

Early Childhood Care and Education in Kenya.

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Recent years have seen a global endeavor to prioritize early childhood care and education as a foundation for later learning and development, as evidenced by the Global Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in the 21st Century (Association for Childhood Education International/World Organization for Early Childhood, 1999). Such efforts are a response to a variety of complex social issues and economic trends. These forces, which are referred to here as "complex family stressors," include, but are not limited to, societal changes due to industrialization, the increased number of women with young children entering the labor force, families with two working parents, a rise in the number of single parents, and the demise of traditional systems of child care and extended family support systems (Driscoll & Nagel, 2002; Graves, Gargiulo, & Sluder, 1996).

This article will provide an overview of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Kenya. Specific emphasis is placed on the historical development of ECCE, the administrative organization, the collaboration among various agencies in Kenya, ECCE curriculum, and teachers' professional training. A relatively young profession in Kenya, ECCE has experienced tremendous growth at all levels.

Definitions of early childhood care and education differ around the world (Swiniarski, Breitborde, & Murphy, 1999). The more industrialized nations consider early childhood to be the period from birth through age 8 (Essa, 1999; Wortham, 2000), while developing nations focus on birth through age 6 (Eville-Lo & Mbugua, 2001; UNICEF, 2002). Regardless of such determinations, the increased interest in early childhood education around the world reflects respective nations' and/or societies' particular philosophical beliefs about children (Graves et al., 1996). Accordingly, children may be viewed as: growing plants that need nurturance, miniature adults, natural and national resources that need to be nurtured, and/or as future investments critical to the sustenance of a society and its ability to compete in the technological age (Essa, 1999).

The belief that early learning begets later learning and success, just like early failure breeds later failure, has been validated in both economic and educational research (Boocock, 1995; Heckman, 1999). According to the World Development Report (Jaycox, 1992), education and economic development are positively correlated, making education intrinsic to development. Therefore, the potential long-term benefits for children's cognitive and social development (Barnett, 1995; Gonzalez-Mena, 2000) have inspired increased interest in early childhood education and care. This interest continues to be championed by UNICEF's health and nutrition programs (UNICEF, 2002).

The Historical Development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Situated on the eastern coast of Africa, Kenya gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1963. Nearly half of Kenya's population of 30 million is below the age of 15 (World Fact Book, 2001). The infant mortality rate is 67.99 per 1,000 live births, while the life expectancy is 46.5 years for men and 48.4 years for women (World Almanac, 2002). Kenya is a multilingual and multicultural nation, with 42 different languages spoken, including Bantu, Arabic, and Nilotic (Bogonko, 1992). English is the official language and the main medium of instruction from preschool to tertiary levels of education. Ki-Swahili is the national language and is taught

from preschool to high school. As a result, most children in Kenya are fluent in both languages, in addition to the vernacular spoken at home. This multilingualism heightens Kenyans' understanding of other cultures.

Kenya is the only African nation with an established early childhood education program, and the initiative has had a significant impact on its citizens. Kenyans perceive education as a key to success in life, facilitating social mobility and personal development (Nkinyangi, 1982). A number of theoretical perspectives focus on education's pivotal role in human growth and development (Mbugua-Murithi, 1997). The modernization theorists contend that education transforms individual values, beliefs, and behaviors, which leads to development (Benavot, 1992). As a result, Kenya has seen a clamoring for and expansion of education at all levels (Mutero, 2001; Mwiria, 1990), including nursery schools, child care centers, kindergartens, and preschools.

The first recorded school for young children in Kenya was founded at Rabai (a coastal province) in 1886 by the Church Missionary Societies (Bogonko, 1992; Eshiwani, 1989). The first early care centers can be traced to the 1940s, when British colonists established centers to serve both European and Asian children. During the same period, the colonial government established early childhood care centers for Kenyan children living on the tea, coffee, and sugar plantations. These centers were set up in response to Mau Mau ...