationship, thereby cementing the notion that people and their environments are ideally inseparable (Alhosani, 2022).

In cultural and family settings that place more values on interdependence, children may benefit more from learning in formal settings, receptive processes where they tend to be respectful and listen to adults. In such environments, learners may also be expected to display high levels of self-control, self-reliance, and self-motivation to achieve academic goals (Xie et al., 2021b). According to Xie (2021b), especially in some African-American culture and families, learners are normally subjected to authoritarian leadership. In cultures and families that encourage individualism, learners may be open-minded, and exhibit activeness in the learning process while at the same time receiving some scaffolding from their seniors. Depending on some family and cultural environments like the Latino and Native American culture, learners may prefer to engage in group work.

In cultures and families where people practice agriculture learners may learn better through activities, that consider elements of participation and contributions of others (Weckström et al., 2021). Malawi is an agrarian nation that largely depends on subsistence farming especially in the rainy season. Most families and cultures

practice farming (Ebuenyi et al., 2020). Considerations of content for learning in early childhood for such cultures is critical in ensuring implementation of early learning education. In other contexts including the Nordic, some activities are paramount to the achievement of learning outcomes (Xie et al., 2021b). In such environments, 'play' is an important component of learning that helps to stimulate learning. While an activity such as 'play' in some settings may be reserved for a break, in other settings 'play' is part of the class activity (Ahlquist & Gynther, 2020).

Other learning experiences are also correlated with the way learners pay attention in class. For example, children especially in Africa tend to learn most of their skills by watching adults (Bradford et al., 2021). Such learners have the tenacity to pay attention to different assignments simultaneously. On the other hand, learners who are used to focused learning are more likely to start with one assignment before going to the other.

Discussions and implication

An understanding of family and culture would help to understand that the environment affects learners greatly. Such implications may affect how learners think, and behave, in different settings including schools, homes, and social settings. The continued deeper understanding of culture and family environments has taken away the simplicity that culture and family do not affect the teaching and learning process. A deeper understanding of family and cultural patterns has been linked to the learning process, development and the general early education implementation (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Implication on pedagogy

Faced with the changing realities of knowledge, teachers and instructors in early education set ups need to take into consideration the ever-changing family and cultural backgrounds of learners to ensure that there is consistency of family, cultural stuff, and training as they nurture infants, toddlers, and preschool learners (Williams et al., 2020). It is imperative to understand pedagogical approaches that reflect on different family and cultural in order to meaningfully influence the learning outcomes among the learners. Therefore, to bridge the gaps between family, culture, and pedagogy, it is imperative to make consideration of family and culturally sensitive pedagogies that link the teacher and learners. In the end, a deeper, understanding, and comprehension of family and cultural aspects can help to reconcile the developmental process and early learning of learners.

Implication of teacher training

A comprehensive understanding of the nexus between family, culture development, and learning not only has a positive impact on the learner to comprehend new knowledge and skills, but also allows the learners to interface with the world in nascent ways that are in line with their environmental perspectives. It therefore entails that, teachers, families and all concerned stakeholders should be culturally and family-competent to achieve the desired results in the for early learning. Teachers are required to adapt their standards and those of the curriculum to be able to have a more dynamic family and cultural mind-set requisite to help children in a culturally and family-sensitive environment. Teachers need to have a clear understanding of family and cultural dynamic influences on children and the learning process (Xie et al., 2021b, Weckström et al., 2021). It is imperative also for teachers to comprehend and to

be able to place development in family and cultural contexts and to understand how learners think and grasp learning content. To foster and create a lasting relationship with children emanating from different backgrounds, teachers should be competent to give meaning to family and cultural issues arising from feelings, thoughts, and actions to properly handle the learners. It may also go beyond the classroom platform to build relationships with families of learners to ensure pragmatically reconcile any issue that may arise externally from the school setting.

Implication on Policy

The understanding of salient issues like family and culture needs to be percolated into pedagogy, practices, and policies. The amendments and introduction of cultural issues in early education should be goal for policymaker. Also policy makers should be competent in family and cultural issues to comprehensively capture and express the issues competently to the development of the nation.

Conclusion

Achieving the goals of education for any education system is the top priority for any nation, organisation including individuals. Early education is not exempted from this. To achieve the best for early education, it is important to understand that early education is influenced by different factors including family and the cultural environs. A careful analysis of the factors is salient to the achievement of quality early education. The understanding of the influence of the factors have implications on number of areas including the learner themselves, teaching methods, teacher training and policy development.

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