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Early Educational Foundations for the Development of Civic Responsibility: An African Experience

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Abstract

An innovative curriculum designed to foster the development of social responsibility among pre-adolescent children was introduced at a rural Zambian primary school. The curriculum invoked Child-to-Child principles focusing on health education, advancing a synthesis of Western psychological theories and African cultural traditions. The teacher sought to democratize the educational process through cooperative learning in mixed-gender, mixed-social-class, and mixed-ability study groups. Learners engaged in community service activities and contributed to the nurturant care of younger children. Young adults interviewed seventeen years after completing the program recalled their experience and reflected on how it had promoted their personal agency, cooperative disposition, and civic responsibility in early adulthood. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

This chapter builds on an earlier presentation by Serpell and Chansa-Kabali (2010).

Civic responsibility emerges in youth and adulthood from an individual's experiences earlier in life in various social contexts, structured by family socialization processes, by peer relations, and in many cases by schooling. In this chapter, we examine the influence on youth civic development of an innovative school curriculum designed to foster the development of responsibility among pre-adolescent children in a predominantly rural region of Africa. In the next section, Robert Serpell explains the theoretical grounding in developmental, educational and cultural psychology for the innovative curriculum observed at Kabale, a government primary school in the small Zambian town of Mpika. Then the origins, rationale, and practices of the curriculum are presented by Paul Mumba, one of the teachers who pioneered its development in the 1990s. A major source of inspiration for the innovations he describes was the Child-to-Child (CtC) approach, originally conceptualized in the 1980s by an international consortium coordinated by London University's Institute of Education. Then, Tamara Chansa-Kabali and Robert Serpell reflect on what they have learned so far from an ongoing study that invites graduates of the Kabale CtC curriculum, now in their late twenties, to look back and interpret the significance of their pre-adolescent experiences at school in forming their current outlook on society and their adult responsibilities. Finally, in the last section we offer an integrative interpretation of the significance of the Kabale experience for the promotion of civic responsibility in Zambia and other societies facing similar challenges in the twenty-first century.

The situation of the youth in Zambia in 2011 is fraught with adversities, including severely limited educational opportunities beyond the first seven years of basic education, very few openings in the formal sector of the economy for those with less than tertiary-level educational certificates, and a devastatingly high prevalence of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), especially among the sexually active youth. "Despite international development advocacy for young persons' rights and abilities, like many other national governments, that of Zambia continues to depict young people in ways that leave little scope to acknowledge their agency. One way is the welfare angle that treats young people as dependent and immature, and therefore in need of 'improvement.' Another is problem-oriented and characterizes young people as troublesome and therefore prone to problematic behavior that needs controlling and curtailing . . ." (Hansen, 2008, p. 213). In the present chapter, we document the perspective of a group of Zambian youth in their late twenties who believe that their experience in pre-adolescent childhood at primary school prepared them well to cope with adversity in ways that are neither dependent nor troublesome, by offering them opportunities to learn through active participation their responsibility to reach out and contribute cooperatively to the well-being of their community.

Theoretical Grounding in Developmental, Educational, and Cultural Psychology

The research program on which this chapter is based is framed within Robert Serpell's cultural perspective on applied developmental psychology that conceptualizes education as facilitating the appropriation of new ideas by learners through participating in socially organized activities (Serpell, 2008). Rather than conceiving instruction as the "de-contextualized" transmission of information, this perspective on education emphasizes the benefits of situating learning opportunities within the sociocultural context in which the target student activity will be applied in everyday life.

The pedagogical practices of institutionalized public basic schooling (IPBS), a model that has become increasingly standardized across the world in the late twentieth century, stand in marked contrast to the traditional family socialization practices and beliefs of many African societies. IPBS tends to emphasize "advance preparation as against on-the-spot assistance," and "authorised competence as against practical competence" (Serpell & Hatano, 1997, pp. 367–368). The Western cultural origins of this model are traceable in Zambia to a process of hegemonic imposition by Christian missionaries from Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the name of evangelization, and further entrenched by a colonial administration that shared with the missions assumptions of European cultural superiority and a view of African cultures as devoid of ideas relevant to the design of education. The racist connotations of those assumptions came under critical attack in the decolonization movement as incompatible with the egalitarian ideals of modern thought enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights. Yet, paradoxically, the essential character of the IPBS model has been preserved in many independent African nations, along with a number of extrinsic features, some of which are culturally problematic, as we explain below.

The indigenous cultures of Zambia and other African societies exhibit patterns of social organization and principles of moral evaluation some of which resemble closely those embedded in the indigenous cultures of Europe, while others are markedly different. A study of conceptions of intelligence among the Chewa people in a rural community of Eastern Zambia (Serpell, 1993a, 1996) found that adults explaining their reasons for assigning important responsibilities to children they knew well in the village invoked a concept, *-nzelu*, that includes connotations of wisdom, intelligence, cleverness, and skill, but places greater emphasis than the English concept of intelligence on a dimension of social responsibility (*-tumikila*). On the other hand, when describing children who performed well at school they were more likely to invoke the concept of *-chenjela* (cleverness or cognitive alacrity). To qualify for the designation of *-nzelu*,

an individual must display both the qualities *-chenjela* and *-tumukila*. Moreover a person who is *-chenjela*, but not *-tumikila* is regarded as socially dangerous.

Similar conceptions of intelligence have been documented for several other African cultures, including the Baoule culture of Cote d'Ivoire (Dasen et al., 1985), the Luo culture of Kenya (Grigorenko et al., 2001), and the Bemba culture of Northern Zambia (Kingsley, 1985). A widespread African child-rearing practice that relates directly to the cultivation of social responsibility is that of sending young children on errands. Ogunnaike and Houser (2002) report that Yoruba mothers selling goods at the city market in Nigeria started doing this with children as young as three years old, as indeed do rural Chewa parents in Zambia (Serpell, 1993a) and Kikuyu parents in rural Kenya (Levine & Levine, 1963). Nsamenang (1992) refers to this practice as a form of social priming, designed to prepare young children for real domestic tasks that will be assigned to them when they grow a little older. It is noteworthy that in the Chewa language the root of the word for social responsibility (*-tumikila*) is *-tuma*, meaning to send.

In rural African societies, children were traditionally raised to believe that they were brought up by the community, that they were part of the community, and that in due course they would play an important role in the development of the community. Implementation of the IPBS model in rural African neighborhoods has often seemed to be quite alien to the community whose children it recruits. A longitudinal trace of the life-journeys of young people born into the rural Chewa community that hosted the study of *-nzelu* cited above found that only a minority of them (and none of the girls) completed the full seven-year primary course, even though there were plenty of places at the local school (Serpell, 1993a). Reasons for dropping out were manifold, but the most common explanation offered by the young people themselves was that they lacked sufficient *-nzelu* to cope with the curriculum. Yet many of them were ostensibly competent to cope with the demands of adult life, suggesting that the problem arose from an inappropriate school curriculum rather than lack of individual intelligence. Furthermore, both parents and teachers expected that very few of those who completed the course and qualified for a place in eighth grade would return to live in the neighborhood and contribute to its economy. Thus, the paradigm of schooling included an extractive definition of academic success. Critical analysis of this situation generated a call for greater local accountability by primary schools to the local rural communities they purport to serve (Serpell, 1999b).

The activities of the Child-to-Child curriculum observed at Kabale school in the 1990s included a number of distinctive features that respond to this challenge (Serpell, 2008). One of these was a cross-cutting theme of monitoring the growth of young children in the first five years of life. In many African countries, including Zambia, the public health system distributes to the parents of young children a record card on which the child's

weight is entered as a point on a printed growth chart that situates the child's actual weight relative to statistical norms (Morley & Woodland, 1988). The card is kept at home by the child's family and brought at each visit to a clinic for periodic updating, so that cumulatively a graph displays whether this individual is within the normal range for his or her age, and whether he or she is growing steadily over time. Kabale students in fifth to seventh grades were assigned to find one of these growth charts in use for a sibling at home or a neighbor's child, to escort the child to the clinic, with or in place of a parent, to watch how the record is entered, and to interpret the significance of the graph for that child's healthy development.

Building on the interpretation of the growth chart, students at Kabale learned about the nutritional care of young children, including oral rehy-dration with a homemade solution of sugar and salt during episodes of diarrhea. Nurturant care of younger children served as a productive contri-bution to the life of the student's family and/or other families in the local community, and as a priming for the student's development of skills and attitudes expected of him or her in adulthood. Project work both in the classroom and outside was organized in study teams, which served as an opportunity for cooperative learning in which students co-constructed solutions to problems assigned by the teacher, and thus raised their aware-ness of the complementarity of individual talents, the potential cognitive synergies of collaboration, and the socioemotional challenges of negotiat-ing roles within a group. Thus in terms of developmental theory, the CtC curriculum at Kabale included theoretically powerful affordances for the development of personal competencies and dispositions conducive to civic responsibility.

Barbara Rogoff (1993) has proposed that developmental change occurs over time on three complementary planes. Participatory appropria-tion is "the process by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation" (p. 150). Guided participation refers to an arrangement between people that facili-tates appropriation. And apprenticeship is a "system of interpersonal involvements and arrangements in which people engage in culturally organized activity in which apprentices become more responsible partici-pants" (p. 144). The CtC curriculum at Kabale Primary School can be seen as an apprenticeship system, through which the teacher guided the participation of the children in activities in such a way that their under-standing of and responsibility for those activities was transformed. In the follow-up study we explore just how radical and how lasting that transfor-mation was.

The history of how CtC achieved prominence in the Zambian public school system in the 1990s has been traced by Udell (2001), and a case study by a research team at the University of Zambia has documented the short-term impact of its exemplary implementation in Mpika (a small town in Zambia's predominantly Bemba-speaking northern province), in

terms of students' practical knowledge of preventive health, their academic achievement, and their parents' appreciation of the curriculum (Mwape & Serpell, 1996; Serpell, 2008; Serpell & Mwape, 1998/99). The following retrospective account of its rationale was written by Paul Mumba, one of the leading teachers involved in development of the CtC approach in Zambia.

Paul Mumba's Account of His Educational Innovation at Kabale Primary School, Mpika, Zambia, 1995–1997

Child-to-Child: An Empowering Approach to Health Promotion. CtC is a broadly conceptualized approach to the integration of education and health with the aim of realizing the potential of the children as agents of preventive health in their schools, their homes, and communities. According to Pridmore (1999, p. 15), CtC rests upon the beliefs that "children learn health messages and pass them on to siblings, peers, parents and their community; learning should be active and fun; children can be partners with adults to improve health, and health and education should work together" (see the Child-to-Child Trust website for more details; http://www.child-to-child.org).

In Zambia CtC was officially launched by the then head of state, Kenneth Kaunda. In his speech, he urged the introduction of CtC as a way of promoting health countrywide and challenged all children to regard themselves as fighters for health. Through CtC activities, children are given the opportunity to provide much needed linkages between the school and the home/community. The concept of CtC has been used to help develop children's full participation and potential not only in the classroom and the school but also in the communities. A major theme of CtC is that as children grow, they should become responsible citizens not only in their families but also in their communities. CtC avoids the dysfunctional separation of IPBS from everyday life by ensuring that not only literacy, but also skills and attitudes for real life are taught intensively in schools. If young people are taught early in life about the significance of family planning and spacing, taking children to under-five clinics, and voting, even if they do not complete a full twelve-year program of education, they will be equipped to exercise their responsibilities for participation in national development.

In 1994–1995, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) distributed to every teacher countrywide the major resource book by Hawes and Scotchmer (1993, p. 14), which contained facts and ideas for health promotion in schools; it was this book that helped me to understand the concept of health. Health was defined as a "healthy environment, being fit and well, healthy mind, healthy relationship and helping others." I was led to understand that it was not just the absence of diseases as perceived by many people including the well informed. This definition of health led me

to design a way of learning building upon the CtC approach that would contribute to solving the challenges I had been experiencing in my teaching responsibilities. Through constant reflection on the activities with the children the following practices were initiated in the classes.

Cooperative Learning. To create happy relations and a good environment, I initiated cooperative learning and group work, which was different from the usual groups implemented in most public schools. Many Bemba proverbs point to the principle of interdependence and the reciprocal benefits of cooperation (e.g. "One finger can't pick a louse"; "You don't have eyes in the back of your head"; "Whom will you ask if you are alone?"), as do many Bemba traditional practices. Setting up cooperative study groups that included both girls and boys was a strategy to close the gaps created by their cultural background in a school setting. I had observed that girls tended to associate themselves with other girls and separated themselves from the boys. In addition to seeking ways of eliminating gender differences in academic performance, an important factor motivating my decision to set up mixed-gender study groups was thinking ahead to what would make the students better wives or husbands when they grew up. Later, when the study groups were established, participating students began to question the cultural conventions that used to keep male and female students apart.

Reflecting on the need for group goals and individual accountability, I introduced children to evaluating their own performance as a group. Then, the groups in the class would be compared to find the group that had done well, and this was held up as evidence of being cooperative. This caused concern among faster learners who did not want their groups to be associated with failure; as a result they were persuaded to help out slow learners on their own time and in their own homes so as to improve the performance of their groups (Mumba, 1995).

Some teachers have argued that this method takes too long and are reluctant to attempt it because they are keen to march ahead with the syllabus. My opinion from observation is that, once children are trained, the operations become easier and faster. I divided the class into groups. These groups were of mixed ability and sex. Each group comprised six pupils. Two pupils represented the group as leaders and both sexes were represented in the leadership. I thus implemented the chain of responsibility for assisting that Tharp and Gallimore (1988) developed in their research building on the ideas of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. This meant that I had to help the group leaders discover how to help other pupils participate in their own learning. The group leaders specified the following roles for themselves:

• Ensure that each pupil had the required material to use in the classroom such as pencils and exercise books and possibly the group would help those that were lacking.

- Ensure that members were neat in writing. Encourage corrections before any new work.
- Evaluate their group's performance and discuss problems in the group.
- Keep and write end of day report for the teacher to evaluate his or her work.
- Represent the group in the academic meetings with the teacher.
- Suggest other new ways of learning in consultation with other members according to their needs.
- Monitor late coming and ensure that latecomers were paired with responsible pupils for encouragement.
- Monitor absenteeism in groups. They were to visit pupils that were often absent from school.

Democratization of the Classroom. My interest in democratization in the classroom was partly inspired by the question: "What causes riots in schools?" It seems that many youth participating in school riots perceive them as "the shortest route to being heard." This implies a criticism of the school authorities for not offering students other, less dangerous, alternative avenues to make their voices heard. Another motivating concern was the frequency of strike action in industry, which prompted me to ask, "What is the role of psychology in preventing industrial unrest?" I was interested in the process through which union leaders, elected as activists, often discover through access to company documents that there are real constraints on what management can do to address workers' demands, but when they try to share this discovery with the members who elected them, they are rejected as "sell-outs." I believe that freedom of expression needs to be constrained by responsibility, and this is something that can be taught in school.

To democratize the class I had to create awareness of rights among the children. This was a difficult component to implement. CtC seeks to promote this element of liberating children to participate actively in the learning process, but many teachers criticized this approach, arguing that creating awareness in children about their rights may promote misbehavior. In my opinion, this is debatable. The children in my class were exposed to their rights as documented in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was done through class discussions in their Spiritual and Moral Education Studies lessons (part of the national curriculum introduced in the 1990s to replace religious studies). What children discovered was that each right had responsibilities that went along with it. I guided them to more discussion of their responsibilities as can be seen from these two examples:

1. Right to education: "Work hard at school"—"Avoid absenteeism"— "Go to school early"
2. Right to recreation (play): "Plan time to play"—"Choose good friends"

Several rights were discussed and the class survey revealed that they enjoyed most the "right to speak freely and voice own opinions." Although most teachers interviewed supported this right, some were reluctant to include it in their actual classes, arguing that it conflicts with indigenous Zambian tradition. For instance, one Bemba proverb prohibits children from speaking openly in the presence of their elders. Our cultural norms, on the other hand, do allow a child to argue with or criticize his or her peers because this is the wisest thing to do, but an argument with an adult is not a sign of respect. This is the background from which our teachers and pupils are coming. When pupils were asked to narrate reasons why they enjoyed the right to speak freely and voice their own opinions in their classroom, they responded as follows:

"We are able to argue and defend our views."
"We are able to ask freely."
"It builds our confidence."
"We are able to contribute."
"We are able to express our problems."
"We are able to challenge bullies and other people that oppress us."
"It removes shyness." (Most girls expressed this.)
"Get ideas from peers."

For further details of the implications of CtC for democratization in the classroom, see Mumba (2000).

Social Responsibility. The CtC approach seeks to cultivate nurturance, cooperation, social responsibility, self-confidence, practical problem solving, and healthy life styles. One activity through which the curriculum attempted to cultivate these psychosocial attributes was assigning children to monitor the growth of younger siblings in the community. I introduced children to maintaining growth charts for their younger siblings or other younger children in the community when these children reach the age of two and a half years. This is the age at which many rural Zambian parents stop bringing their children to the clinic for weighing, focusing their attention, instead, on the next child to be born. This responsibility was then taken on by children involved in the CtC program. Providing children with the opportunity to participate in the care of a younger child has potential educational value as an opportunity to cultivate nurturant responsibility, a moral quality relatively neglected in the curriculum of most contemporary public school systems. I see the CtC outreach health activities of our primary school students as laying the foundations for intersectoral collaboration between health and education, provoking the breakdown of professional and administrative barriers between the sectors. In this way, even when my students were still young they were actively engaged in civic reform, expanding the awareness of teachers and

health workers of how they can better serve the public by integrating their complementary fields of endeavor.

Developmental Outcomes and Adult Recollections of Former CtC Pupils

More recently, two of us, Tamara Chansa-Kabali and Robert Serpell, embarked on a long-term follow-up study of young women and men, now in their late twenties, who were enrolled in the program at Kabale in the 1990s and some of their local contemporaries enrolled in the conventional curriculum at the same school. The goal has been to explore through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews the longer-term psychological consequences of engagement in CtC activities from fifth to seventh grade. The informants interviewed to date include some whose formal education ended with seventh grade while others went on from secondary to tertiary education and are now embarking on a professional career (including a nurse, two teachers, a religious pastor, a diplomate in journalism, and a diplomate in social work).

We have been struck by the difference of focus and intensity between the recollection and opinions voiced by respondents who were enrolled in a CtC class and those whose teachers at Kabale used conventional pedagogical practices. The latter group remembers mostly sports and clubs. Those who were enrolled in a CtC class, on the other hand, recalled with remarkable consistency several of the themes discussed in the above section, often relating these to abstract philosophical principles that had made an enduring impact on their later lives.

As Fivush, Bohanek, and Zaman (2011) have shown, in middle-class American culture, "individual narrative selves are created within families and across generations" (p. 45), mediated by recurrent activities such as family dinner conversations, with young people invoking their parents' stories as resources for interpreting their own life-journeys. Many of the young Zambians we have interviewed seem to have created narrative selves through peer-group-mediated conversations about their shared CtC experiences at Kabale school. At the end of the interview guide for our study, the following questions were asked of each respondent: "What are the things that you have carried on as an adult from your experiences at Kabale? How have the experiences at Kabale contributed to your life today?" Most of the former students of Paul Mumba's CtC class at Kabale responded to these questions with enthusiasm, attributing both concrete practices of their current adult lives and abstract principles informing those practices to enduring themes appropriated through formative experiences in their upper primary school years.

Peer-Group Cooperation, Gender Equality, and Helping Others. *Group Work, Group Learning.* Several respondents spoke passionately about their study groups, expressing a sense of enduring group solidarity

and referring to their former classmates in the same group as "my member." One of the values pervading group work was that of encouraging slow learners. As one respondent testified: "We used to be in groups, it was very encouraging. I was not good at school work: I got encouraged because at least I had someone by my side to help, and we really had that true spirit in the classroom and everybody was helped . . . We played together, did everything together . . . we lived like a team!" (23)[1]

A female primary school teacher had internalized this as a pedagogical principle in her own professional work: "I've learned that you can get help from anybody . . . no one is dull . . . interacting with others, mingling, making friends." (6)

For several respondents the impact of this aspect of the CtC curriculum had been to generate a broader, prosocial disposition to help others, to share knowledge, and to cooperate in social projects. Other responses to the question "What are the things that you have carried on as an adult . . .?" included:

"Having a heart for other people." (2)
"I've learned to respect other people; to live in a group; to control myself spiritually." (24)
"Working together, because you know unity is the key to success; you are able to express yourself." (9)
"To be free, to associate with people 'cos without people you can't live alone of course." (10)
"This time I come to realize how important Mr. Mumba was, because I am applying the life skills he had oriented me to at that moment." (44)
"Maybe it helped me very much being confident in myself. That's what I got from Kabale Primary School that has helped me very much today." (3)

One of the respondents recalled Kabale School as "a beautiful place, full of activities." These activities, steered by their teacher, were embraced by the families and parents and the entire community. The activities conducted by the children in the community brought cleanliness and sanitation to the school and home environments. The study groups were mixed, including some students who came from higher social class homes and others from very poor homes. Despite those differences in socioeconomic status, the children worked together as one family. For instance, one reported that they would go to the extent of donating some money for someone in the group who did not have washing soap at home for cleaning his uniform. They also took turns to conduct their group work from home to home regardless of status.

Gender Equality, Mixed Coed Study Groups. With regard to gender differentiation of roles in class activities, a respondent from the non-CtC group recalled that there were differences especially when it came to sweeping—that boys were not as smart at this task because that was not

their role and therefore girls would take it up and make sure that the classroom looked smart. In contrast, a former CtC student revealed that even though such gender differences existed initially, they disappeared as time went by. She recalled a seminal occasion when the teacher, who was male, showed the boys an example: he swept and cleaned the classroom by himself. This exemplary demonstration put an end to the belief by the boys and girls that they should have different roles depending on their gender. A female respondent recalled: "I would say there was no difference between boys and girls in the class because even us girls we would want to reach the boys' level, so we worked a lot—there was no difference . . . And like today life, and when I went to college, I had to meet men now in our class, it was not very difficult for me to interact . . . it helped me very much being confident in myself." (3)

One male respondent quipped: "We saw our girl classmates as sisters, not as wives," seeming to imply that egalitarian relations between the sexes have no place within a marriage. But later in the same interview this respondent, reflecting on his own adult family life, emphasized his willingness to handle domestic chores at home and proudly affirmed that he had an egalitarian relationship with his wife. (27)

Health Care Practices, Personal Hygiene, Environmental Care. These key curriculum objectives were widely cited by our informants, many of whom attested that the habits instilled in them at Primary School had remained with them in later life. This may not be a unique feature of the CtC curriculum because Hoppers (1981) and others have documented a preoccupation with personal cleanliness as a distinctive characteristic of many primary school leavers in Zambia, and LeVine, LeVine, Richman, Uribe, and Correa (1994) have shown that in several countries with low rates of school enrollment the infants of mothers with complete primary schooling have reliably better prospects of survival and health. However, some of the narratives provided by our respondents afford striking evidence of direct causal connections that serve to put some flesh on the correlational literature. For instance, several of the young parents in our sample, including fathers, went out of their way to assert that they take their under-five child regularly to the well-baby clinic for check-ups. In a striking case reported elsewhere (Serpell, 2001), a young mother whose formal credentials at the end of seventh grade were such that she did not qualify for a place in eighth grade described in convincing detail how she had shared with another young mother skills and understanding rooted in modern biomedical science that enabled her to save an infant's life.

Contrasts Between CtC at Kabale and the Pedagogical Practices of High Schools. According to the recollections of respondents who continued their schooling beyond seventh grade, the practice of assigning learners to study in groups in the CtC classes at Kabale was unique. Indeed, several of them recalled that they were explicitly told by their teachers in high school that they should work as individuals. Yet it was

clear to many of them, based on their CtC experience at Kabale, that cooperative problem solving was a valuable strategy for educational settings, which some of them adopted on their own initiative.

With few exceptions, the respondents confirmed the findings of the earlier case study conducted while this cohort was still enrolled at Kabale. Most of them recalled that their parents encouraged their participation in the CtC because they knew that the experiences they were going through would be relevant for them in the future. Several of the former CtC students considered the nature of their primary education to have been significantly different from that of contemporary Zambian schools, and expressed sadness that the education they went through, which was beneficial to their present lives was not currently practiced in the schools.

For some of our respondents who did not go on to tertiary education the long-term benefits of group work in upper primary school included a lasting respect for individuals of lesser academic aptitude as having other complementary strengths, another important resource for adult citizenship.

Agency and Responsibility in Adolescence and Early Adulthood

The CtC approach adopted by Paul Mumba and his colleagues at Kabale Primary School evidently made a profound impact on many of his students. Fourteen years later, they remembered vividly the study group organization of the class as exciting and empowering. They also retained a clear memory of the philosophical themes of helping others, cooperative learning, and gender equality. Many of those who went on to further education regarded the CtC approach as superior to the more individualistic educational practices they encountered elsewhere. Although this evaluation may reflect the emphasis on collectivist values of traditional African culture, it is clear that the experience of CtC added something important to their home socialization because these values did not feature in our interviews with youths who had attended the same school, but were enrolled in classes that did not adopt the CtC approach.

Several key features of the approach stand out for us as having given this cohort of young people an important sense of personal agency conducive to civic participation later in life. The assignment of genuine responsibilities to them at an early age for reaching out to intervene in the wider community, with an emphasis on nurturance of the development of children younger than themselves, seems to have cultivated in many of them an enduring prosocial disposition to help others in need. The pressure to cooperate in mixed-gender, mixed-social-class, and mixed-ability study groups seems to have heightened their awareness of social interdependency and laid the foundations for egalitarian relations with members of

the opposite sex. The requirement to express their own opinions verbally opened their minds to the values of reasoning and debate that are central to democracy in a knowledge society.

On a theoretical level, participation in the completion and interpretation of the growth chart introduces children to the technology of health science as mobilizing socially distributed cognition (Salomon, 1993), such that when a child is weighed at the under-five clinic, the growth chart printed on the record card, the family escort, and the health professional each contribute complementary information for determining the health and nutritional status of the child. Viewed from this perspective, the cognitive possibilities afforded by the technology are mediated by co-constructive processes among participants in a socially organized activity (Valsiner, 1991). The developmental context of such activities comprises not only a behavioral system of relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but also a representational system of meanings (D'Andrade, 1984; Sameroff & Fiese, 1992). The representational character of the meanings woven into the sociocultural context "makes it clear that the system is open to deliberate change by its participants, albeit only gradually, and often with great difficulty" (Serpell, 1999a, pp. 42–43). Acknowledging the mutually constitutive relationship between culture and cognition (Cole, 1985) provides a basis for recruiting the imaginative creativity of young learners in the appropriation of a dynamically evolving cultural system of meanings rather than treating them as passive recipients of fossilized knowledge (Serpell, 1993b). The CtC curriculum at Kabale explicitly invited students not only to continue a traditional pattern of responsible participation in family life by caring for younger siblings, but also to expand it to include boys as well as girls, and to critique traditional attitudes and practices inconsistent with modern science.

Although most Zambian families have responded positively to the expansion of formal basic schooling in recent decades by enrolling their children, this does not guarantee that their children will be able to face and solve the challenges they will encounter later in real life. In our view, teachers and curriculum developers should have a broader vision for education, beyond imparting the skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. Children need to be integrated at an appropriate level to participate in civic development. The concept of CtC declined in political visibility in Zambia in the late 1990s, upstaged by other programmatic themes such as promotion of girls' education, poverty reduction, and the fight against HIV and AIDS. Yet, as a philosophical approach, rather than a program, it appears to us to have enduring relevance. Moreover, the particular emphasis at Kabale on engagement by preadolescent children in the nurturant care of younger children seems to have been a uniquely powerful theme for instantiating the approach.

Some commentators in the field of international advocacy for children's rights have argued that the responsibility for taking children to

under-five clinics is too heavy for a primary school age child, but this is part of everyday life for most children in Africa, who are expected to care for their younger siblings. In African tradition, a child who is above the age of eight is seen as someone who can take on certain responsibilities. It is only when they arrive at school that we hear some people objecting that this is a form of child labor. Rather than a form of exploitation, we suggest that the mobilization in CtC of this traditional socialization practice has served to embed early experience of taking responsibility within school education, thus reducing its alienating effects and cultivating a sense of personal and social agency, an essential foundation for effective civic participation later in life.

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Note

1. When quoting from the interviews in the main body of the text, we have cited only the serial number assigned to each respondent. The following code summarizes key demographic characteristics. F = female; M = male; T = completed some tertiary education; S = completed twelfth grade; B = completed ninth grade; P = stopped schooling after seventh grade; U = currently residing in an urban area; R = residing in a rural area; E = in formal employment; X = not in formal employment; S = full-time student; B = self-employed in business. For respondents quoted in this chapter, the details are as follows: 2: FTRX, 3: FTRE, 6: FTRE, 9: FTUE, 10: FTUX, 23: MTRE, 24: MTUE, 27: MBUX, 44BM: MTUE, 69: FTRE.

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