

Title: Achieving Optimal Early Childhood Development through enhanced Collective Care and Grounded Early Childhood Education in Madagascar

Author: Zanafy Gladys Abdoul

Affiliation: Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Antananarivo, Madagascar

Contact details: gladyszanafy@yahoo.fr ; +261 33 14 790 15

National of: Madagascar

Abstract

One of main challenges to achieving the goals of optimal early childhood development, care and pre-primary education for all in 2030, as stated in the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 (2015), in many of the Least Developed Countries remain accessibility and quality. However, access and provision of quality care and education depend a lot on the awareness and conviction of parents and caregivers. Hence, this paper aims at advocating nurturing care, early schooling from a home perspective as well as responsive and collective caregiving in conformity with the advocacy for a localised early childhood care and education in Sub-Saharan countries (Marfo et al. 2008; Nsamenang and Pence 2008 ; Harkness et al. 2009). Based on the data collected from a survey on Malagasy parents' care and education beliefs and practices conducted from November 2020 to January 2021, the present study will outline the status of early childhood development goals in Madagascar and provide recommendations in terms of policy and care services, taking into account the present context of a pandemic.

List of abbreviations and acronyms

ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
LDC	Least Developed Country
OECD	Optimal Early Childhood Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Introduction

Education remains one of the most basic needs and yet, highly unattainable that guarantee a reasonable level of welfare and wellbeing recognised under human rights as due to all of humanity. It seems incredible that in this century, many children in most LDCs are still denied this open door to human dignity as they lack full and equal access to health, education, water, energy, ICT. Looking at education and care more particularly, researchers and social thinkers from the Global South have for the last decades advocated for contextualised early childhood care and education (ECCE) (Marfo et al. 2008; Nsamenang and Pence 2008 ; Harkness et al. (2009). ‘Children must be empowered from an early age to become the authors of their own lives’ (UNICEF 2013). These words, which summarise the essence of responsible parenting and home-based ECD, draw the main line for this study as they map out the very aims and targets of all early years care and education provision regardless of culture and economic status. This advocacy stems from the fact that children in this part of the world have often been left behind within the globalised narratives on ECD (Harkness et al. 2011; Akkari et al. 2016; Ebrahim, Okwany and Barry 2019). Thus, calling forth urgent and active measures in order to carry these young children’s voices onto the mainstream arena of education and care and to valorise indigenous knowledge. There is also the timely need of our contemporary context which requires a general shift in education and caregiving from the exclusive hands of trained ‘experts’ to the midst of collaborative communities who are only asking to be involved in the future of their homes and the planet (Okwany et al. 2016). Notwithstanding the urgent need for support that parents are experiencing due the toll added by the pandemic context on the already existing hardships of poverty.

According to the early childhood development countdown to 2030 (UNESCO’s Country report on ECCE in Madagascar, 2006 ; www.nurturingcare.org, 2019), Madagascar lacks certain key data in order to build a facilitating environment of laws, policies, services and community support to assist parents and caregivers in providing their young children with nurturing care. Indeed, having the necessary data on access of young Malagasy children to OECD can inform policy makers as to what is already present and what requires reforming in the pre-existing educational system. The outcomes of this study will contribute in informing policy-makers as to the strengths and weaknesses of the established education strategies; encourage the establishment of collective care centres for young children in order to get convinced and committed parents to provide their offspring with optimal and sustained

growth. These reforms are expected to help Madagascar align with the other African countries that have already piloted this type of structure and managed to advance within OECD.

Using a mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis, the present paper proposes to explore the state of nurturing care, responsive caregiving, as well as early learning and stimulation at home through the survey of the beliefs and practices of a sample of parents in order to measure their awareness of ECD requirements. The questions address areas such as the quality and quantity of time spent by parents with their young children at home, as follow-through activities promoting cognitive development and basic skills acquirement outside the schools; as well as the type and use of play things and books. Conducted between November 2020 and January 2021, the survey compiles the education and care practices of a non-targeted sample of 200 informants of mixed socio-economic and educational background. On the backdrop of a world pandemic, meeting parents and caregivers face-to-face for an interview was almost impossible; while opting for an online-based survey would have left out many parents who are not so familiar with the virtual world of social media and information technology. Yet, those parents may have a lot to say about the care and education of young Malagasy children. Hence, the choice to go meet the parents where they were; that is within the waiting hall of paediatrics' wards or outside schools and day-care facilities as they patiently await their turn to meet the doctors or to take their children home. Most of them were eager to talk about their parenting experiences as they often feel the burden and pressure of education and care in a fast-changing social context. The following sections of this study will explore in details the narratives of care and education that those parents and caregivers had to share; some inputs brought by the specific context of the Covid-19 on parents' practices and habits will be highlighted.

1. ECD translated into laws and policies

Madagascar has largely suffered from lack of a clear policy and a line of actions that may guide and frame all measures aimed at facilitating and fostering a real progress and evolution in terms of education. ECCE mainly remains at a burgeoning stage due to the intervention of international declarations and the works of NGOs (Loomis and Akkari, 2014). Some measures, which most of the time only benefit a certain fringe of the population, are kept on hold until international partners and donors intervene. However, parents and caregivers need a facilitating environment of laws, policies, services and community support to assist them in

the difficult and complex task of providing their young children with adequate care and nurturing. Regrettably, one has to admit that the concerned local authorities seem to be quite weak in the context of Madagascar when it comes to implementing ratified texts and legal framing for the welfare of its population.

Policies and international conventions have been passed but never been implemented. Major ones that could help with achieving OECD are left out such as paid maternity and paternity leaves, child and family social protection etc. The fact that the wellbeing and welfare of children and families have always been ‘tossed in’ within the agenda of the Ministry of Population, which is already tackling the welfare of women and gender issues in addition to poverty, might explain why ECD has often been put secondary. They need a separate and independent structure of authority that would give them priority. Several laws in favour of ‘education for all’ have been passed and implemented by the newly elected government; leading to an undeniable improvement in the rate of schooling for both boys and girls. In 2019, the net enrolment for pre-primary was of 36,8% (boys: 34,9% and girls: 38,8% according to <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/mg> , March 2021). The major strategy of the current Ministry of National Education, summarised within the ‘*politique enseignante*’ (published on the ministry’s website on March 2018), consists in defining and implementing an effective ESP, in reforms aiming at a fair distribution of trained teachers for quality education accessible to all Malagasy children. This policy has undeniably advanced the general state of educational mainstreaming. Concrete examples of efforts to ameliorate access to standard quality education are: 1) the recruiting and training of 40521 teachers; 2) the establishment of pre-primary level within Public Primary Schools or EPPs (about 901960 children of both sexes were enrolled to pre-primary education). These figures stem from the 2019 World Bank report on the state of education in Madagascar (www.tradeeconomics.com). 3) An additional action in favour of accessible quality education is the building of new schools in even the remotest areas of the country. According to Sahondrarimalala Marie Michelle, the Minister of National Education: “progress is flying at the speed of a light” with 15 primary and secondary schools built in 2020 and 59 others in gestation (Davis R. 2020 - Trans. Zanafy: ‘*avancement à grande vitesse.*’). However, these structures would be pointless if the adequate capacity building for all stakeholders does not follow-through along with an equal concern for educational principles and impacting contents. Moreover, the current specific context of health emergency is somehow adding weight on the measures to be taken by the concerned authorities in terms of adequate and safe structures.

2. ECD in homes and care centres

Besides a facilitating environment of laws and policies which are either already in place but not fully implemented or not made available to parents; one of the most important elements of ECD where Madagascar lacked data and which the survey covered are that of nurturing care and responsive caregiving. Beyond care per se, the first element refers to the state of early learning: stimulation at home, type of playthings and games, attendance in ECD, which are dependent on the quality time parents are spending with their child in addition to reading and the availability of books within homes. As for the second element, it encompasses parents' awareness on ECD as revealed through public information; parental mental health where parental cooperation and an equal division of care have been taken into account; parent support through group talks or home visits; as well as access to quality child day care. The last point has been given particular attention as care facilities and services have been a major issues raised by parents and caregivers. Whenever they need to step outside for a side job or to run any errand, parents rely heavily on community to keep an eye on their children. Extended relatives, uncles and aunts, even older siblings and especially grandparents contribute a lot to the home care and nurturing of young children in the Malagasy educational context along with circles and network of friends and neighbours.

Indeed, even when day care centres exist in the neighbourhood and are accessible, most parents will not be able to afford the cost that tends to be exorbitantly expensive. Despite the increase in schooling attendance rate, the monthly cost of day-care services vary a lot depending on the quality of services on offer as well as the neighbourhood where they are situated (between USD 6.60 = Ar 25 000 and USD 92.46 = Ar 350 000 according to the parental forum Kilonga.com: <https://kilonga.wordpress.com/creches-et-garderies/>). These amounts sound astronomical in contrast with daily household income (USD 0.66667 = Ar 2523.69) as per the World Bank report for 2020 which ranked Madagascar among the 3 poorest countries of the world. Parents are unemployed or are too absorbed with fending for the family, scraping bits and pieces of money here and there for food and clothes, to be able to provide an adequate education to their children (Rapanoel 2013, Randriamasitiana 2015). The majority of the population is living in extreme poverty and precarious conditions rendering them particularly vulnerable and unable to ensure the wellbeing and welfare of their own homes in spite of a strong will.

The precariousness of households is heightened by the Covid-19 context since many parents, especially those who depended on the informal sectors, lost their jobs, found their bread-

winning activities cut or had to take on other jobs to make ends meet. A telling example would be the case of a respondent that we will call Sara. Sara is a private school teacher and a single mother with a daughter of 5 years. The father of her child left her two years before due to money issues. As there was no work, no pay during lockdown, money became scarce. She found it hard explaining to her young child why there was only beans or greenery and no meat for most meals. She had to take on an additional job and started washing and ironing clothes for friends, colleagues and acquaintances. She explains: “I’m not afraid of work, as long as I don’t have to steal to feed my child. What’s tough is the humiliation and the feeling of shame... I feel like a bad mother who cannot even take proper care of her daughter.” She has to leave her child alone, under the watch of neighbours, whenever she has to go out to collect or deliver the clothes. She practically has no time for her daughter, either to play, talk or tutor her during homework. She is afraid that these new working hours will disrupt their relationship.

2.1 Care practices through data

Most parents who took part in the survey are young and presented more or less the same profile leading to homogenised parenting patterns. The average age of informants hovers around 20-35 years, they are educated except in rare cases and have a certain awareness of ECD at varying levels depending on contact with the concept. In contrast to older parents who tend to cling to the traditional division of care and social roles, most parents also declared sharing parenting roles and tasks though mothers are still entrusted with a large share. This toll put on mothers only increased within the context of the pandemic. Fathers are most visible in tasks pertaining to ‘nurture care’ (feeding, bedtime activities, cleaning, games and quality time) unless the child is sick in which case, mothers or grandmothers are again more solicited.

Indeed, many of the women respondents have put forward the fact that the lockdown period and the new health measures have considerably impacted on their usual nurturing tasks. Besides financial, emotional and physical extra efforts that families have to contend with, women are the ones who primarily feel the weight and tension created by the adjustments in terms of care. To illustrate, Roxette is a doctor with three young children aged 18 months, 3 and 5 years. With schools closed, the kids are staying home while the helper, who usually takes care of them, left for her hometown to care for a sick relative. The mother’s tasks at home were scaled up, simultaneously her working hours doubled with hospital duties being reinforced. Her husband, who is a civil administrator, is working from home; so basically, he

is in charge of the children in the morning but after 9h30, distance work starts and he is unavailable until later in the afternoon. Fortunately, the grandparents live in the same house and are able to take over from there. They go through home-schooling, gaming and playing, feeding, cleaning until Roxette gets home. The strain from stress and extra effort got both grandparents sick after a certain time of this new routine. This meant extra expenses on medication for the family and more care duties to Roxette and her husband. Apart from work, Roxette also had to pass by the children's school three times a week to collect pedagogic activities and lessons for home learning. Even when the schools re-opened after the lockdown period, practices and habits have changed a lot. The children are now driven to and from school by their father instead of going with the school bus because they felt that would be safer for them. This also means extra expense for gas and car maintenance. Notwithstanding the tension created by so much changes and prolonged time in a closed space on the couple's intimacy and relationship. "I prefer by far when we were both at work and only saw each other in the evening. At least, we had much to share then. Whenever I happen to be off-duty, all we do now is fight and bicker. There doesn't seem to be much to talk about besides problems. We've never spent this much time around each other and though there is much love, our flaws naturally surface up." This family's experience clearly reveals how each household, even the less financially insecure, is facing some drawbacks from the measures taken to control Covid-19.

Reading of the compiled and processed data (table1 below) has revealed that not all of the improvements in infrastructure affect parents and caregivers directly. There is a general sentiment among informants of a lack of accompaniment and support from an authoritative standpoint. Most parents crave spaces where they can share experiences with other parents or professionals and ask for practical advice. Dedicated virtual platforms – social media forums mainly – or parental structure such as 'Ecole des Parents' have been mentioned as good initiatives that might come in handy to parents who feel abandoned in the supposedly 'collaborative' socio-cultural task waiting them as per the African proverb: "it takes a village to educate a child". Even if members of the community and institutions such as the church, nurses and some private hospitals, NGOs and very rare workplaces that provide advices for young parents are filling out that empty space, a more authoritative presence is missing.

The majority of informants are aware of a specified lack in terms of knowledge on ECD and find deplorable the degrading state of education in general, in both homes and schools. They highlighted the need to inform all stakeholders (schools, parents, community, state, partners

and international organisations) as to their respective roles and inputs. A concern for the need to reinforce the localised aspects of education through the valorisation of Malagasy identity and culture, which fosters respect for elders, civic obligations and positive discipline, has surfaced as the most suggested solution to the impeding situation.

Table1: Recapitulative of access to OECD

Type of Care		Available* (rate %)	Non-available (rate %)
1) Nurturing care	Food	94%	8,5%
	Sleep time & room	8,5%	91,5%
	Clothing+toys	72%	28%
	Cure in time of illness	100%	N/A
2) Quality time early stimulation	Games+home activities	85,5%	14,5%
	Outside activities (cultural or historical places or parks...)	65%	35%
	Schooling (homework, repetition of songs, participation in school activities ...)	49%	151%
	Books - storytelling	36,5%	63,5%
3) Responsive caregiving	Discipline (reprimanding, corporal punishment)	73,5%	26,5%
	Emotional support (family&community)	77,5%	1,5%
	Educational principles (values transmitted...)	92,5%	7,5%
4) Parental support	Group talks &home visit (FB-Church-association etc.)	47,5%	53%
	Shared care/tasks	75%	25%
	ECD awareness	6%	36,5%

(Source: Zanafy survey Nov. 2020-Jan. 2021) (*Available Vs non-available rate refers to the percentage of access by young children to the corresponding type of care within families and homes; that is the elements of care and education that parents and caregivers are able to provide and/or have access to.)

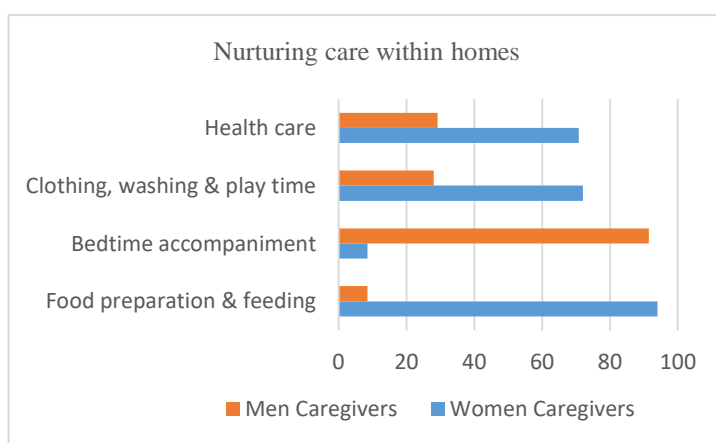
A closer look at the survey data will tell us more about the details of parenting practices within Malagasy homes in terms of nurture care and responsive caregiving. Indeed, those two elements constitute the most practical, engaging and time-consuming part of care and education in the early years.

2.2 Nurturing care and responsive caregiving

Ensuring that young children of 0-5 have access to the most basic needs in terms of nurturing care is fundamental for the development of their young bodies and minds. However, many children in vulnerable to extreme precarious homes in LDCs are not receiving adequate food and comfortable clothing that will ensure growth and protection from illnesses; given access to proper health services when sick as well as enjoying the security of sleeping under a safe roof. These already constitute the primary concerns of parents and caregivers in most home based care systems although many are making do with what is at hand to meet those needs. *Vulnerability* and *precariousness* here are both designing a state of lingering fragility in the households that put them at constant risk of falling into/under the poverty line or a fixed state of income shortfall as per World Bank assessment.

In this section, care in its nurturing aspects is covered through the amount of time and specific attention caregivers allot to the given task of feeding, clothing and washing, bedtime and cure in times of illness. The following chart indicates the percentage of care elements availability within households and the division of tasks between men and women caregivers.

Chart 1: Nurturing care



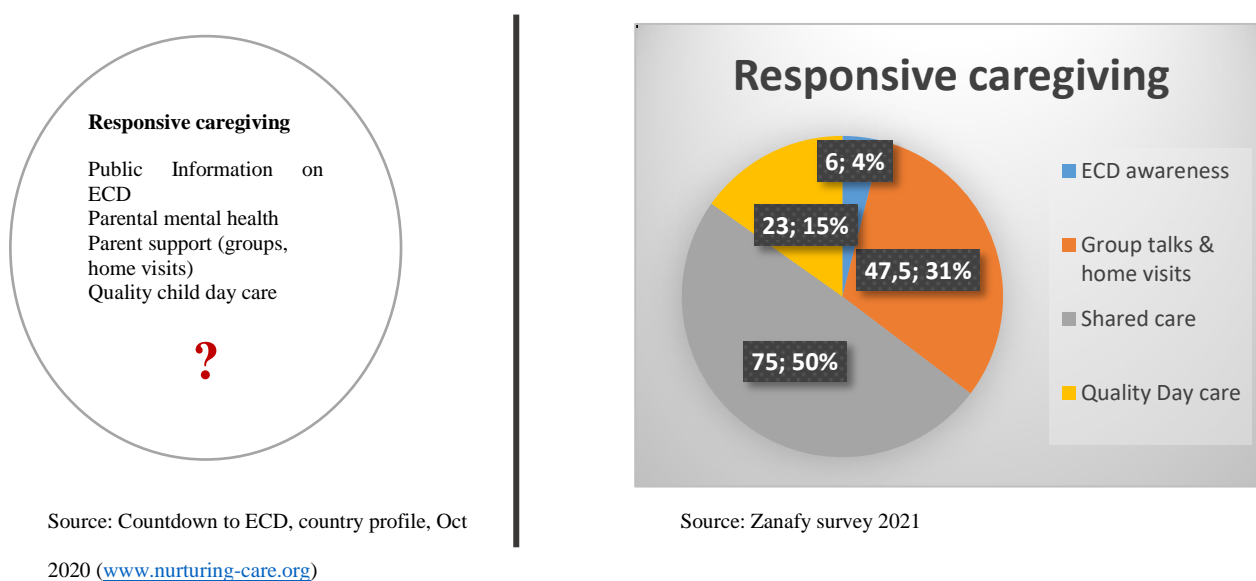
Source: Zanafy survey 2021

Family or community members contribute in great part in providing the necessary care and nurturing that children particularly require during the early years. Most of the time, when

parents are at work or out for any reasons, children are left with family members or neighbours (54,5 %); recourse to professional and specialised institutions such as a nanny or a day care facility (23 %) is not a common practice. This is where community solidarity and support play a significant role in ECCE. A child cognitive development and early stimulation is entrusted in many hands, whether the hands are skilled or not. Parents have to rely on trust when it comes to leaving their kids with others since they do not have much alternatives.

This system of support and collaboration, though neither established nor recognised at a formal level, alleviates much of parents' responsibilities and pressure from time-consuming nurture care, especially working parents. Without this system of collaborative care and education, which is a form of co-parenting (Marfo et al. 2008; Harkness et al. 2009), many parents who have to make money and to attend to other duties will never be able to manage. Such a system should be explored and valorised as they contribute a lot in shaping and informing ECD for the vulnerable populations in LDCs.

Chart 2: Contrastive responsive caregiving



As public information about ECD is very limited (chart 2), parents are more or less left on their own with disciplining and inculcating values to their children despite help from extended family and community at large. When faced with difficulties, they cling to what they know and tend to revert to age-old educational precepts. Thus, many parents evoked the fact that they are aware of children's rights, which prevent them from using corporal punishment on their children. However, they also reiterated that the young generation of today are out of

control due to fast-evolving technology and the influence of globalisation; and so, children need a stronger disciplining. The majority of parents (40 %) would first try verbal admonition or another type of punishment such as no snacks or grounded in the house for minor infractions. Some also used a form of pinching that are associated with grandmothers, ‘tsongo’ or ‘tsipindy’ (5 %) as mild correction before reverting to hitting on the hands and legs with a tree branch or a belt in cases where the infraction is judged as ‘serious’. This may include answering back to an elder, especially one of the parents, using violence on siblings or another child, breaking a toy etc. Parents are confused as they find themselves in between what they believe to be right (traditional teaching which says that if you love your child, you have to discipline him/her: *zanaka tiana tsy hitsitsiana rantsan-kazo*) and the national laws on children’s rights which provide protection for all children in line with international conventions. However, the very document advocating those laws also stipulates that there is ‘limited information on how convention is put to practice.’ (Madagascar National Laws: 2012) Such instances where parents are left alone with the moral debates as to what they should do or believe aggravates the feeling of disillusionment in many inexperienced parents. Concerning rooms and bedtime, although the child is given his/her personal space, very few parents have their kids sleep in a separate room (8 %) even if they can afford to have several rooms. This is probably due to socio-economic means but most importantly, the cultural belief that kids must stay close to their parents, under their loving gaze and protection; otherwise, they might be prey to bad spirits and evil temptation. This practice does in any case prevent parents from inculcating values of independence and autonomy to their kids. Such interpretation show that some indicators of ECD may need revision or adaptation in regard to cultural context or beliefs of parents.

Many parents and caregivers have integrated the importance of sharing quality time with a child for his/her wellbeing and cognitive development. Though parents do not have much free time, they tend to allot a few minutes or hours of the evening and the weekends to play games, or sing and dance on the rhythms of children’s songs, or watch movies with their children. Some of the younger parents (23 %) have also developed the habit of just sitting with the child for ‘cuddling’ or to ‘talk’ and ‘tease’ which is not common in Malagasy society where traditionally, speech was much hierarchised and became the appanage of old age (Randriamasitiana 2015). The types of activities listed above are positively fostering self-confidence and trust in the child while considerably enhancing intergenerational communication. Although not many parents (9,5 %) use this time spent with their children to

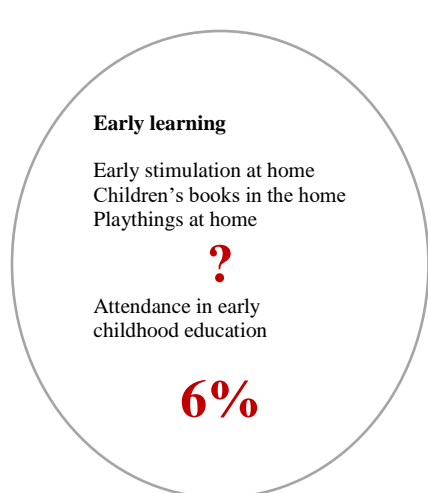
deal with homework; there is no doubt as to the impacts of such a change in attitude and practice on the sustained wellbeing of the child.

2.3 Early learning and stimulation

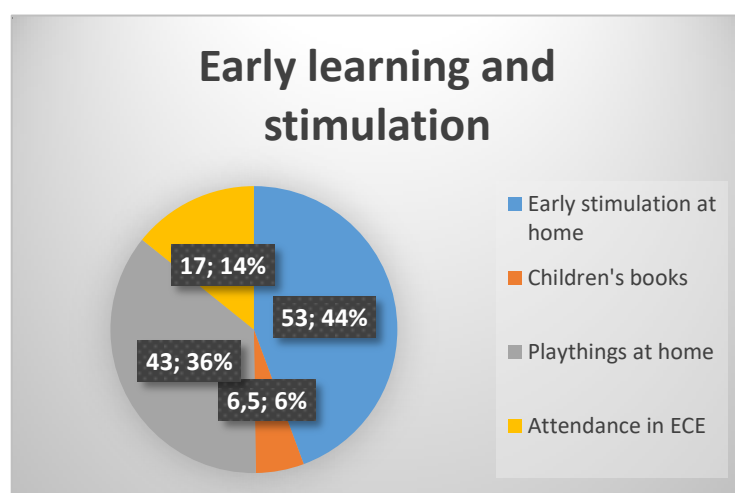
In this section, attention is particularly focused on aspects of early learning and stimulation of the child at home. Though the economic and financial status of each household considerably define and limit the access of children to things such as playthings and books, informants' responses have shown that children are being stimulated with what objects or activities parents have at hand. This could cover colourful and musical play 'objects' as odd and singular as bottles, leaves and plants or cardboard as much as traditional games and nursery rimes that are used to amuse and occupy the child.

The chart below indicates the rate of real or theorised improvements recorded in the field of early learning and stimulation at home:

Chart 3: Contrastive early learning



Source: Countdown to ECD, country profile, Oct 2020
(www.nurturing-care.org)



Source: Zanafy survey 2021

Given the expensive prices of books, the culture of reading has come to be associated by Malagasy people to a westernised and comfortable lifestyle that contradicts the tradition of orality; and thus, is often shunned (Randriamasitiana, 2015). However, in certain households where the practice is held and given a regular pace, the choice of books being shown or read to the child will often diverge from usual children books (6,5 % only in survey). Parents or older siblings will be asked to read from the Bible and other religious books (6 %) or as an alternative some historical and school manuals (11,5 %) that are aimed at enhancing the

Malagasy identity and cultural side of the child. Some parents will take as option country-specific or fairy tales (15 %) considering that these are conceptually fit for young children. In any case, the curiosity, the stimulation and cognitive or emotional development associated with the book are rarely taken into account. Following the same pattern, when it comes to buying clothes, shoes or toys, parents' lifestyle and financial situation are likely to have more weight in the choice rather than another reason. Besides adequation with the age or the gender of the child, and in some cases the quality and origin of the materials used for the products, pricing will take prevalence and the educational aspect is completely overlooked. This gives an indication as to what motivates parents. In a poor country like Madagascar, unfortunately, parents' choices tend to be dictated by circumstances rather than convictions.

As for early stimulation at home and attendance of ECD which have been translated in the survey data as parents accompanying their child in after-school activities such as the repetition of newly learned skills and information, be it nursery rhymes or numbers etc. and the access to facilities and professionals of early years care and education. Most parents are busy working during the day and when they get home, usually late in the evening, they tend to other duties. If they happen to spend time with their kids, they will rather play games (53 %) or watch movies (12 %) than go over the child's day, an activity that will be relegated to weekends and occasional holidays. Involvement of older siblings in the education of young infants (0-5) has been noticed to help in the area of early stimulation at home given that those older brothers or sisters are already schooled. In playing with their younger sibling – they dance and sing together, talk and tease, cuddle and hug, run etc. – allowing the infant to exercise his/her motor skills as well as develop the brain (UNICEF 2013, 2017).

Accompaniment with early schooling in the Malagasy context is thus, somehow still heavily weighed onto the mother (13 %) if it is attended to at all; with a few exceptions where fathers or other members of the family (8,5%) are taking over. The reason could be explained in a mother's particular awareness of the home environment on her child's cognitive and intellectual development. She feels the need to get involved because she wants to be present in the life of the child, to be as close as the distance set by quotidian routines allow and to fully engage in his/her growth. Being informed about the child's daily progress at school constitutes a privileged way to do so. Furthermore, she can exchange with those who are spending two third part of the day with her child. 'Since it is my first child, I want to be around, to show him that mommy is there and to follow his every progress step by step', a young mother noted. This state of things encourages the reproduction of the traditionally stereotyped and gendered division of care that is plaguing the parenting system.

Overall, parents are either very engaged with the schooling of their children or not involved at all. The contrast is quite flagrant given that there does not seem to be any particular profile for the one practice or the other. This tends to point out that accompanying their child in his/her schooling from an early age is something arbitrary to the parents. Yet, this arbitrary choice will determine and define the path the child's future and success will take. A choice which certainly would be different had the parents been made aware of its consequences on the child's development, wellbeing and future welfare. Indeed, ECCE can have a great impact on cognitive development and school readiness as well as survival in later schooling stage (Loomis and Akkari, 2014). Randriamasitiana (2015:62) even goes further by asserting that education remains one of the surest way to go up the social ladder for people living in a context of extreme poverty.

3. Recommendations

After reviewing the data from the survey and existing literature, this part of the study will consider suggestions and actionable recommendations aimed at activating the achievement of OECD for 2030.

In order to achieve a fair and dignified quality education for Malagasy children in line with the *Politique Enseignante* outlined by the Ministry of National Education (2018), a thorough and concise National Action Plan detailing the arcs of intervention on ECD is required. A working document where all concerned entities will take part and collaborate for efficiency and a better use of resources. Parents and caregivers, being the first beneficiaries of such measures and policies have to be put upfront in its elaboration. Hence, the usefulness of a platform of exchange (physical and/or virtual) like the already seeded *Ecole des Parents* that will listen to the worries of parents and provide practical advices on a day-to-day basis. For any action plan on ECCE to be effective, some temporising and balance between international conventions and local beliefs and practices remain a major point to delve upon.

Given that awareness in OECD remains one of the biggest obstacle to parents changing attitudes and practices in favour of ECD goals, a strong sensitisation campaign highlighting the benefits of ECD for both the individual child's happiness and welfare as well as the nation's economy might be of much help. Such a campaign, led by a strong and charismatic leading entity or figure, will strive to convince parents and stakeholders on the need for refreshed and situated educational methods. This leading entity or figure will take the place of a champion and act from a localised standpoint to get the ECD actions to the desired targets.

It is highly recommended to find this leader from the community of traditional or religious leaders who remain pillars of influence in the eyes of parents when it comes to education. As the data shows, within a context where unreliable political leaders and corrupted systems seem to prevail, the majority of parents (61,5 %) are dotting on religion and age old cultural values on which they can put their trust as the basic guiding principles in their parenting practices.

Besides the lack of public information on ECD, another priority is the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of access to support and services related to ECCE. Action here needs to address specifically the vulnerable and low-income families that are most often crowding the poor rural or semi-urbanised areas. These populations require proper services and facilities that are cost effective. Hence, the concept of a community-based or collective care centre. Not only does community-based centres considerably reduce the cost for ECE funding at a national level; but they will also allow parents and caregivers, who are among the primary stakeholders to children's education and care, to own the major aims of the integration of ECE into the educational system and fully engage in its successful achievement.

In the model of the care services provided in structures such as the Home Garden, the community pre-primary centres in the Republic of Cabo Verde; or the more modernised ECE Facilities of Tanzania which provide food, health and adequate materials and learning; the Collective Care Centres (3C) will provide inclusive and localised access to early stimulation and early learning for all Malagasy children aged 0-5. In order for the 3C to be convincing in the eyes of parents and caregivers, their full awareness and ownership are key. The belief that children are the most important wealth and duty of a nation is still very strongly held among Malagasy parents: '*Voalohan-karena ny zanaka*' (Randriamasitiana 2015:53). A belief that will ensure their voluntary participation and engagement for the success of the project. Any collective care endeavour has to be participatory and local-based as suggests the required ingredients for all equitable, impacting and sustainable form of change and development (Escobar 2008). A position which is reinforced by David Korten when he stated that development actions must be people-centred; calling on 'external development partners to support objectives chosen by the people, building communities' capacity to manage resources and meet local needs independently.'(1984) Indeed, just like parents and stakeholders from the other LDCs, Malagasy parents' full commitment to the goals of ECD will be boosted by the prospect of a collective care project that they have taken part in elaborating.

From a practical functioning, the 3C will be established at the level of the *Fokontany*, the local structure of authority which is the closest to the community or alternatively included into the EPP structures that are already existent. Parents may be more willing to volunteer their time and experiences at the care centres if they happen to be close to their homes. As the centres are mainly on participatory and non-paid basis, with the help and guidance of professionals, parents will be asked to serve time at the centres on a rotational basis and spare some assigned moments for their children. Exchanges between caregivers (parents, professional carers, community members...) will highlight good practices and naturally encourage community cohesion and *entraide*.

The collective aspect of the 3C will considerably alleviate mothers from the toll of nurturing care which is still weighing heavily on them, pre and post-Covid-19, despite the recently encouraging active participation of fathers and other members of the family (54,5 %). The pressure mainly adds on when considering health care during times of illness (mothers 12,5 % vs fathers 2,5%). Having their young kids (0-5 years) who are not yet schooled at the Collective Care Centre will leave them time and space for self-care and to tend to other activities that might benefit the households without worries. This will in time, produce healthier homes and life patterns in terms of division of care and innovative education. Although such infrastructure as a 3C will require some time to set in place and organise, they constitute an efficient alternative, as they will allow access to OECD to many young children from vulnerable households whose parents may not be able to afford the exaggerated rate of regular day-care services. Thus, a 3C is both cost-effective and inclusive in its conception. Within all these actions and policies aimed at the achievement of ECD, partners, international donors and NGOs will play a very central role. They will contribute through the accompaniment of communities throughout each step of the actions for ECD, from the setting of the National Action Plan, to the sensitisation campaign up to the creation of the collective care centres. Like gardeners keeping a close eye on a burgeoning tree, they will contribute with the budget for the training and sensitisation of parents and community members who will be dealing first-hand with the care centres. The skills and capacity building period will take 1-3 first years sanctioned by a thorough strategic punctual follow-up, conducted by both internal and external auditors, on how the budget is managed and how new policies are implemented. The centres should be functioning independently after 5 years of grooming and accompaniment.

Conclusion

The survey results reveal a pattern of the beliefs and the practices of local parents and caregivers when it comes to early childhood care and education. Although much improvements are witnessed with the establishment of a mandatory pre-primary level in all public and private schools, the building of new infrastructures as well as the training of in-school teachers and recruiting of new ones; parents feel abandoned in their education and nurturing care tasks. The difficulties faced by parents are heightened by the context of the pandemic which has added more toll on women and the poorest and vulnerable households. Institutional support such as spaces where parents and caregivers can exchange good practices and get information on ECD, are in great demand. Nevertheless, the seeds to the primary goals of OECD have been planted despite the fact that stakeholders are often carrying out scattered actions, each following their own agenda and losing out in impacts.

Parents are aware of the importance of nurturing care and early learning in their parenting beliefs and practices. They deplore the loss of tradition as national identity and discipline, especially the respect for elders which is at the foundation of Malagasy culture and which is fading away among younger generations. With the raise of technology and the influence of globalisation, traditional games like *kivarivary* or *tsiombioby* that played major parts in transmitting cultural values and identity representations have disappeared. Some parents feel under pressure as they struggle with the education of their children; they feel powerless, ignored by their own children and have trouble communicating with them. A significant part of the respondents (71, 28%) expressed some nostalgia about “the old days” when they could use corporal punishment and a strategy of fear to have the upper hand on their kids despite the illegal and dangerous aspects.

Aware of the deplorable state of education within homes and schools, most parents (28,5 %) are dreaming of a quality education that would be affordable and accessible to all. This realisation has led to the yearning for contextualised education reforms focusing on the valorisation of Malagasy culture and language. Those suggested solutions show that parents are aware of the importance of an adequate education for a given cultural environment in contrast to standardised practices that they cannot own nor feel committed to. Policy implementers must look inward, explore indigenous-based knowledge, and incorporate a collaborative perspective involving schools, homes and communities in devising new policies and reforms related to ECD.

The state of things calls for the setting of an action plan at the national level that will define priorities in ECD and outline ensuing implementation measures. Some areas such as responsive caregiving and equal division of care are clearly still underworked and require more focused attention and action from concerned authorities. The creation of facilities for inclusive and accessible care services such as Collective Care Centres for young children aged 0-5 as in the other LDCs on the African continent are encouraged. The community-based care centres will be established at the level of the *fokontany* or within the existing structures of EPPs and run on a volunteering and rotational basis. These facilities will give informed parents the chance to provide optimal ECD for their children while reducing the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of access to adequate support and care services. In the current context, the health and sanitation aspects of such facilities will also require some particular attention. Moreover, those centres will considerably reduce the cost for ECE funding at a national level and allow parents and caregivers, who are among the primary stakeholders to children's education and care, to own the major aims of the integration of ECE into the educational system and commit to its successful achievement. As for international organisations and donors, they will be full-fledged partners in those measures, as they will provide full accompaniment through budget, capacity building as well as follow up activities. Overall, these data have shown some coherence that leads to encouraging changes in ECD in the Malagasy context although the way to achieving OECD is still a rather long one. Parents and caregivers have integrated the fact that the environment, the nurturing care as well as their full commitment have a decisive impact on their children's future. In accordance with the hopeful lines stating that 'attitudes, policies and practices can change' (UNICEF 2017); this increase in awareness can be read as a significant evolution in parenting practices and translates the results of all the sensitisation works on ECD done over the last decades. Despite some strong hold on a number of beliefs that seem to work counter clock to established norms and standards, specifically disciplining and corporal punishments, children's work (Rapanoel 2013), the broad campaign for refreshed education strategies has contributed in informing parents and caregivers' experiences on ECCE both in schools and within homes. Indeed, although the proposed recommendations listed here are not necessarily new or diverging far from the known practices in essence; they are nevertheless aligned to the vision of a set of paced and grounded habits in favour of achieving OECD.

References

- Akkari A., Loomis C. and Lauwerier T. (2013). “Investir dans le préscolaire en Afrique subsaharienne, une synthèse de la littérature internationale.” *إنسانيات / Insaniyat*, 60-61. Available online on January 31, 2016 ; accessed on March 28, 2018 from: <http://journals.openedition.org/insaniyat/14212> ; DOI : 10.4000/insaniyat.14212
- Davis R. (2020). “Education nationale: Construction de 59 EPP et CEG manara-penitra”; *Midi Madagasikara* editorial board of December 1, 2020. Accessed online on April 04, 2021 from: <http://www.midi-madagasikara.mg/politique/2020/12/01/education-nationale-construction-de-59-epp-et-ceg-manara-penitra/>
- Ebrahim H., Okwany A. and Barry O. (Eds.) (2019). *Early childhood care and educations at the margins: African perspectives on birth to three*. Routledge research in ECE series. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Escobar, Arturo (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University press.
- Harkness S., Super, C. M., Barry, O., Zeitlin, M., and Long J. (2009). “Assessing the environment of children’s learning: The developmental niche in Africa”. In E. Grigorenko (Ed.), *Multicultural psychoeducational assessment*. p.133–155. New York: Springer.
- Harkness S., Super, C. M., Barry, O. and Zeitlin, M. (2011). “Think locally, act globally: Contributions of African research to Child Development.” *Child Development Perspectives*, 5:2, p.119-125.
- Korten, David C. (1984). “Strategic Organization for People-Centered Development”. In *Public Administration Review. Business Source Complete*. EBSCO, July-August, 44: 4, p. 341–352, [doi:10.2307/976080](https://doi.org/10.2307/976080).
- LOOMIS, Colleen, AKKARI, Abdeljalil (2014). “The impact of formal early childhood care and education on the cognitive development and academic potential of children in Madagascar: a literature review”. *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics*, 18:1, p.7-24.
- “Madagascar National Laws: on children’s rights and corporal punishment”, last update reform project of 2012. Accessed online on March 30, 2021 from <https://archive.crin.org/en/library/publications/madagascar-national-laws.html>

Marfo, K., Biersteker, L. Sagnia, J. and Kabiru M. (2008). “Grounding ECD in Community Development and Capacity Building: Responding to the Challenge of Meeting the Needs of Children under 3 in Africa”. In Alan Pence, Marito Garcia, Alan Pence, and Judith L. Evans (Eds.) *Africa’s Future, Africa’s Challenges: Early Childhood Development in Sub Saharan Africa*, The World Bank.

Ministère de l’Education Nationale (March 2018). “Présentation de la politique enseignante de Madagascar : les 3 ministères en charge de l’éducation félicités par l’équipe spéciale internationale sur les enseignants pour l’éducation – UNESCO”. Accessed online on March 30, 2021 from : <https://www.education.gov.mg/presentation-de-politique-enseignante-de-madagascar-3-ministeres-charge-de-leducation-felicites-lequipe-speciale-internationale-enseignants-ledu/>

Nsamenang B., Pence A. (2008). *A case for early childhood development in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Bernard van Leer Foundation. Working paper 51.

Okwany A., Ngutuku, E. and Muhangi, A. (2011). *The Role of Indigenous Knowledge and Culture in Childcare in Africa: A Sociological Study of Several Communities in Kenya and Uganda*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

Randriamasitiana, Gil Dany (2015). “Cultures familiales et scolaires: réalités locales de familles défavorisées à Madagascar.” In *La Revue Internationale de l’Education Familiale* 2:38, pp. 49-71, Paris: L’Harmattan. Accessed online on 31 July 2020 from <https://www.cairn.info/revue-la-revue-internationale-de-l-educationfamiliale-2015-2-page-49.htm>

Rapanoel Laingo (2013). “La dynamique des rôles de la famille dans un contexte de brassage culturel”, Travail et documents, Université de La Réunion, Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, in *Interculturalité et dynamique identitaires dans les îles de l’océan Indien*, pp.151–163. (hal-02186040)

UNESCO (2019). *Country report on ECCE in Madagascar*. Electronic document, accessed online from: www.nurturingcare.org

UNICEF (2017). *Early moments matter for every child: global report on ECD*. Accessed online on 24 September 2018 from: <https://www.unicef.org/early-moments>

UNICEF (2013). *Parents, Families, and Home-based Early Child Development*. Accessed online on December 04, 2017 from: https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_69849.html

UNICEF (N.d). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Electronic document, accessed online on February 05, 2007 from: <http://www.unicef.org/crc>