

# Indigenous knowledge and early childhood care and education in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research study was to explore the integration of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory in combination with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory served as the conceptual as well as the methodological framework advising the components of this research. This qualitative case study invited perspectives from local parents, teachers, directors, a university faculty member, and administrative personnel from Ministry of Education in Ethiopia. Major findings uncovered that language, the Ethiopian alphabet (fidet), traditions and cultural practices passed down from generation to generation, were seen as part of Ethiopia's larger indigenous knowledge system. The value of using indigenous knowledge, including the extent of integration of cultural practices as measured through use of native language, curriculum and educational philosophy, revealed distinct language preferences (Amharic or English) based on school, personal wants and population demographics.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Care and Education; indigenous education; multilingual education, Ethiopia; community cultural wealth*

## Introduction

There is a great reverence toward Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ethiopia, especially the importance of giving every child the opportunity to go to school at a young age so that their future will yield a more prosperous end. In the last 100 years, Ethiopia has recognized the importance of education as a catalyst to the empowerment and advancement of people and society at large. The country established universities, colleges, and various educational institutions in an effort to provide for its citizens a place of academia similar to those found in more industrialized nations. Ethiopia also participates in efforts to reach international education goals such as those proposed by UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) campaign.

Internally, Ethiopia's National Policy Framework for ECCE was constructed in collaboration with various domestic agencies, such as the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. These organizations assisted in conceiving the primary guidelines for ECCE to be carried out in a holistic approach to meet the needs of the country's youngest and most populous citizens.

The importance of ECCE and its impact on children's holistic development has garnered worldwide attention. Studies on brain development show critical periods in which children are most primed to learn (Gestwicki; 2013, EFA Global Monitoring Report Team; 2007; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Kuhl, 2010). These critical periods are at their peak beginning in infancy and continuing to age five, findings which have led humanitarian organizations to focus on the need for ECCE from a global perspective.

Neuman and Hatipoglu (2015) also report on the increased attention to ECCE and the benefits that accrue to children for later success in school. However, they indicate that progress worldwide has been uneven with sub-Saharan Africa lagging behind other regions. There have been problems in scaling up successful programmes and little attention has been given to the development and training of teachers. Quality education as a human right is an international issue that is made more urgent by the vast disparities in health and well-being between

countries. A focus on early childhood education is fundamental in providing opportunities for all children to become literate members of their communities.

United Nations Economic Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s Education for All (EFA) goals highlight children's rights, an idea that was largely absent in various countries, including Ethiopia, where a child was seen as an asset rather than an individual with rights (UNESCO, 2015). These insights from international agencies bring attention to the importance of education in the early years, a period culturally regarded in Ethiopia as an extension of infancy and coming of age.

### **Research questions**

This paper investigates the challenges associated with integrating indigenous knowledge in ECCE in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It derives from research that sought to understand the current conditions of ECCE, with inquiries focused on the absence of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in early education programmes. As such, diverse perspectives were invited on the following questions:

1. How do parents, teachers, administrators and faculty members define indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in ECCE programmes in Ethiopia?
2. To what extent do parents, teachers, administrators and faculty members value the use of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in ECCE programmes in Ethiopia?

### **Conceptual framework**

The research study explored several factors that influence the struggles, successes, and challenges in integrating indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in ECCE programmes in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Underlying conditions needed to be examined through a conceptual lens that considers cultural appropriateness in curriculum together with supporting children's holistic development. For this purpose, Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theories were applied to the current context of early childhood education in Ethiopia.

#### ***Vygotsky's sociocultural theory***

Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory is well known and briefly reported here as it applies to indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Vygotsky believed children's understanding of their world was constructed from their cultural and social experiences, and that all aspects of a child's development from language acquisition to mathematical concepts are guided through the direct and indirect contact the child has with his or her environment during the early years. These experiences are guided by individuals in the community and combined with generational practices, language, and social interactions. Consequently, the main focus of education development in any early childhood care and educational programme should be on enabling children to construct knowledge using their surroundings and scaffold through social relationships within specific cultures and communities (Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2005; Gestwicki, 2013; Vygotsky, 1986).

Vygotsky's (1986) theory of development and learning in the early years captured the relationships between cognitive development, language formation, and the gradual process of speech. Building on this concept, he argued language construction to be the single most indicative event that sets the stage for complex cognitive development. Vygotsky referred to language as a "tool" (Vygotsky, 1986; Vygotsky, Gauvain, & Cole, 1978) children use to transport the knowledge they see, hear, and feel in their natural environment.

This philosophy is very close to the extensive work in ECCE in Reggio Emilia, which draws on constructivist philosophy to recognize the rights of the child as a co-learner with the teacher who serves as a guide. Knowledge is viewed as socially constructed and holistic with multiple forms of knowing (Hewett, 2001).

Vygotsky (1986) considered the community to be the most fundamental and effective agent in helping children build ideas and concepts of their place in the society, but this was discredited by the policies proposed in the UNESCO universal education reform plan. Enslin, Tjiattas and Todd (2009) challenge this Western universal education approach, stating:

The universalist wishes to export unchanged European conceptions of education, attempting to re-create a bygone English grammar school ethos (competitive and individualistic); a curriculum premised on the Western canon, including Eurocentric, history, moral education that denigrates local custom and is premised on Western-enlightenment or Christian codes of conduct, and individualistic learning styles that discourage collaboration and despise indigenous knowledge. (p. 2)

### *Yosso's community cultural wealth theory*

Whereas Vygotsky's theory addresses the importance of culture and the social environments in ECCE, Yosso (2005) looks more broadly at the strength of community as culturally construed internal competency for educational success. Her theoretical framework, community cultural wealth, adopts the critical race theory (CRT) approach to offer alternative interpretations of the Bourdieuan "cultural capital" theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Critical race theory provides a lens through which scholars examine the impact of race and racism (or other forms of subordination such as political, economic, and community) on social structures, practices, and discourse. According to Yosso, the Western educational discourse of cultural capital theory highlights the valuable cultural capital that middle and upper-middle class children bring to the school, which supports their social mobility through formal schooling. This stands in contrast to the lack of cultural capital that children from disadvantaged communities have, leading to their failure within and outside of the school system. However, Yosso critiques this deficit perspective and highlights the inherited cultural wealth of all communities that needs to be harnessed by schools for successful education of all children.

Yosso's community cultural wealth framework includes six forms of cultural wealth: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital. Aspirational capital refers to "the ability to maintain the hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Linguistic capital highlights "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication in more than one language and/or style" (p. 78). Linguistic capital draws on the strength of having multiple language abilities and factoring in this ability as a positive marker in a student's educational intake. Familial capital refers to the informal transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. In familial capital, the cultural imprints that extended families leave behind are believed to influence the construction of a child's belief system.

Social capital delineates the power of a community as a resource, not only to extract knowledge and network but as a social system for support during difficult times. Navigational capital refers to the skills to be able to take advantage of what different social institutions have to offer and to avoid needless conflicts with them. Resistance capital, on the other hand, refers to the necessary opposition to people, policies, and institutions that oppress people and foster inequality.

Vygotsky's (1986) theory of how children develop language from social relations in their communities and Yosso's (2005) view that indigenous people possess several types of cultural capital provide perspective for this study. They provide a lens to understand the challenges in incorporating indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in ECCE programmes in Ethiopia. In addition to this theoretical framework, it is important to understand the history of education in Ethiopia from the proud beginnings to the transition from indigenous education to formal schooling, and to modernization and Western influences.

### **Ethiopia's education system**

The genesis of Ethiopia dates back 4 million years to Lucy or Dinqesh, one of the oldest human fossil remains found (Marcus, 1994). The country's historical imprint is swathed with dynasties, early kingdoms, lineages tracing back to King Solomon and homage to Christianity (Lipsky & Blanchard, 1962; Pankhurst, 1955). The Orthodox Church served as the initial setting for informal or indigenous education designed to prepare participants for the world of Christian life (Wagaw, 1979) and strengthen church roots.

A learning pedagogy heavily conditioned in the liturgical process of the church, crafted with traditions and cultural practices, thus served as the foundation for Ethiopia's education system. This was considered informal in nature but rich in its approach with many subjects. This form of teaching and learning shaped the scholars of the land. Boys, having more priority than girls, entered the life of part servant of the church and part servant of country at around 7 years of age (Buxton, 1970; Levine, 1965; Wagaw, 1979).

#### ***From indigenous to formal schooling***

It was not until 1889, under the leadership of Emperor Minilik, that a more Western propagated education system was introduced in Ethiopia. As part of his vision to advance the country into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Emperor Minilik invited outsiders to share their invention in all facets of development, especially in the field of education. He "encouraged foreign traders and artisans to settle in Ethiopia and introduced new community institutions like schools, hospitals and banks" (Sjostrom & Sjostrom, 1983, p. 35). In 1908, the emperor established the first public school, Minilik II Primary and Secondary School, in Addis Ababa, the capital city.

Europe's thirst for colonial power over Africa was mounting and, in 1896, the Italians' strategic assault toward Ethiopia resulted in a victory for Ethiopians at the Battle of Adwa. Ethiopia's longstanding sovereignty remained uncompromised; however, despite never being colonized by a European power, the residue left from multiple attempts and the brief occupation markedly obscured the way forward.

Shortly after his passing in 1919, Emperor Minilik's vision and strategy to create an educated future was embraced by Emperor Haile Selassie, who assumed the throne and led the country until his deposing in 1974 (Marcus, 1994; Pankhurst, 1955; Wagaw, 1979). This was a precarious time for Ethiopia as a country; having to defend its freedom for the second time against the Italians was arduous, but the win recognized Haile Selassie as a beacon for independence for African countries struggling under colonial rule.

Haile Selassie assertively supported the establishment of colleges and institutions and, by 1956, post-secondary learning communities had sprung up in major cities, including Addis Ababa and the province of Gondar. The establishment of Haile Selassie University I, currently known as Addis Ababa University, signified not only the emperor's foresight for the country's future but his belief in the power of education.

#### ***Modernization of Ethiopia's educational system***

Education in the early grades was primarily taught in the Amharic language but, as students entered the elementary school, a limited number of subjects were introduced in English (Kiros, 1990; Levine, 1965; Wagaw, 1979). Around 1955, the Ministry of Education passed a language policy formally establishing Amharic as the main language of instruction but created space for other non-national languages to be introduced later and taught simultaneously as part of the curriculum in subsequent grades (Heugh, Benson, Bogale, & GebreYohannes, 2007).

As the number of public schools increased, quality in curriculum and instruction was compromised, leading to a shift in vision. After concluding a long-term domestic study, the MoE rolled out a 10-year proposal that included a reformation plan, *Basic Recommendation for the Reorganization and Development of Education in Ethiopia*, which focused on redefining and assessing curriculum and instruction. In the primary grades, recommendations included reduction in class size, teacher training, and a call for morphing primary schools

into community schools (Kiros, 1990). The community schools were instituted on the basis of connecting the child's education with his or her environment and developing this relationship through rigorous coursework, curriculum and education materials. This was, perhaps, the initial step towards integrating indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in the daily learning of student.

### ***International policy and intervention models***

Shortly after the 1961 summit in Addis Ababa, UNESCO proposed a 20-year plan spanning from 1960 to 1980, with reviews every 5 years from implementation. As part of the initial 5-year goal, UNESCO impressed upon Ethiopia and other African countries the importance of teacher training and increasing enrollment at both the primary and secondary level education (Kiros, 1990).

Efforts by UNESCO to remedy some of the preliminary findings on the progress of education in Ethiopia and other Sub-Saharan countries can be viewed as the primary onset of discounting community cultural wealth, indigenous knowledge and the community schools previously proposed by the MoE. The sense and essence of Africanism - that collective core that aims at community evolution and includes the gathering of ideas from elders and old age practices while incorporating new ideas to build and improve not only the individual but the society that embraces the child - was markedly absent in UNESCO's approach.

As UNESCO forged ahead with its universal education strategy to address the educational needs of many countries, the deficiency in national perspective became increasingly apparent. Ethiopia's internal progress prior to the involvement of the international community was underscored with increased educational sites at all levels, primary, secondary and higher education. Ten years after the establishment of UNESCO's proposal for increasing enrollment and expanding free education, the nation's internal assessment showed educational growth was 18%, far below the 1961 summit target of 71% (Kiros, 1990).

In response, the Ethiopian MoE reevaluated UNESCO's imposed initiatives and, through the Education Sector Review, refocused development objectives on cultural values and the importance of inclusive practices at all levels of the educational structure. The primary aim was to promote progress in various areas including social, economic and cultural sectors (MoE, 1973). Between 1960 and 1990, Ethiopia experienced growth in diversity of colleges and specialized training programmes, including the opening of technical schools, business, medicine, language studies, and pharmacy, and the establishment of the Adult Literacy Program to reach the illiterate population nationwide (Gebre-Mariam, 2002; Kiros, 1990).

In 1990, UNESCO declared that education is the principal foundational resource in any country's growth and future development. Ten years later, UNESCO streamlined their objectives through the EFA campaign with a "strategy for ensuring that the basic learning needs of every child, youth and adult are met within a generation and sustained thereafter" (EFA Global Monitoring Report Team, 2007, p. 23). As UNESCO progressed with the EFA campaign, a greater need to understand the meaning of early education in the context of children's historical, social, and cultural experiences was beginning to emerge.

### **Research methods**

Data collection for this study occurred through 18 interviews primarily in Amharic, classroom observations at 10 preschool sites, field notes, collection of relevant documents, and photos of sites acquired during a six-week stay in the Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. Situated in Shewa province, Addis Ababa has a current population of approximately 3.4 million people who speak 80 different languages and close to 200 dialects ([www.newworldencyclopedia.org](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org)). Amharic or Amarigna is the official and most commonly spoken language in Addis Ababa.

Purposeful sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) was used to recruit participants from Addis Ababa and surrounding areas. The decision to include a diverse group of participants was

central to the purpose of this research study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2010) contend that purposeful selection of sites and participants leads to “information rich” (p. 253) experiences during the data-collection process. The criteria set for participating in this study were availability, diversity of sites based on socioeconomic status, and involvement in ECCE in some capacity.

The researcher traveled to Addis Ababa and worked with four local individuals who served as gatekeepers, assisting her with site and participant selection. These individuals contacted ECCE programme providers, verbally explained the nature of the study, and gathered preliminary consent from ECCE site administrators. Their guidance and direction enabled the researcher to initially establish the procedure of this research study via email communication with a supporting letter. This was crucial in getting buy-in from schools, as it legitimized the study protocol to follow.

The last stage of site selection and participation was a verification letter from site administrators of ECCE programmes in Addis Ababa, confirming on the school’s behalf consent for the researcher to conduct the study at their site. The 10 schools that consented to this study differed in classroom size, ratio, tuition base, demographics of families served, and category of school (private, government, and community). Site administrators and directors identified consenting parents and teachers willing to be interviewed. There were 7 males and 11 females in the study, ranging in age from 22 to 65 years. Six parents, 7 teachers, 3 school directors, a faculty member from Higher Education, and an administrative person from the Ministry of Education consented to the study. Their diverse perspectives contributed significantly to the breadth and depth in understanding the development, inclusion, availability, and challenges of integrating indigenous knowledge in ECCE.

## **Results**

Results are reported using the research questions as a guide. The first question addresses how participants defined indigenous knowledge. Their responses are presented in terms of Yosso’s (2005) theory of cultural capital. Each theme is related to one or more the capitals. The second question examined the values of the participants. Sense of belonging and adeptness in Amharic are centrally connected to familial capital.

### ***How do parents, teachers, administrators and faculty members define indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in ECCE programmes in Ethiopia?***

Indigenous knowledge is a natural phenomenon that occurs over time as a result of cultural routines and traditional dispositions. However, the definition of indigenous knowledge continues to be expressed from a Western perspective, which is a viewpoint that often discounts the voices of the natives who practise this intangible wisdom on a daily basis. As part of the inquiry process of this research study, it was important to understand indigenous knowledge in the context of Ethiopia from the locals absorbed in the meaning, unknowingly practising it in their daily lives. As such, one of the research questions driving this study invited locals’ perspectives of their definition of indigenous knowledge.

The primary themes correspond to Yosso’s (2005) cultural capitals. Linguistic capital refers to language and the Ethiopian alphabet. Familial capital is related to clothing and food. Social capital connects to etiquette and respect. Each of these capitals is explored in more depth to reveal how participants defined indigenous knowledge.

#### ***Linguistic Capital***

Ethiopia’s rich language system was dominant in participants’ answers. Parents, directors, teachers, administrator, and faculty members referenced the approximately 80 languages and close to 200 different dialects that exist in the country. Amharic was mentioned as the most viable, available, and working language used in Ethiopian society but, in the dialogue, participants noted their bilingual and trilingual abilities mostly

related to their family tongue or the area where they were born. When explaining the richness, current conditions of the languages and the specific contribution to indigenous knowledge, a teacher responded:

*Our language is our biggest indigenous knowledge, we have a great wealth, our country has a great language system, and it's old and has reproduced itself. For example, our language has evolved in so many ways . . . so, when language renews itself in different forms, then it will be easier to assign new technology to its name because now we use American names, not home born names.*

As part of the demographic questionnaire, participants were asked the number of languages they spoke. In confirmation to the variety of languages spoken in Ethiopia, 77% of participants were bilingual, 11% were trilingual and the rest 11% shared that, even though they do not speak fluently in their mothers' or fathers' tongues, they were able to understand communication in that language. As well as Amharic and English, languages mentioned by teachers in the demographic questionnaire included Guragina, Oromigna, Gamogna, Greek, Tigrigna and Spanish.

Parents explained their intent to teach children their own primary language as part of the transmission of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Participants' discourse on the oral language system was accompanied by other forms of expression, such as the Ethiopian proverbs, storytelling, and old wives' tales, as part of the oral language system.

In addition to the abundance of languages found in Ethiopia, the complexity of the written language, specifically the alphabet system, was noted by participants. The Ethiopian alphabet or *fidel* consisting of over 260 characters was recounted as another representation of Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge. The written language of Ge'ez, including its non-Western number writing systems, was mentioned to be a significant contributor to indigenous knowledge. However, in further discussion, it was noted that the use of Ge'ez has significantly decreased in the general population and is currently limited to the churches where services are rendered in this ancient language. Participants spoke of the lessened value of both the Ge'ez and indigenous numeric writing system, attributing its diminishing use to Westernization and the availability of the uncomplicated English numbering system that was included in current instructional mediums in majority of the sites.

#### *Familial capital: Clothing and food*

Participants shared childhood stories in which specific indigenous practices and cultural experiences assisted the seamless transition of indigenous knowledge between generations. One teacher shared her parents' ethnic tribes: her father, a *Dorze* from the southern part of Ethiopia, came from a tribe known for the craftsmanship of traditional Ethiopian wear. Her mother's family was from the south, an area where premium *dukem teff* (indigenous grain) is produced. She explained how she grew up amid the skillful arena of her father's family making handmade clothes and how this emblem of everyday life stayed with her long past her childhood. She concluded by pointing to the *netela* (an outer garb, part of the Ethiopian dress worn by women) she was wearing and pressing upon the fact that, if she could, she would wear the traditional clothes like her mother did every day.

Food was another theme that emerged amongst participants who cited their cultural specialties like *kitfo* and other delicacies associated with specific tribes. Participants reiterated the importance of having the skills to make traditional foods like *wot* and *injera* so that, even if children go abroad, they are able to stay connected to their roots. Along these lines, many teachers referred to *teff*, the coffee ceremonies and more complicated ethnic foods that require generational skills like making *kocho*, *tej* and *tela* (Ethiopian honey wine) as the ingredients for Ethiopia's distinct indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

*Social capital: Etiquette and respect*

When she entered classrooms, the researcher was greeted harmoniously with a welcome from students standing behind their desks. Some offered their seats, there was attention given to the teacher instructing them, and there was an aura of wanting to learn. When children were given their snacks, there was an automatic *amesegnalhu*, or thank you. In speaking of these imbued practices of culture, one parent added:

*I believe our culture and traditions offer a lot of benefit and boundaries for our students. The respect people show to each other and attached to our religion—the expectation to wait until marriage before experiencing a physical relationship with the other gender, so all this to say they follow the path of our culture, I believe this will add to their success as a whole.*

The unspoken principle of respect that fills the daily life of Ethiopians was echoed in participants' responses. A parent added, "What delights me to see in our culture is how we care for the elder, the respect we have for each other, there is true care". The presence of respect at an early age was commented on by a director who has foreigners in her preschool programme. She explained the difference she sees between the Ethiopian children and non-Ethiopians in their behavior and their etiquette. In her response, she attributed upbringing and cultural practices to the quietness and respect young Ethiopian children showed toward teachers versus the foreigners who question and challenge classroom rules at a very young age. She shared:

*When you compare the kids here with others, they, the kids here, still understand through culture what is right and wrong, like, if they are doing something that is not expected of them, they can respond to your facial expression of disapproval and they rethink what they are doing. The foreign students, they want to reason and you have to reason with them constantly about everything. And that may be good actually for both cultures, but there might be things that you do not want to explain and reason out and are not acceptable in our culture.*

***To what extent do parents, teachers, administrators and faculty members value the use of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in ECCE programmes in Ethiopia?***

As part of the exploration of cultural practices in early education settings, participants were asked their perspective on the value of using indigenous knowledge. They offered comments primarily in two areas. First, in terms of familial capital, teachers and school directors expressed their rationale for integrating indigenous knowledge as a sharing in the sense of belonging that participating in cultural values entails. Second, in terms of linguistic capital, children's aptitude in Amharic or their mother tongue in early grades was believed to be helping children become more adept in the language, facilitating a natural learning experience.

*Familial capital: Sense of belonging*

The benefits of including Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge were tied to raising children with ethical sensitivity and emotional responsibility. Using Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge alongside everyday learning for children was seen by some participants as a deterrent from unwanted behavior - seen later in the older grades. The integration of cultural practices and indigenous knowledge was believed to give children ownership of who they are and where they belong in relation to being an Ethiopian child. In responding to using indigenous materials and other relevant cultural tools to educate children, a teacher stated:

*Yes, they [children] will be confident, they will have confidence in who they are, they will love their country, and, after 12 years, they do not want to go to Europe or elsewhere. They will want to work here. When they see the problem, they want to solve that problem, instead of going away.*

There was also a sense of pride in some participants' answers, in defence of using Ethiopia's own knowledge and language as an effective medium to instruct young children. Teachers gave examples of how they represent the

culture by incorporating items from the community like Amharic or linguistically or culturally relevant books, or artifacts, and some built products with local materials for children to interact with.

*Linguistic capital: Adeptness in Amharic or mother's tongue*

The use of Amharic, mother's tongue or local languages was heavily discussed with several of the participants, acknowledging proficiency in Amharic or mother's tongue as an essential function representing indigenous knowledge for the proper education of the child. In revealing experiences from the classroom and delineating the difference between those children who are raised in using native languages, and its contribution to early comprehension skills, a school director shared this reflection:

*There was a child that came here to attend school. In class, you know, we sing the "Itsy Bitsy Spider," in English and the children sing it, but, you know, they sing the melody and not really hit upon the words correctly, but this kid came from a household that taught him this song and the meaning behind it in Amharic and he came to us with a well-developed language system in Amharic, and so, when he came here, since he already knew the song in his native tongue, he was asking questions like, "which wall did she climb?" [and] "did the wind take her down?" etc. Our other kids could not associate such things. I would even say that they don't know "shererit" is the same as spider. They may think it is another insect, but this kid had prior knowledge about spider and their ability to go up and down the wall, that wind can affect its direction in his own environment in a language that he can relate to. He was able to explore this concept in depth. If we were teaching children in their language and playing music in a language that relates to them, then children are able to invite many different concepts towards their own thinking and knowledge base to build on it.*

Participants weighed in on the benefits of using the national language. Their responses touched upon social responsibility and personal belief. Some teachers stated it can be difficult to find direct translation for words in Amharic, especially when translating from Amharic to English. Further, some teachers admitted their struggle with English and preferred to speak and teach in Amharic as they were fluent and comfortable in that language.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Given the definitions of indigenous knowledge and the values of the participants, this concluding section offers recommendations that continue to follow Yosso's (2005) capitals, in particular linguistic capital, resistant capital, and aspirational capital. The linguistic challenge is the transition from the native language to English and provision of adequate resources. The resistant challenge is to maintain indigenous practices in the face of powerful countervailing forces of Western culture. The aspirational challenge is for Ethiopia to keep its shared culture and values while still meeting Education for All goals.

*Linguistic capital: Change of language of instruction*

Participants explained that the current educational policy switches the medium of instruction to the English language once students enter seventh grade. This prompts some parents, specifically those who can afford those schools that promote English, to prepare their children early by exposing them to the English language. Some parents and teachers commented on this disparity in preparation of children as being detrimental to the outcome of one group of children. Children attending schools serving low-income families were primarily taught in the Amharic language, following the mandate given by the MoE in Ethiopia, but also out of their own beliefs and conviction to preserve the language. Teachers and parents alike felt the decision to learn and teach in the indigenous language somewhat compromised their students' long-term success, especially when they progress to secondary and higher education where the language of instruction abruptly changes to English.

One parent expressed the frustration he felt when his daughter, after graduating from a Kindergarten (KG) programme that mainly used Amharic as the medium of instruction, was faced with thinking and maneuvering in the English language once she arrived in middle school. This was even more daunting as he considered her future, competing with her more “English exposed” peers at the local university. He still had admiration for the school where she attended preschool for giving her a great start in life, with an education that was ingrained in Ethiopia’s culture and traditions, and even though he believed this should be the way, he sees the struggle his daughter faced in later grades.

In addition to these challenges, teachers’ lack of qualification and preparation for teaching in English was brought up by directors, faculty members and administrative personnel from the MoE who shared the disconnect many children face when presented with Western terms, expressions and examples. One participant stated:

*Why I am saying English is affecting the learning of our children is simply, when you are speaking in English, that language becomes abstract to those children... Our children know about Mississippi River, but they don't know about the small ones around their village because they are not talking about it. Because with the stories and use of the English language also come experiences of other countries.*

*Recommendation for a three-language policy.*

A critical look at the current medium of instruction specifically examining compatibility and developmental appropriateness in the ECCE settings can assist in creating a language policy that meets the social, cultural, and cognitive need of every child in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a country with a rich language systems and dialects; while respecting this diversity, there needs to be a language policy that affords equal opportunity and access for every child in an environment that reflects his or her traditions and linguistic system of the community. Similar to India’s three language systems (Murphy, 2012), Ethiopia can adopt a comparable approach with language instruction that will produce trilingual students, ready not only for higher education in Ethiopia, but aptly competitive in the global education market. This can be achieved by implementing a national language, such as Amharic, which is widely spoken in various corners of Ethiopia while simultaneously implementing a local language or the mother’s tongue for instruction starting in early education classrooms and international languages as subjects in primary grades. The timing of foreign language introduction is critical to expand the linguistic ability of the child and not replace the local or indigenous language of the country. English and other chosen foreign languages can be considered as part of the curriculum as subjects in primary and elementary grades.

***Lack of resources in the native language***

Schools serving families from a higher socioeconomic population were seen to use Western materials over indigenous products in the classroom. The influence from home and the growing aspiration for Western products, including English, added to the obstacles of creating an environment for children that embodies the culture and traditions of Ethiopia. Furthermore, Ethiopia’s own educational history has added to the current state of regarding Western materials as having a greater impact on children’s acquisition of knowledge.

Parents involved in the study shared their perspective on Western materials in the classroom, including their value to the learning environment. Many from the low-income group expressed that they do not see any additional value and suggested that, if resources permitted, Ethiopia’s own manufactured items would add value to the ECCE environment. Parents acknowledged that Ethiopia’s own resources were more beneficial for children’s education and noted their value, with one participant asking, “Well, then, why do you think they import it to the West if it was not useful?”

Teachers’ responses as to the reason behind their decision to use Western materials, such as books and toys, and the absence of indigenous materials in the classroom revealed that convenience coupled with

parental expectations from affluent families were a contributing factor in the schools' decision to incorporate foreign goods in the classroom. Convenience has been a major contributor in adopting a system of education that promotes English through the curriculum. Confirming there have been instances when they have ordered materials manufactured in Ethiopia, teachers said that this was not sustainable. In describing her decisions in the classroom, one teacher added:

*Because they [children] know them [gojo bet] so, instead of bringing something that they do not know, instead of teaching them about igloo, we have nothing about igloo. I mean, we don't know about igloo, but the problem here is we don't have materials to teach about gojo bet. I don't have a picture; I easily get the English picture igloo from the internet.*

This teacher explained that it is easier to teach children about igloos when they are covering the letter "I" than to teach them about a hut house or *gojo bet*, the traditional Ethiopian houses with which children are familiar - essentially, you can reach a picture of Igloo on the internet faster than seeing a *gojo bet* in the environment.

Furthermore, there was an overwhelming agreement in asserting that the absence of resources was not due to lack of intellectual ability or craftsmanship, but society's thirst for Western-themed education philosophy that translated into the devaluation of Ethiopia's existing cultural wealth.

The issue of funding was raised, especially when investing in materials designated as toys or instruments for instruction. Ironically, schools serving low-income families were seen to have more homemade, locally created, and culturally relevant materials, but directors and teachers shared the continuous challenge to find instructional books and engaging materials to use in the classroom. Further, to some, investing in interactive materials or toys when some sites are struggling to provide nutrition for children was a luxury as opposed to a necessity.

#### *Recommendation for incentive programme*

The international community, specifically those agencies driving the international goals such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank involved in various funding activities in Ethiopia, can refocus the direction of the monetary support towards specific, country/community driven effective indigenous education, such as the use of local languages in pre-primary education curriculum and materials used for instruction. Programmes or countries using culturally relevant materials can be considered for a stipend to further their projects.

#### ***Aspirational capital: Amendment to current EFA goals***

Recommendations for policy at the international level urges that UNESCO amend current EFA goals to reflect and reinforce the critical role of native languages and use of indigenous practices to meet the first objective of ECCE access and expansion in developing countries. Since the inception of the EFA campaign, concentration on access-only related goals has overshadowed other aspects of the meaning of ECCE in Ethiopia and beyond. As such, Ethiopia bears witness to high dropout rates and attrition in subsequent grades (MoE, 2011). As the leader of universal education reform, UNESCO has both an opportunity and responsibility to amend the EFA campaign goals in such a way that indigenous practices are at the forefront of the goals and objectives in member countries' agendas when revamping an education system that has been consistently imported into Africa. These measures will help bridge the gap between theory and practice - and advocacy and policy - for many countries, including Ethiopia. In addition, this will pave the way for achieving quality education using resources and materials familiar to the student.

ECCE is an essential component for any country's progress toward realizing the full potential of its citizens. This study's findings align with Yosso's (2005) resistant capital because it uses the words of the participants to challenge the stance held by international organizations as the nucleus entity where interventions are drawn from and homegrown solutions disregarded. Less-industrialized countries like Ethiopia have the

ability to build their own educational standards using their existing cultural, linguistic, and traditional systems as the core of their curriculum. Often the definitions ascribed to indigenous communities regarding their identity are transliterated and filtered through Western views of their culture. Misunderstandings of one's culture and "poor translation (both forward and back translation) can create an 'artificial knowledge conflict' and that scientific knowledge tends to prevail and to dominate in such cases because it is supported by more powerful political, social, cultural and economic structures" (Grenier, 1998, p. 25).

The definitions of indigenous knowledge expressed by the participants underscore Ethiopia as a pluralistic society, a defining strength that rebuts the one-size-fits-all international education reform designed to silence indigenous knowledge. Therefore, for Ethiopia to make formidable educational advances, the country's existing community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) needs substantial consideration in all facets of education reform.

The challenges in integrating indigenous knowledge and cultural practices produced delineating themes: (a) ECCE in Addis Ababa has made progress in terms of creating a space for early learning; and (b) achieving a quality education programme infused with indigenous knowledge and effective early education programmes for all children in Ethiopia is still largely absent. Further, as illustrated in the findings, the education gap between the rich and the poor, specifically looking at education materials, curriculum, and medium of instruction, has generated two sets of citizens in Addis Ababa - one has been instructed in local languages including limited cultural materials and indigenous language, while the other has been prepared in English.

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