Challenging Piaget: Western Influence in Kenya's Early Childhood Reform

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Author Note

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Abstract

This article examines the ongoing influence of Western developmental theories, particularly those of Jean Piaget, on Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum reform. Despite its stated aims of fostering learner-centered, culturally relevant education, the CBC continues to rely heavily on Piaget's stage theory, reflecting colonial legacies in education policy. Drawing on a postcolonial theoretical framework and a thematic analysis of curriculum policy documents and early childhood education materials, this study critiques the contradictions inherent in adopting Western developmental models in the Kenyan context. The findings reveal tensions between the curriculum's constructivist aspirations and its adherence to fixed developmental milestones, which marginalize indigenous pedagogical. By privileging Western notions of quality and best practices, the CBC risks undermining the transformative potential of education to reflect Kenya's diverse cultural and social realities. This article calls for a re-evaluation of early childhood education policies to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and flexible learning pathways, fostering a more inclusive approach.

Introduction

Western discourses have and continue to dominate the conceptualization of best practices in early childhood education across the globe. Pedagogical practices, curricula, and educational structures are often perceived as higher quality if they align to Western values, languages, and practices (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Nganga, Akpovo, Thapa & Mwangi, 2020; Vavrus, 2002). Early childhood education often aligns with this paradigm despite early childhood experiences and educational practices stretching across cultures and continents. The dominant narrative of early childhood education remains singular: children need to be developed in age-appropriate manners, screened for deficits, and taught in developmentally appropriate practices that align with Western values.

This article explores this through the lens of a recent educational reform in Kenya, called the Competency-Based Curriculum, which launched in 2018. The reform aspires to produce "engaged, empowered, and ethical citizens" who are both "patriotic and global," equipped with the "skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values to thrive," which will be achieved by using learner-centered practices like "bespoke, differentiated, innovative learning experiences" (KICD, 2017, p. 10). Despite the promise of innovative learning, the Kenyan reform relies on Western models of childhood developmentalism as its

foundation. The reform explicitly uses Jean Piaget's stage developmentalism to structure its curriculum, pedagogy, and activities. Using textual content analysis, I explore how Kenya's policy documents, early childhood curriculum learning standards, and teacher workbooks take up Piaget's developmental stages. I argue that Kenya's reform creates a contradiction between learner-centered aspirations and Westernized developmental frameworks, leading to tensions and limiting possibilities for alternative approaches. This curriculum's confused approach ultimately restricts the potential for teachers and students to experience a truly learner-centered and bespoke educational model. My research ultimately aims to unsettle these dominant narratives of 'quality' and 'best practices' that continue to sway and impact education in the Global South (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2013).

First, this article explores the history of developmentalism and its influence on education, then looks at how this history manifests in Keynan curriculum documents. Methods, data, discussion, and implications follow.

Confronting Piaget

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a highly influential Swiss psychologist known for his theory of cognitive development, which describes how children's thinking evolves in stages as they physically grow. However, children developing through age stages did not start with Piaget. His theories were created in tandem with other dominant theories of the time, such as evolution and recapitulation theory.

Developmental theory describes children in which "new abilities and proficiencies were thought to unfold in set steps or be acquired in a series of stages" (Baker 1999, p. 798). Developmentalism also has a colonial and racist past (Burman, 1994; Fallace, 2014; McClintock, 2013), where young children were often compared to prehistoric man or positioned as 'savage.' Despite its illusion of scientific objectivity, the idea of developmental stages is associated with the idea of 'goodness 'and evangelical notions such as liberating the child from savagery (Hollway et al., 2003). It was also assumed that through ideas of developmentalism that humans or even societies could follow a linear, ordered hierarchy to 'civilization.'

The idea of developmentalism as a theory was influenced by G. Stanley Hall, who combined the idea of childhood innocence with biological notions. Hall (1846–1924) was an American psychologist and educator, known as the founder of child and educational psychology. Drawing on Darwin's notions on biological development, Hall (1975) started early childhood studies in the United States. Hall's ideas were influenced by Herbert Spencer, (1820–1903) an English philosopher and sociologist, who applied evolutionary theory to human society, coining the phrase "survival of the fittest." Spencer coined the idea of recapitulation theory, which posits that the development of an individual recapitulates (or mirrors) the evolutionary development of the human species. According to Egan (2002), Spencer's recapitulation theory was highly influential but also embarrassing and, rejected, mostly, within American public schools.

[An embarrassment about] Spencer's recapitulationism was its casual and brutal racism. His theories helped those whose interest lay in viewing other races as inferior "savages," comparing such adult "savages" with modern children… Spencer used absurd observations to justify "superior" people to govern "inferior" people, and of course, to decide who was inferior and who superior. (p. 28).

Hall applied these ideas to early childhood—suggesting that the stages of development a child goes through reflect the stages of human evolution. Hall believed during early childhood, children exhibit behaviors and characteristics that are reminiscent of more primitive and "savage" stages of human development. At the time of Hall and Spencer,

recapitulation theory was presented as eternal facts, something everyone understands. As British child study advocate James Sully (1902; as cited in Fallace, 2014) wrote: "As we all know, the lowest races of mankind stand in close proximity to the animal world. The same is true for infants of the civilized races…" The theory of recapitulation was not something that needed to be explained thoroughly or supported with extensive evidence because it was a 'tacitly presupposed' belief shared by the entire intellectual community. (p. 26) Recapitulation and evolution played a part in Piaget's developmentalism as Burman (1994) argues, "The specifically Darwinian notion of natural selection, however, emphasizes variability rather than uniformity. While Darwin's subscription of recapitulationism and Lamarckism were equivocal and implicit, these were the features that were taken up to the structure of the emergent developmental psychology. It should be noted that these views were widely held and, among others, both Freud and Piaget subscribed to them in their writings. (p. 11)

Developmental theory has been extensively criticized by the likes of Baker (1999), Cannella (1997), Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1997), Suransky (1982), and Walkerdine (1984). These scholars all critiqued the reliance on developmental theory as a narrow vision of the individual child and childhood that also masked ideologies that constructed the autonomous, independent, and rational adult and, at the same time, the dependent, immature, and more emotional child. The construction of the child as an individual that would self-regulate and behave rationally are governing discourses that were to be interred in the mentalities and actions of children in early childhood education, alongside broader cultural discourses envisioning the Western child as future adult. These notions constructed a Western-European cultural identity that was a political and cultural construction related to the imagined ideal citizen.

The idea of developmentalism is still strongly held to this day, despite its racist and colonial past. However, these ideas are seldom critiqued in mainstream venues of teacher and early childhood education and continue to be taught as "best practices" to early childhood students, teachers, and practitioners globally.

A final example of this can be found in the guiding framework for United States early childhood settings, the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). This framework is written and promoted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). While this framework has evolved positively over the year, Bloch & Whye (2024) argue that the framework still has a strong adherence to theories of child development, which "falsely restricts the scope of ideas related to the causes of change in child development, or the multiple interpretations one might have if we drew on family or children's own ideas, diverse experiences, and knowledge" (p. 7). Bloch and Whye (2024) also highlight that recent DAP guidelines reveal a large oversight on research regarding non-white and non-middle-class children. DAP guidelines state,

Although research finds that culture and context matter, relatively little research has been conducted with children from non-white and non-middle-class backgrounds. There is also a need for additional research led by those who reflect the diversity of children and families in their lived experiences. (NAEYC, 2022, p. xxix)

In an era of innovative research on children, especially non-white children and contexts, it's disconcerting that huge policy frameworks still refuse to acknowledge or incorporate it into their policies. In the next section, we see a similar scenario playing out in Kenya.

The Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya

Education in Kenya has long been critiqued for not reflecting the diversity of its population and their educational goals, rather tilting towards the priorities of Kenyan elite and Western values (Ntarangwi, 2003; Thiong'o, 1986; Wafula Wekesa, 2008). As

Ntarangwi argues, despite previous curriculum reforms, Kenyans have "absorbed imperialist values that consequently condition them to think of 'development' as the process of shedding any traces of their unique traditions and cultural practices" (p. 211). As argued throughout this article, the new Competency-Based Curriculum can be aligned with these arguments.

After a series of working papers, reports, and a nation-wide needs assessment, the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) was unveiled in 2018. The CBC reform focuses on developing practical skills, competencies, and talents among learners, with an emphasis on 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and problem-solving. The goal of the curriculum is to produce well-rounded individuals capable of addressing real-life challenges (KICD, 2017).

The CBC was officially unrolled in schools 2019 but was waylaid by the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reform in Kenya moved from pilot stages to nationwide implementation. The Ministry of Education adopted a phased rollout, beginning with Grades 1-3 in 2020 and expanding to upper primary by 2021. Teachers underwent professional development training from the government to shift from content-based instruction to more interactive, skills-based teaching methods. However, despite efforts to prepare educators, many faced challenges in adapting to the new curriculum, with reports of insufficient training and resource shortages, particularly in rural areas (Akala, 2021; Sifuna & Obonyo, 2019).

Additionally, the CBC's emphasis on practical skills required more infrastructure like science labs, computers, and internet, creating disparities between urban and rural schools. Parental involvement became crucial, with families asked to support students' project-based learning, which raised concerns about the financial burden of additional materials as well as reflecting affluent, urban Kenyan priorities (BBC News, 2021).

The Kenyan reform shows a new emphasis on early childhood education. This emphasis is significant for several reasons. The Competency-Based Curriculum marks the first time early childhood learning standards were officially included in the national curriculum and all young children expected to enroll in pre-primary. Policy documents explicitly show how young children are key in this curriculum.

Many youngsters are growing up without the desired values, positive attitudes and psychosocial competencies needed to function as responsible citizens. The Framework will take advantage of the fact that learners spend most of their formative years in school, which presents opportunities for the curriculum to mold and reinforce values upon which the learner's character is formed. (KICD, 2017, p. 14)

Before the Competency-Based Curriculum reform, early childhood education was left to churches, families, local organizations, or NGOs— leaving the spectrum of early childhood educational experiences wide. Now, children, once under local influence, are officially folded into the realm of the state. Prior to compulsory pre-primary education, early childhood education was heavily involved with communities and families, which reflected the cooperative nature of African culture (Mbithi, 1972). After Kenya's independence from Britian in 1963, early childhood education across the nation became possible through *Harambee* schools, schools sponsored by local communities in the spirit of *Harambee* (meaning pull together in Swahili). In these contexts, early childhood settings became a mixture of traditional childrearing practices such as traditional weaning foods, mother tongue stories, intergenerational care (Swadener, Wachira, Karibu, & Njenga, 2008), and globalized discourses on 'quality' schooling. Begi (2014) highlights how mother tongue instruction historically preserved Kenyan cultural values through storytelling, proverbs, and songs while facilitating children's understanding of key life skills. Despite benefits, Begi identifies systemic challenges—such as lack of

training, parental resistance, and insufficient resources—that perpetuate the dominance of colonial languages. This contradiction mirrors the Kenyan's reliance on Western developmentalism, sidelining Kenya's linguistic and cultural heritage in favor of rigid age-stage frameworks. A true learner-centered model, as envisioned, would integrate mother tongue education to reflect indigenous cultural knowledge and support broader educational goals of equity and inclusion. Swadener et al. (2008) notes that state guidelines for Kenyan early childhood practices typically follow Western assumptions about normal child development, "quality," and advocated "best practices."

In Kenya, Westernized discourses on development, quality, and childhood (re)enter classrooms through the new reform. While Kenya's curriculum documents espouse language like "bespoke, differentiated, innovative learning experiences" (KICD, 2017, p.10), the curriculum is primarily informed by Western psychology and developmental theories. The developmental stage theory of Piaget forms the basis of the reform's theoretical foundation—with his ideas repeated across domains like mathematics, business studies, and indigenous language instruction. Piaget's developmental stages are taken up to inform the sequence and structure of the Kenyan curriculum, as well as pedagogical tactics. With this is an assumption of quality and best practices, which is also an assumption that there are universal truths that are discoverable concerning teaching and that the 'right' methods predetermine outcomes. The Basic Education Curriculum Framework writes on Piaget,

Piaget asserted that children cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so. According to this theory, there is progressive reorganization of mental processes resulting from biological maturation and environmental experience… before these [earlier] ages children are not capable (no matter how bright) of understanding things in certain ways, and has been used as the basis for scheduling the school curriculum. (KICD, 2017, p. 17)

In policy documents, the CBC bucks the teacher-centered structure, rote memorization, and importance of summative assessments. Instead, it finds its theoretical and pedagogies reasoning from constructivist theorists such as John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. It focuses on children, their agency, mastery of skills, and nurturing a variety of career paths specifically through learner-centered methods.

However, this switch to a constructivist/competency-based pedagogy has been extensively criticized for not allowing teachers to truly understand the theories behind constructivism, not given enough support or materials, and promoting Western ideologies (Akala, 2021; Tabulawa 2003; Vavrus 2002). As Vavrus and Barlett (2011) argue, implementing learner-centered pedagogies "…[embody] particular understandings of teaching and learning that arose in specific cultural contexts and assume certain material conditions for teachers" (p. 4).

Overall, these policies show a buy-in into the categories of developmentalism—an interesting contrast to other theories highlighted in the Kenyan curriculum reform on creating a child-centered and constructivist model. The early childhood curriculum is clear about the influence of the developmental theorists on the construction of the curriculum and pedagogy. Despite the educational reform's move to child-centered pedagogies, the reasoning is still built upon the idea of linear progression through stages.

Piaget's Influence in Kenya

The CBC explicitly states constructivist theories at the cornerstone of the curriculum's theoretical foundations. Constructivism emphasizes that learners build their understanding through interactions and experiences, making learning an active process of meaning-making rather than rote information acquisition. The curriculum's Basic

Education Framework (KICD, 2017), a foundational policy document for the reform, states the curriculum is informed by John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Howard Gardner, Erik Erikson, and Jerome Bruner.

For Dewey, the curriculum draws on his social constructivism. Dewey influences the "… the practical aspect of the basic education curriculum in the curriculum reforms" (KICD, 2017, p. 16). The curriculum which uses Vygotsky's social-cultural development views leads the ideas of guided learning in supporting students toward independence. Gardner's multiple intelligences theory argues that individuals possess various types of intelligence and emphasizes the importance of self-directed learning and delivery of instruction in multiple mediums. Bruner's cognitive development theory suggests that learning is a process of building on prior knowledge through discovery. Finally, Erikson's psychosocial development theory describes eight stages of growth, each involving a specific challenge or crisis that shapes personality.

This combination of theorists reveals theoretical contradictions in the curriculum reform. First, the reform explicitly takes Piaget's theory of stage development as a basis for the reform and does not engage with his other theories on constructing knowledge. This puts the idea of rigid stages at odds with other constructivist theorists in the curriculum. Piaget's theory emphasizes the role of stages in cognitive development and suggests that children reach specific cognitive abilities at certain ages, largely driven by biology and time. In contrast, Vygotsky believes that learning is highly dependent on social interactions and that cognitive development can be accelerated through guided learning and social interaction, regardless of age or stage. Vygotsky's (2012) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development implies that with the right support, children can achieve more than their current developmental stage would suggest. While Piaget argues that children progress through fixed stages of cognitive development, Bruner's theory suggests that any concept can be taught to children at any age as long as it is presented appropriately.

Briefly, Piaget theorized that children progress through four stages. The first stage, called the Sensorimotor Stage, is from birth to about two years old, where infants explore the world primarily through their senses and physical actions. Next, children grow into the Preoperational Stage, from ages two to seven, they start using language and symbols to represent objects and experiences. At seven, children enter the Concrete Operational stage, where they develop logical thinking, but only in relation to concrete, real-world objects. In adolescence, they reach the Formal Operational stage, where abstract thinking becomes possible. Piaget theorized that at this stage children can reason logically about hypothetical situations, consider different perspectives, and engage in complex problem-solving and deductive reasoning. Throughout these stages, Piaget believed that cognitive development follows a universal pattern, with each stage building on the previous one as a child's mental capacities mature (Wadsworth, 1971).

Piaget's stages are explicitly used to inform the curriculum. In the Kenyan Basic Education Framework, Piaget is discussed at length at the foundation of the curriculum's structure.

Piaget asserted that children cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so. It is important to note that children's thinking does not develop entirely smoothly, instead, there are certain points at which it "takes off" and moves into completely new areas and capabilities. (KICD, 2017, p. 17)

A strong focus on Piaget and developmental stages is found throughout the Basic Education Framework for all content areas and in a rigid way, "Pre-primary mathematics curricula should therefore comprise learning basic mathematical concepts through manipulation of concrete objects and not abstract knowledge" (KICD, 2017, p. 30). In teaching indigenous languages, Piaget is taken up again, "According to Piaget, learners

[lower secondary grades] at this age develop the ability to think about abstract concepts. The subject in indigenous languages will therefore expose the learner to abstract ideas and appropriate hypothetical and deductive reasoning" (KICD, 2017, p. 50). This policy recommends that students are only taught 'concrete' language activities in early childhood and lower primary levels. It is noteworthy that the curriculum only engages with this part of Piaget's oeuvre, no other theories or arguments of his are used in the curriculum.

The following sections explains methods, data selected and used, findings, and implications of Kenya's use of Piaget.

Methods

This research is based off fieldwork in Kenyan early childhood settings, where materials relating to the curriculum reform were gathered. This included eight textbooks from grades Pre-Primary 1 (PP1) and Pre-Primary 2 (PP2), correlating to children ages three to seven.

For Pre-Primary 1, materials included two language activities workbooks, one Christian Religious education workbook, and one environmental activities workbook. For Pre-Primary 2, materials included one Christian Religious education (CRE) workbook, one mathematical workbook, and two environmental studies workbooks. These books were chosen to cover both grade levels and content areas. These curriculum materials were analyzed alongside of the Basic Education Framework (KICD, 2017), the guiding policy document outlining the new reform, and the 2024 Curriculum Learning Standards (KICD, 2024). The Curriculum Learning Standards make up the bulk of the context analysis. The Basic Education Framework is a policy document which focuses on aligning education with the country's national goals and global standards. The document is organized around covering the national goals for education, core competencies to be developed, curricula pillars, and the structure of basic education.

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and trends within the policy document and curricular materials. This analysis was interested in how the policy documents framed developing children and then how teacher and student workbooks handled them. There was also a focus on the pedagogical tactics used in the workbooks, as well as outlined in the policy document. This analysis followed a "thinking with theory" approach, using theory as a flexible interpretive tool. This helped reveal tensions in the curriculum and how texts engage in dominant discourses with a postcolonial theoretical framework, offering insights into both constraints and possibilities for early childhood education in Kenya (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011).

Table 1:

Curriculum Materials Collected for Kenyan Early Childhood Setting

Grade Level	Age Group	Subject Area	Number of Workbooks
Pre-Primary 1	3–5	Language Activities	2
Pre-Primary 1	3–5	Christian Religious Education (CRE)	1
Pre-Primary 1	3–5	Environmental Activities	1
Pre-Primary 2	5–7	Christian Religious Education (CRE)	1
Pre-Primary 2	5–7	Mathematics	1
Pre-Primary 2	5–7	Environmental Studies	2

Findings and Discussion

In the new reform, Pre-Primary 1 and Pre-Primary 2 have five content areas including Language, Mathematics, Creative Arts, Environmental Activities, and Religious Education. Each content area uses a theme-based approach such as "My Family," "Our Neighborhood," "Animals," "Weather," and "Water."

The curriculum learning standards generally align with Piaget's stages of Sensorimotor and Preoperational stages. Activities are typically structured to match age-based expectations, like simple sorting or symbolic play for younger children in Preoperational stages. Sensorimotor skills engage with the world through physical actions and sensory experiences

In Pre-Primary 1, this is particularly emphasized in Mathematical activities which emphasize sorting, grouping, and sequencing concrete objects such as wood blocks, balls, toys, bottle tops, flowers, pebbles, shells, paper cutouts, seeds, feathers, fruits, and beads. These items are generally sorted based on color, size, and shape. Environmental Activities are also of a concrete nature. These lessons tended to engage in coloring in workbooks and sorting activities. Creative Arts engages in scribbling, coloring, using modeling materials, and bending. Other content areas emphasize sensorimotor skills less like Religious Education. Language activities include letter cut outs and handling books.

The Preoperational Stage is for children two through seven, which is most of the children in grade Pre-Primary 1 and Pre-Primary 2 grades. This stage is supposed to be fostered by symbolic thinking, language development, and pretend play. For example, in Pre-Primary 1, children learn greetings and farewells during Language Activities. This is supposed to be taught in a variety of ways through observing pictures of greetings, demonstrations and role play, video clips, and discussions (Shimenga, Kabura, Adhoch, Ochieng', & Odiwuor, 2018, p. 32-38). While role play fits both with the Piagetian stage and a learner-centered approach, the activities are limited. During role play, children are not encouraged to improvise, create their own greetings, or interpretations of greetings.

Strictly applying Piaget's framework over the curriculum restricts the curriculum and teacher's adaptability by assuming that all children within an age group possess the same cognitive abilities across the world. Expecting children under seven to think only in symbolic terms, typical of the Preoperational stage, and also not allowing for other activities, could discourage students from engaging in different types of thinking. In contrast, the Kenyan curriculum's goals are to use learner-centered pedagogies and practices. This kind of approach encourages exploration beyond set stages, giving children the chance to encounter a wider range of experiences regardless of their 'developmental stage.'

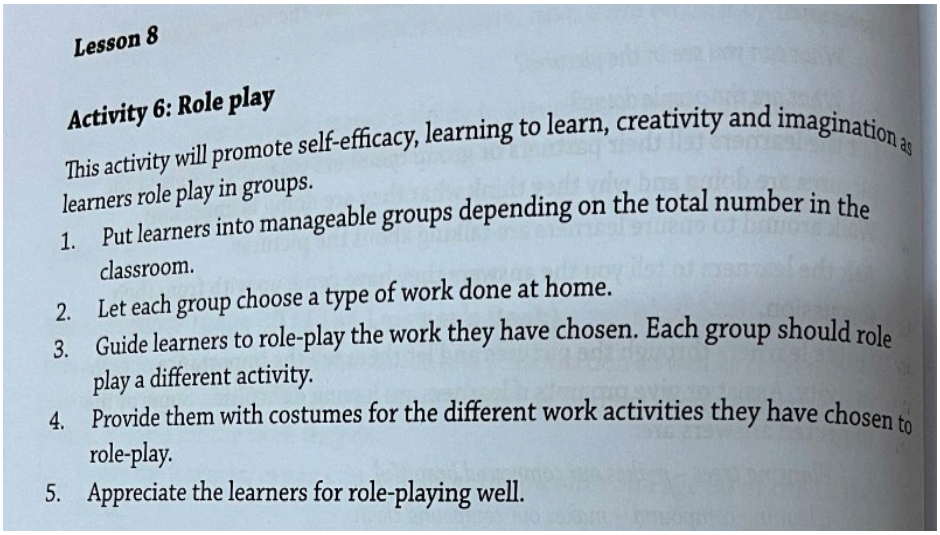
A key tension in this curriculum between Piaget's developmental stages and a learner-centered curriculum lies in balancing fixed developmental milestones with individual readiness. Piaget's framework, with its age-related developmental readiness, limits the range of experiences offered to children, while learner-centered approaches seek to create broad opportunities based on each child's interests and abilities. This can conflict with a strict adherence to stage-based expectations.

In practice, the CBC integrates aspects of both Piaget's theory and learner-centered methods, but not without tension. For example, activities are structured to align with age-specific expectations, such as simple sorting tasks or symbolic play for younger children in the Preoperational stage. Yet, the curriculum also promotes exploration and creativity, which are central to learner-centered education and may lead some children into more complex tasks.

In analysis, it becomes apparent that some content areas encourage more learner-centered practices, and some areas are stricter in obeying developmental stages. In Environmental Activities, children are encouraged to explore their surroundings and make choices about what they observe and discuss. This is illustrated in *Figure 1* (Adan, Muange, & Ogur, 2018, p. 52).

Figure 1

An Example Teacher Workbook



Lesson 8

Activity 6: Role play

This activity will promote self-efficacy, learning to learn, creativity and imagination as learners role play in groups.

1. Put learners into manageable groups depending on the total number in the classroom.
2. Let each group choose a type of work done at home.
3. Guide learners to role-play the work they have chosen. Each group should role play a different activity.
4. Provide them with costumes for the different work activities they have chosen to role-play.
5. Appreciate the learners for role-playing well.

This learner-centered method allows for flexibility but may be constrained by Piagetian assumptions, which could limit these observations to sensory or concrete interactions for younger children rather than fostering speculative or abstract thought. Similarly, in Creative Arts, symbolic play and role-playing are encouraged, which aligns with the Preoperational stage. However, the learner-centered nature of these activities could promote self-expression, leading some children to engage in more advanced reasoning, such as problem-solving through storytelling, which extends beyond typical stage-based expectations.

There are quite a lot of learner-centered approaches in the curriculum learning documents. The curriculum frequently uses play-based learning, particularly in Creative Arts, Environmental Activities, and Religious Education. Activities include singing, dancing, role-playing, storytelling, and exploring the environment. However, there is

always a focus on structured learning outcomes and guided experiences. Even moments of free play are still highly structured with end results assumed. Teachers guide all discussions, select topics, and facilitate each learning experience. Children might operate under some free-play but there is no true open-ended or agency to choose topics or ideas of their own volition. There is often no agency in the curriculum for children to purse their own ideas.

Finally, even moments that are noted to encourage critical thinking, do not truly offer opportunities for deeper thinking. For example, the following shows an activity from an Environmental Teacher Workbook for PP2 (ROOTS, 2019).

This activity will promote communication and collaboration, as learners discuss the words correctly in pictures. It will also promote critical thinking as the learners match the pictures.

1. In groups or pairs, let the learners look at the pictures in the first row. Use the following guiding questions; Who do you see?
2. Let the learners name the people they see in the pictures in the first row.
3. Guide the learners in reading the names in the second row.
4. Guide learners to match the pictures with their names. Some learners might not be able to read. Say the word and let learners draw a line from the words to the picture.
5. Go through their work to ensure they have done it correctly.

This activity, while structured to foster collaboration and communication, falls short of genuinely promoting critical thinking. Matching pictures to names involves basic recall and recognition, rather than deeper analysis or problem-solving. To truly encourage critical thinking, activities should include open-ended questions or tasks that require learners to form, justify, and critique their ideas.

It is worth noting that the curriculum reform engages with no indigenous or Africa-centric frameworks of knowledge creation, despite 'learner-centered' and competency-based ideas having indigenous roots in Kenya. As Turkana[1] scholar, John Ng'asike (2010), points out, learner-centered and competency-based ideas have long been prevalent in indigenous communities.

In Turkana culture, women and men have equal responsibility in training children in all the cultural skills. Elders acknowledged that the training of women is the most efficient and thorough. Ordinarily a child's interest matters and determines the keenness of their observations as they watch and participate in adult's activities… Boys and girls learn all the cultural skills needed for competency. All children are recognized according to their efforts and the competency at which they learn the skills they are taught. Although every young person has a general knowledge of concepts and skills of his/her culture, it is not mandatory that children learn every skill in perfection. Young people perfect only the skills they develop interest from early childhood (p. 111).

As Ng'asike shows, following individual interests, acquiring competencies, and nurturing creativity are not new in Kenya. However, the current reform follows Western notions rather than established indigenous values. As Nganga et al. (2020) found, the Western dominance of education was actually a source of pride in Kenyan teachers. These teachers spoke … "of educational values and practices that were not locally created and/or grounded in indigenous notions of teaching, learning, and caring for young children—they discussed how their practices were guided and influenced by Euro-

[1] A semi-arid region of northwest Kenya and an ethnic group of pastoralists

western notions" (p. 116). Following these practices and values established by Western countries led teachers to feel that they were teaching in a high 'quality' manner.

My analysis shows this curriculum takes a blended or confused approach, structuring activities around skills appropriate to Piaget's stages while attempting to allow room for individual exploration. Additionally, the curriculum's learner-centered elements support differentiated instruction, allowing teachers to tailor activities based on each child's readiness instead of adhering to a strict developmental stage. However, teachers are still expected to guide students toward predetermined outcomes, which can reintroduce some age-based expectations despite the learner-centered approach.

Implications for Early Childhood Education in Kenya

The continued reliance on Western models of education perpetuates a tradition that follows colonial frameworks aimed at shaping the 'savage' child into a rational adult. I have argued here that the uncritical adoption of Piaget's developmentalism in the CBC reform sustains colonial structures in Kenyan education. The Kenyan Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reform's reliance on Piagetian developmental stages reflects a continued alignment with Western theoretical frameworks that inadequately address Kenya's diverse educational needs. Strict adherence to these staged approaches risks marginalizing alternative learning pathways that are more resonant with Kenya's cultural, social, and educational contexts.

By positioning Piaget's stages as universal truths in developmental progression, the CBC implicitly upholds Western norms of child development as standards for "best practices" in Kenyan early childhood education. This approach may inadvertently dismiss indigenous pedagogical practices that have historically shaped child-rearing and education in Kenya, such as communal learning and intergenerational knowledge transmission. For instance, practices like nature-based learning, weaving, tending the land, and communal participation, which are embedded in Kenyan cultural heritage, are sidelined in favor of Eurocentric educational milestones. These practices, tied to moral, social, and cultural learning, risk being lost when Kenyan education continues to emulate Western standards.

Additionally, there is a dissonance between what the curriculum aspires to achieve and the realities of Kenyan classrooms. Many Kenya educators encounter systemic challenges—limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and diverse student needs—that conflict with implementing Piagetian frameworks effectively. Yet, these constraints limit educators from introducing activities that foster critical thinking, creativity, or social awareness before students reach the "appropriate" age dictated by Piaget's model.

In practice, this marginalization extends to experiential, hands-on learning approaches rooted in Kenyan contexts, such as *Harambee* and indigenous knowledge frameworks. By prioritizing these alternative practices, Kenya could foster a curriculum that emphasizes cultural relevance, social responsibility, and a broader spectrum of outcomes. Such a reorientation could better address the holistic needs of Kenyan children while resisting the perpetuation of colonial norms within educational reform.

Toward An Inclusive Educational Model

For Kenya to fulfill its vision of producing engaged, empowered, and ethical citizens, it may be beneficial to adopt a more inclusive framework that allows educators to draw from indigenous knowledge systems. Recognizing the cultural wealth and diverse learning styles of Kenyan communities, future revisions of the CBC could integrate flexible learning trajectories that support children in developing in ways that are culturally meaningful.

The uncritical adoption of developmental theories in Kenyan policy risks perpetuating colonial educational models that may undermine larger educational goals of social equity, cultural respect, and adaptable learning. By balancing Western developmental frameworks with Kenya's unique cultural strengths and educational aspirations, policymakers can create a system that is truly learner-centered, respecting children's diverse developmental pathways and equipping them for success in both local and global contexts.

The uncritical adoption of developmental theories, particularly Piaget's stage-based framework, in Kenyan policy risks perpetuating colonial educational models that undermine larger goals of social equity, cultural respect, and adaptable learning. By positioning Western norms as universal, the Competency-Based Curriculum marginalizes indigenous knowledge systems—such as communal learning, intergenerational teaching, and localized cultural skills—which have historically equipped children for both social and economic success. This erasure not only alienates children from their cultural identities but also exacerbates educational inequities, particularly in resource-constrained rural areas. Furthermore, privileging Western developmentalism restricts opportunities for more inclusive and expansive learning trajectories that reflect Kenya's diverse cultural contexts.

The consequences of this approach extend beyond Kenya, as it mirrors broader patterns of educational imperialism that reinforce dependency on Western "best practices" and undermine local innovation. To create a truly transformative educational system, policymakers must critically examine these frameworks, integrate Kenya's cultural strengths, and adopt flexible models that support children's diverse developmental pathways. Such an approach would not only empower Kenyan learners to thrive locally and globally but also challenge dominant narratives of quality that privilege Western ideals over indigenous wisdom.

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