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## From traditional learning to modern education: Understanding the value of play in Africa's childhood development

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Rhymes, poetry, stories, wrestling, music and dancing were essential cultural elements through which childhood play was promoted in traditional Africa. "Modernisation" brought about by colonialism led to distortion and decline in the use of traditional play for childhood education in many parts of Africa. This work assessed the value of play in Africa's childhood education, using documentary analysis and a survey of views from South African and Nigerian childhood educators. The documentary analysis involved a review of existing research to give an overview of traditional play in Africa, while survey data generated from 62 respondents in South Africa (SA) and Nigeria (Nig) were used to illustrate the findings of the review. Traditional African play, when properly deployed, could enhance children's physical, mental, social and emotional development. This study identified 5 major obstacles to the integration of traditional and modern forms of children's play. It therefore calls for concerted efforts by policymakers, educators and parents to address the challenges associated with the identified obstacles within a trado-modern paradigm.

**Keywords:** childhood development; colonisation; indigenous education; playful learning; precolonial Africa; traditional learning; trado-modern approach; western education

### Introduction

Play is natural to all children, but indigenous play appears to be under threat in much of Africa's modernised education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO], 1980:5), play is "the *raison d'être* of childhood." Children's right to play, within the context of the contemporary childhood development movement, is underscored in a number of international instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (1989). However, available research indicates that less is known about the potential of traditional or indigenous play for enhancing modern childhood education in Africa. With the predominance of westernised education, traditional African play has continued to take a back seat in the formal school system (Lester & Russell, 2010; Omolewa, 2007). Consequently, the relevance of traditional children's play to contemporary childhood education in the continent seems unclear and under-researched (Nyota & Mapara, 2008; Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015; Roopnarine & Davison, 2015). This attention deficit has created a serious knowledge gap among childhood educators and teachers on how to balance traditional learning with recent educational practices in the ongoing modernisation process in Africa.

### The Research Problem

This work explores the changing landscapes of children's play in its historical, theoretical and empirical contexts as a response to the challenge of removing obstacles to integrating "traditional" and "modern" approaches to African education. Principally, therefore, the work set out to achieve three objectives: one, explore the value of children's play in precolonial Africa with reference to emergent issues in the coming of Europeans and western education; two, examine contemporary views on the value of children's play from the perspectives of pre-primary and primary school educators in SA and Nig; and, three, highlight major challenges of play-based learning in current childhood development practices in Africa as well as possible ways of addressing them.

### Literature Review

#### *Understanding play in traditional African childhood development*

In traditional Africa, the process of child development took place within the family and the community. Beginning from the early years, children were integrated into the economic, social, cultural and physical activities going on in their environment. These included farming; naming, marriage and burial ceremonies; and festivals that involved wrestling and masquerade. Marah (2006) reports that girls "were socialized to effectively learn the roles of motherhood, wife, and other sex-appropriate skills" while boys "were socialized to be hunters, herders, agriculturalists, blacksmiths, etc., depending on how the particular ethnic group, clan or family derived its livelihood" (p. 15). Whatever may appear to be the limitations of the mode of learning, when viewed through

the lenses of contemporary times, the simple cultural milieu of the traditional society provided a pragmatic context for indigenous education and the use of playful learning in childhood development.

Indeed, evidence from recent studies attests that traditional African children's play has the potential for optimising early childhood development (ECD) in modern-day Africa. For example, Nyota and Mapara (2008) explain that Shona traditional children's games and play in Zimbabwe were infused with songs which represented indigenous ways of knowing. In a more comprehensive report, Ottenberg and Binkley (2006) present some of the African experiences of children's traditional play which have endured to date. Among these is play from such cultures as the Kuba people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, the Dogon people of Mali, the Uzairue people of Jattu in Northern Nigeria, the Dylua peoples of Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso, the Yoruba people of South Western Nigeria, and the Fante people of Ghana. A graphic illustration of the value of traditional play to children's development is also presented in the work of Rossie (2013). Based on extensive fieldwork in the Tunisian Sahara and a review of ethnographic literature and other documentary sources, children's experiences of play in the desert region are summed up by Rossie thus:

In nomadic, semi-nomadic or sedentary communities (of Africa) living in an environment of sand dunes, children familiarise themselves very early with sand and readily use it in their games. These include pretend games related to weddings and female or male activities, games of motor skill involving movement, equilibrium, flexibility and fighting, and also games of cognitive skill such as board games and riddles with drawings. The 'toys' created with sand can be very simple – for example, sand itself serving as play material for the small ones – but also quite complex, as in the case of a mosque and minaret made with wet sand by older children. (2013:4)

Other reports from Tanzania (Kekana, 2016), South Africa (Joseph, Ramani, Tlowane & Mashatole, 2014), Nigeria (Iwokedok, 2009), Zimbabwe (Nyoni & Nyoni, 2013), Zambia (Kalinde, 2016) and Ghana (Nabie, 2015) all support the emerging contention that integrating traditional songs, games and play can contribute much to enhancing contemporary childhood development practices. However, the evidence suggests that this has not been possible owing to the changing landscape of education with the coming of Europeans and the onset of westernisation as from the 1880s.

The western missionaries and European colonialists came to Africa purposely to evangelise and impose Euro-American ways of life. The Christian-oriented education introduced by the missionaries was designed to produce evangelists for spreading the gospel while the colonial

government supported western education only for the training of junior workers for the colonial service (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002; Omolewa, 2007). In the pristine Christian sense, children's play was regarded as "the devil's workshop" and "leading to sin" (Chudacoff, 2007:26). Chudacoff further recalls that among the New England Puritans of colonial America, it was "sermonized that at least some forms of play wastefully diverted both children and adults from their serious responsibility of serving God" (2007:26). Accordingly, evidence of discrimination and selective access to play and the use of children's toys was noticeable in colonial America (Chudacoff, 2007).

What Chudacoff reported about play in American colonies also played out in Africa under colonial rule. For instance, "[e]ducation policies during the colonial era (in Zimbabwe) discriminated against the blacks; therefore, meaningful Early Childhood Education (ECE) was accessed by a few privileged families mostly in urban areas" (Makuvaza & Gatsi, 2014:370). In Kenya, Odongo and Onderi (2014) contend that "neglecting indigenous ways of bringing up children in our society merely because such practices are seen as 'traditional' or 'outdated' while embracing in totality the 'modern' child rearing methods has perhaps brought erosion of social values" (p. 108). It was possibly against the background of the reported trends that Omolewa (2007) concludes that "[t]he coming of European (Western) education from late 15th century onwards disrupted the traditional system and brought the formal school system" (p. 594). As revealed later in this work, the widely reported distortion and disorientation brought about by colonialism was at the root of the seeming confusion about the place of play in ECE in much of contemporary Africa.

#### *Theoretical perspectives: Modernisation and play in childhood development*

The theory of modernisation helps in understanding the seeming confusion surrounding the place of play and traditional learning in contemporary African education. It is a theory that can be used to explain how Africans appear to have relegated their traditional ways of life in preference for foreign ones. Modernisation theory implies that "modern societies are more productive, children are better educated, and the needy receive more welfare" (Reyes, 2001:2). Inglehart and Welzel (2007) argue that the theory "brings an intense awareness of change and innovation, linked with the idea that human societies are progressing" (p. 3071).

#### *The natural development of play?*

Child development theories, particularly as from the 19th century, "focused on the observed changes in children as they grew older – maturation" (Nolan

& Raban, 2015:8). Accumulated research evidence indicates that, unchallenged, the child would, at some stages in life, climb elevated terrains; gather and scatter items around; chase siblings and peers; assume mother/father roles; pretend to cry or laugh; and do many more of children's play activities. Explanations for why children enjoy doing these things, that are sometimes incomprehensible to the adult mind, could be found in perspectives on play such as Freud's therapy theory, Bruner's rehearsal theory, Dewey's preparation theory, Montessori's sensory learning theory, Piaget's intellectual development theory and Vygotsky's social development theory. In sum, these theories view play as a natural need of the child, in same way as eating is to the human body.

The intrinsic value of play is evidenced in opportunities for children to express their need for love, learning and living in an adult-dominated world. Elements of life are woven together in play as children experience and express them. In play, children digest life and make their own meaning of it. Play is therefore the primary means through which imagination, intelligence, language and perceptual-motor abilities in infants and young children are best developed (Frost, 1997). All the skills needed in adolescence and adulthood are cultivated and tested when children play. And this makes the transition to adult roles easier and less chaotic. As play comes naturally to the young child, children's feelings can be gauged, monitored and moderated when they play. For instance, through social play, children cultivate the attributes of justice and fairness which guide them all through life.

Katz (1997) has, however, warned that "this developmental principle may have limited generalizability", recalling "large groups of China sitting for long periods watching quietly as their classmates performed songs and dances" (para. 10). Nevertheless, the situation reported by Katz may have to do with the conditioning of children, and the observation about this set of Chinese children may not necessarily be natural to them. A similar form of conditioning currently goes on in many African preschool centres where children are forced to passively watch television programmes or computer-driven activities under the watchful eyes of untrained teachers and caregivers to give uninformed parents a semblance of a digitalised ECE (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015). As Katz (1997) justifiably counsels, however, such examples "should not be taken to imply that young children necessarily like to sit still for very long periods or that such experiences enhance their physical, social, or intellectual development" (para. 10). Nolan and Raban (2015) put the issues into the correct perspective by arguing that developmental theories lay the foundation for developmentally

appropriate practice (DAP), which focuses "on a child's learning and development as an individual, as opposed to the focus on acquiring specific knowledge" (p. 8). In other words, practitioners' understanding of play, within the framework of child development, should be broad enough to cover what children need for all-round development; not limited to certain environmental conditions that are beyond the children's control.

#### Play as constructivist pedagogy

The pedagogical value of children's play has its roots in constructivist theory. Constructivists argue that all humans (young or old) interact with elements of their environment to create their own understanding and knowledge. For children, this occurs mainly through playful learning (Katz, 1997). From the constructivist viewpoint, therefore, play is central to children's reconstruction of their experiences and it is the most potent pedagogical tool for ECD and education (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015). Piaget's research on genetic epistemology has shown that children's reasoning contains many ideas that were never taught but which they developed as they grew and continually engaged with their environment. "To understand is to discover, to reconstruct by rediscovery, and such conditions must be complied with if in the future individuals are to be formed who are capable of production and creativity and not simply repetition" (Piaget, 1972:20). Socio-cultural constructivists like Piaget argue that "children are able to make stimuli in the environment match their own concepts" (Englebright-Fox, 2008:para. 10). Therefore, children's play not only allows them to practise what they know, but also makes them learn new things by constructing new knowledge through activities involved in play.

Contemporary models of ECE are mostly informed by constructivist epistemology which approves of a play-based pedagogy (Samuelson & Pramling, 2013; Weikart, 2000). Such models include the High/Scope Curriculum and the Child-centred Approach Curriculum. These play-based models contrast with some other approaches to ECE which downplay the use of play. Examples of these are the programmed approach of the traditional nursery schools (with defined and strictly implemented curriculum) and the custodial approach associated with some Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) programmes in developing countries which have "no basis in theory" (Weikart, 2000:60). Early childhood education programmes in contemporary Africa adopted one or more of the diverse models with varying implications for play-based pedagogy. For instance, Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015) found that ECD policies in Nig and SA specify a play-based approach for interactions in ECE centres and that the main method of facilitating learning should

be the play way. Thus, the policy context provides room for integrating traditional and modern approaches to playful learning in the development of the African child. The extent to which this happens in practice was further explored in this work.

### Methodology

The methodology of this work involved documentary analysis and opinion survey. The documentary analysis method relied on a review of existing research in order to gain insight and generate the information used to support our construction of the observed phenomena (Bowen, 2009; Mogalakwe, 2006). Since it is impossible to cover all African countries in a study of this nature, the researchers relied on existing literature for the purpose of selecting, appraising and synthesising information presented as excerpts and quotations (Bowen, 2009). This is particularly with reference to the characterisation of traditional African play.

To complement findings from the documentary analysis, data obtained from a survey of 62 educators at two separate national workshops in SA and Nig were used. The researchers administered an open-ended questionnaire with five key items (country of practice, current occupation, type of school, knowledge/use of traditional play, and reasons for non-use of traditional play in schools – if applicable). With the attached summary of the characterisations of traditional play, as gleaned from the documentary analysis, volunteers in the two countries were requested to provide written responses to three main questions: (1) “Which of the traditional play are you familiar with or knowledgeable of?”, (2) “Which of the traditional play have you used in the last school term?”, and (3) “If not used, why do you think teachers are not using the traditional play described

in the template?”

The survey questionnaire was administered to 32 volunteers during a national workshop for in-service Grade R and elementary school teachers in Johannesburg, South Africa, in July 2016. The same instrument was also administered to 30 volunteer in-service nursery and primary school teachers at a similar workshop in Lagos, Nigeria, in February 2017. The teachers’ responses to the three key questions raised in the research instrument were pooled and analysed using frequency counts and simple percentages. Data obtained were used to illustrate core issues raised on the value and use of children’s play in the literature review.

### Findings

Based on the findings of the documentary analysis (Appendix A), five categories of traditional children’s play with similar characteristics in some African countries were highlighted. Even though the play bears different names in different countries, the activities involved in much of the traditional play are similar and their contributions to child development are along the same direction. The traditional play covers manipulative, cognitive, physical games and games with rules. With reference to the characterisations of the play listed in Appendix A, respondents were asked to state how familiar with or knowledgeable they were of the traditional play. Their responses are as presented in Table 1. While between 20 and 40% of the respondents in both SA and Nig claimed to either be familiar with or knowledgeable of the five categories of traditional play described, only between 31 and 43% of the respondents had used “rope skipping” and “Mbube mbube/Ekun meeran mee” in the last school term. What this suggests is that most of the teachers were not using traditional children’s play.

**Table 1** Extent of knowledge and usage of traditional children’s play (SA,  $N = 32$ , Nig,  $N = 30$ )

Type of play	Knowledgeable and in use	Knowledgeable, not in use	Familiar	Not familiar
Upuca (South Africa)	05 (16.6%)	08 (26.6%)	09 (28.1%)	10 (33.3%)
Okwe (Nigeria, Ibo)	07 (23.3%)	08 (26.6%)	11 (36.6%)	04 (13.3%)
Morabaraba (South Africa)	06 (18.5%)	07 (21.8%)	12 (40.0%)	07 (23.3%)
Dara/Doki (Nigeria, Hausa)	08 (26.6%)	09 (30.0%)	10 (33.3%)	03 (10.0%)
Kgati (South Africa)	10 (31.2%)	07 (21.8%)	12 (40.0%)	03 (9.3%)
Rope skipping (Nigeria)	10 (33.3%)	09 (30.0%)	08 (26.6%)	03 (10.0%)
Mancala (South Africa)	05 (15.6%)	09 (28.1%)	12 (37.5%)	06 (18.75%)
Ayo (Nigeria, Hausa)	08 (26.6%)	10 (33.3%)	09 (30.0%)	07 (23.3%)
<i>Mbube</i> (South Africa)	11 (34.3%)	09 (28.1%)	07 (21.8%)	05 (15.6%)
<i>Ekun meeran mee</i> (Nigeria, Yoruba)	13 (43.3%)	05 (16.6%)	08 (26.6%)	04 (13.3%)

In order to probe the reasons for non-use, respondents were requested to list the three most

important reasons for not using traditional children’s play as known to them. Their responses

are summarised in Table 2. Only issues raised by at least one-third of the respondents for each category

were used in the analysis of data.

**Table 2** Reasons for non-use of traditional children's play

Reasons	South Africa ( <i>N</i> = 32)		Nigeria ( <i>N</i> = 30)	
	<i>f</i> (%)	Ranking	<i>f</i> (%)	Ranking
Competency of caregivers and preschool teachers	18 (56.3%)	2nd	24 (80.0%)	2nd
Wrong notion of the purpose	16 (50.0%)	3rd	16 (53.3%)	5th
Mushrooming of ECE centres	12 (37.5%)	4th	26 (86.7%)	1st
Attitudes of stakeholders	20 (62.5%)	1st	23 (76.7%)	3rd
Inconsistent government policies	11 (34.4%)	5th	17 (56.7%)	4th

Going by the order of ranking, the reasons for non-use of traditional children's play varied in some respects in the two countries. Nigerian respondents ranked the proliferation or mushrooming of educational centres first. For the South African respondents, their number one issue was the attitudes of the stakeholders. However, respondents in both Nig and SA agreed on the problem of competency in relation to caregivers and preschool teachers as the second most important issue in the non-use of traditional children's play. Nonetheless, the third most important reason for the South Africans was wrong notion of the purpose of traditional African play, while attitudes of stakeholders ranked third in the reckoning of their Nigerian counterparts.

### Discussion

Documentary and empirical evidence in this study has shown that the use of play in childhood education is under threat in Africa. This is, however, not peculiar to the continent. Peterson, Portier and Murray (2017) reported that, perhaps until recently, parents in North America did not approve of the use of play in both kindergarten and grade one. And, as Joan Almon (2003:17) earlier concluded, it appears "[c]hildren no longer have the freedom to explore woods and fields and find their own special places." The researchers' observations in Nig and SA agree with Almon's (2003) submission that "[i]nformal neighbourhood ball games are a thing of the past, as children are herded into athletic leagues at increasingly younger ages" (p. 18). More fundamentally, however, the decline in children's play (including traditional play), as shown in this study, may be traced to five unresolved issues or threats to childhood education in contemporary Africa.

One of these greatest threats is a lack of competent practitioners. In an earlier survey by Ogunyemi (2004), it was found that more than 70% of the sampled Nigerian teachers could not clearly explain the use of play facilities and their roles in guiding the children towards playful learning. The

finding was irrespective of teachers' gender, age, qualification or teaching experience. More recent investigations by Musa, Abubakar and Danladi (2017) and Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015) agree with the position of Samuelson and Pramling (2013) that many practitioners "generally (mis)understand (play) as being the opposite of teacher-organized activities" (p. 2).

Another major issue raised in this study is the misconception of work and play, particularly at the preschool or ECE level. Not much seems to have changed in Nig and other African countries on the belief that the purpose of preschool education is to start "serious academic work", as reported by Durojaiye (1977:30). Many parents see "play" as making the children unserious about their "studies" and childhood educators who opt for play-based activities are seen as lazy. For these parents, children learn better when introduced to paper-and-pencil tasks right from infancy (Ejuu, 2015b). The root of this unscientific notion of play in ECE may be traced back to the colonial experience when the Europeans made access to formal preschool education an elite affair (Nganga, 2009). This gave rise to a situation in which many African parents would stop at nothing to go for "academic" preschool education which discourages "playful learning" as a way of "catching up" with the elite members of their society. Therefore, there is a need to pay due cognisance to this socio-historical context as part of efforts to find a lasting solution to the value crisis in childhood education in Africa (Ejuu, 2015a; Makuvaza & Gatsi, 2014).

The proliferation of private childhood education centres constitutes another major source of crisis for education at this level in today's Africa. In a Nigerian survey, parents perceived "government schools as being of poor quality, with many respondents unwilling even to consider enrolling their children" (Härmä, 2011:1). In addition, "[g]overnment school teachers are seen as lacking in motivation and unwilling to give due care and attention to the pupils in their charge" and "[l]earning at these schools is believed to be

extremely limited” (Härmä, 2011:1). The seeming rejection of public nursery/primary schools has given rise to what Ogunyemi (2013) calls the “mushroom school phenomenon” owing to “the continued demand for private provision of early childhood education facilities by parents since the 1970s” (p. 818). In the same vein, Seleti (2009) reported that there is unequal access to economic benefits and resource amenities among ECD centres in SA. Other researchers like Barry and Zeitlin (2011) and Dawes and Biersteker (2011) have also linked socioeconomic inequalities to the provision of ECD facilities in different parts of Africa. These and other findings point to the challenge of restoring confidence in the public provision and management of childhood education in a manner that accommodates the yearnings and aspirations of African families and nations.

Another major hindrance to the use of play and quality childhood education in Africa is the attitudes of stakeholders. Early childhood education centres in Africa are largely privately owned. Without doubt, “these sub-standard schools were established principally for profit motives by their proprietors” (Ogunyemi, 2013:818) and they were set up without the full involvement of the communities in which they are located. So, there is no meeting point in the activities and roles of families and community on the one hand and the educational centres on the other. It has been documented that schools in Nig are “unresponsive to parents and parents feel that government sector schools cannot be expected to be accountable and so do not request or seek improvements” (Härmä, 2011:1). Parents are also reportedly more interested in academic reports than visiting schools to see their children at play and drawing lessons on how to apply the playful learning techniques back at home as well as in the community (Härmä, 2011). In addition, our observations in Nig also indicate that forums like parents-teachers association (PTA) meetings devote more time to addressing how parents can “assist the school” with pressing financial needs than what could be done to promote playful learning among school children. Yet, back in their various homes, these children “are not allowed to play freely because parents are afraid of accidents or do not have time to take them to a playground” (Gosso & Carvalho, 2013:3). In the process, valuable opportunities for making the children tap from traditional play, which abound in many African neighbourhoods and communities, are lost. This runs contrary to accumulated findings that engagements at home in socio-cognitive activities by young children put them at an advantage in school readiness (Schaub, 2015). Therefore, parent education is imperative in order to develop their skills in traditional play-based activities for complementing efforts at playful learning in preschool centres and schools.

Inconsistency in government policies, which results in wide gaps between policy formulation and implementation, is another stumbling block to the steady development of quality childhood education in Africa. For example, Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015) have shown that ECD policies in SA and Nig are theoretically oriented towards play. Similar trends have been reported in Senegal (Barry & Zeitlin, 2011), Tunisia (Rossie, 2013), Zimbabwe (Makuvaza & Gatsi, 2014) and Uganda (Ejuu, 2015b). In most of these settings, however, the evidence suggests that policy declarations on play are observed in the breach, due to lack of political will to enforce and monitor standards. Therefore, a change of attitude by political leaders is required for African children “to be prepared and supported in order to possess all the necessary prerequisites for quality schooling while cherishing traditional values that keep them in harmony with their culture and society” (Barry & Zeitlin, 2011:125). This also calls for a political process that does not disregard what is relevant in the traditional system of education (such as play) or mistake modernisation for Euro-American assimilation.

#### Recommendations

The issues raised in the discussion of findings call for serious and concerted efforts to reposition Africa’s childhood development through the integration of traditional play into ongoing childhood education and development activities. Improved teacher education programmes, in both pre-service and in-service components, will go a long way to improving childhood educators’ professional capacity for handling both traditional and modern forms of children’s play. Parent education is also key. This could be provided through forums like the PTA, community/neighbourhood associations and school open day platforms. A lot of misconception about the place of play, especially in the traditional setting, could be corrected through the avenue of parents’ education. With correct information and knowledge, parents and guardians may also begin to have a change of attitude and, ultimately, embrace playful learning in engaging their children at home.

To make play-way learning work in childhood education, African governments must show the way. They must enforce existing guidelines on the establishment and running of childhood educational institutions in order to discourage the exploitation of innocent parents who patronise substandard schools. Governments could create model childhood centres where blends of traditional and modern strategies of teaching (including play) are in use by expert educators. For instance, elements of traditional play, outlined in this study, could be improved upon and integrated into the curricula of

these schools as found suitable in their respective environments. The use of “University Practising Schools”, currently operational at the University of Johannesburg, may be adopted in other parts of Africa where there are none. More importantly, African governments must desist from playing politics with the education of children. Frequent changes in policies and programmes could frustrate the best of plans by practitioners and educators. Therefore, the interests of Africa’s future leaders should be kept above the petty politics that characterise governance in many parts of the continent.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Trado-Modern Approach to Child Development**

African theories of childhood play are still largely unexplored (Nsamenang, 2015; Pence & Nsamenang, 2008; Ramokgopa, 2001). However, a growing body of recent literature has stressed the importance of the holistic development of African children with reference to their cultural roots (e.g. Kamara, Kasanda & Van Rooy, 2018; Nsamenang, 2006; Pence & Marfo, 2008; Semwaza, 2013; Wadende, Oburu & Morara, 2016). This is in response to “the international image of children [which] is becoming increasingly homogeneous and Western-derived, with an associated erosion of the diversity of child contexts” (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008:v).

Nsamenang (2015:838) insists that “the ‘culture’ that channels developmental outcomes is inside the individuating self as a core facet of the ecocultural paradigm.” His ecocultural theory interrogates the impact of physical and cultural contexts in ECD in Africa. This is consistent with his earlier theories of human ontogenesis through which he insists that “an African worldview visualizes phases of human cyclical ontogenesis of systematic socialization of responsible intelligence in participatory curricula that assign stage-appropriate developmental tasks” (Nsamenang, 2006:293). These curricula, he argues, do not view knowledge as “separated into discrete disciplines, but all strands of it are interwoven into a common tapestry, which is learned by children at different developmental stages, who participate in the cultural and economic life of the family and society” (Nsamenang, 2006:293).

We propose a trado-modern approach (TMA) to child development as a framework for the use of play in achieving a blend of old and new strategies in contemporary African childhood education. The concept of “trado-modern” implies a blend of traditional and modern child development activities, including play, that puts the interests of children at the centre of all considerations in recognition of Nsamenang’s ecocultural paradigm. TMA places a high premium on African socio-cultural child-rearing practices without losing sight

of the benefits accruable from global research on holistic child development. While recognising age-specific programmes, the trado-modern educator focuses more on activities and programmes that prepare the child to be a participatory member of the community, unlike Euro-American culture that promotes an individualistic ethos. The socio-cultural milieu is the fulcrum for the construction of childhood in Africa. This milieu, as earlier explained in this work, provides ample opportunities for singing, dancing, clapping, storytelling and other play-related activities within the indigenous childhood development paradigm.

Responding to the challenge of play-based teaching and learning for effective childhood development in contemporary Africa demands a holistic approach that integrates aspects of tradition and modernity. African early childhood educators, parents and policymakers should embrace a play-based curriculum in order to ensure holistic child development in the continent. Play allows children to construct, challenge and reconstruct their own understanding of the world. It connects children’s new experiences to prior ones in order to achieve new learning. Play is a constructivist activity which has always been part of children’s development processes in all societies, including traditional Africa. The provision of a safe space and facilities for play, diligent supervision and enforcement of specified standards with culturally conscious, trained and knowledgeable educators, as well as parents’ education in playful learning strategies, are necessary ingredients for achieving the goals of trado-modern, play-based, childhood education in contemporary Africa.

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### **Authors’ Contributions**

Ogunyemi and Henning wrote the manuscript and Ogunyemi provided data for the tables, Ogunyemi administered the questionnaire and conducted all documentary analyses. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### **Notes**

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**Appendix A: Characterisation of Traditional African Play and Child Development**

Names of traditional play	Activities involved	Categories	Relevance
<i>Upuca/Diketo</i> (South Africa) <i>Okwe</i> (Nigeria) <i>Dinketo</i> (Botswana) <i>Kudoda</i> (Zimbabwe) <i>Ndaale/Lkor</i> (Kenya) <i>Pombo</i> (Ghana)	Requires one or two players; pebbles, seeds or beads; players throw one pebble into the air, pick the remaining pebbles one after the other before catching the one thrown into the air; players continue until all the pebbles are picked up.	Manipulative, cognitive and game with rules	Teaches addition and subtraction; sets of different numbers; encourages team spirit; and develops social interaction skills among pupils
<i>Morabaraba</i> (South Africa) <i>Dara/Doki</i> (Nigeria) <i>Shisima</i> (Kenya) <i>Dili</i> (Niger)	A board game played by two; players take turns to place a counter anywhere on the game board until all counters are placed; players move the counter into an adjacent empty square; counters are moved up, down or sideways but not diagonally in order to place three counters in a row; play ends when a player is unable to make three in a row, with the opponent winning the game.	Cognitive, manipulative and physical play	Encourages basic mathematical sense; develops problem-solving skills; and encourages deep thinking and focus among children
Rope skipping (Nigeria) <i>Kgati</i> (South Africa) <i>Gadha/fishu-fishu</i> (Zimbabwe)	A skipping game played by three; two players hold the skipping rope at each end while the third player skips in a variety of ways chanting and singing.	Physical play	Enhances mental coordination and promotes physical fitness of children
<i>Ayo</i> (Nigeria) <i>Mancala</i> (South Africa) <i>Oware</i> (Ghana) <i>Onwe</i> (Uganda) <i>Wari</i> (Senega) <i>Awale</i> (Ivory Coast) <i>Bao</i> (Zimbabwe)	Two players are involved; the first player “scoops” all four seeds or pebbles picked in any hole from his/her side and “sows” them by dropping one in each hole, except for the one from which the seeds were first taken; the opponent does the same thing; either of the players who had his/her seed dropped on the opponent’s side and made 2/3 seeds, takes those seeds, provided they are in a row next to each other; player with more seeds at the end of the game is the winner.	Cognitive play and game with rules	Teaches children basic mathematical skills of addition, multiplication, division and subtraction
<i>Mbube mbube</i> (South Africa) <i>Ekun meeran mee</i> (Nigeria)	Children (players) help a “lion” or “hyena” (i.e. <i>mbube</i> or <i>ekun</i> ) to locate and capture an <i>impala</i> (deer) or <i>eran</i> (goat); one player is the lion and the other one is the <i>impala</i> ; both players are spun around a circle of other children; players forming the circle begin calling out to the lion outside, “ <i>mbube, mbube!</i> ” or “ <i>ekun meeran mee!</i> ”; if the lion fails to catch the <i>impala</i> /goat inside, a new lion is chosen, and if the lion catches the <i>impala</i> , a new <i>impala</i> is chosen.	Physical play	Develops children’s physical agility/fitness, increases their mental alertness, and promotes respect for rules