

Dislodging dominant ways of framing ECCE: A scholar-activist perspective

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Response to Inaugural Address Lecture by Professor Hasina B. Ebrahim

Towards an inclusive child-oriented paradigm in early care and education in South Africa

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It is a great honour and privilege for me to respond to this inaugural address of a distinguished African scholar, Professor Hasina Ebrahim. Our paths first crossed in 2008 when I was undertaking a year-long research on the role of local knowledge in childcare in Africa. Based on the action oriented research of this inquiry, we were reaching out to scholars from Africa with Africentric perspectives in ECCE to work together to highlight the need for respecting and acknowledging local ways of early childhood care and support. Professor Ebrahim proved to be an invaluable ally because of her scholarship around contextual accounts of ECCE that privilege children's ways of knowing and respecting different views. Over the years, I have observed her extensive body of scholarly work grow and had the great privilege of working collaboratively with her in pushing the ECCE knowledge space largely around how to work and engage with young children and their families.

I view her as a scholar activist because of the way she bridges the divide between the academy and practice. Hasina's scholarship in the ECCE knowledge space is focused on dislodging the dominant framing of ECCE and the ideal centered childhood and shows instead the importance of taking an inclusive, perspective that recognizes the multiple sense of the child. This requires paying attention to methods and theories in research with children. Her scholarly activism has been loud within the South African context. She acknowledges that South Africa has gone beyond the Victorian maxim that African children are to be seen and not heard to a clear position that they can be seen, heard and their perspectives sought and included. She problematizes the way children are heard and how the voice of children is represented in South Africa. This is accentuated within the South African context of persistent structural inequalities and also has resonance for scholarship on ECD in Africa more broadly.

This inaugural lecture is consistent with Hasina's scholarship building that has culminated in a paradigm shift and her unapologetic focus on early childhood care and education at the margins. In this presentation and over the years, she has made important contributions to scholarship around a nuanced perspective on the voice of young children. In this respect of voice, her scholarly contribution can be understood at different levels:

Firstly, she makes an important contribution on how we access and value the voice of children in research as well as in practice and policy. She notes that children are speaking subjects and troubles the dominant framing where children have been seen as objects rather than subjects of

research. She thus challenges the accepted assumption that very young children lack a voice because they cannot as yet articulate it or because they cannot articulate it the way adults are used to or expect.

Thirdly, she also proposes the need to hear the voice of children albeit in a different way by focusing on the verbal and non-verbal cues. This requires the need to listen to children beyond utterances to a perspective that should involve observing, dialogue and interpreting what children say and **also what they do not say**. It is important because such a perspective not only enables us to understand perspectives of very young children and avoids a situation where we “hear children problematically.” I however add that that the verbal and non-verbal cues should be stretched to a perspective on what children in general may say or not say based on the context in which knowledge production by children is embedded and the relations they may have with adults. As she rightly notes in this presentation, what children say may be responding to a particular curricular of values. Such a perspective on being attentive to the way we know about children as well as reflecting on the hidden curricular has implications for practice, policy as well as pedagogy.

It is therefore important for research to continue questioning the discursive fields in which children’s voice may be embedded. Her work on research with young children and the concept of situated ethics is a notable contribution to scholarship because it enables a perspective on how ethics for research with children should not be based on a “ticking the box kind of situation,” to an ethics based on context and individual situation. It is ethics positioned within the understanding that ethical acts and especially on research with young children are not universal but are constructed and practiced in particular contexts where researchers have to make decisions *in situ*. She notes that situated ethics does not take away the responsibility of the researcher towards the academy and towards the rules of research but she notes that it gives adults an opportunity to learn from children.

Her critique of the dominant models of ECCE as articulated in this inaugural address and in her scholarship goes beyond a polemic model to an approach that is cautious and intends to push the knowledge boundaries in the early childhood field. She adds her perspective to scholarship that has called for working within and against the dominant framing of childhood and young children. This cautious critique is what we have called in our joint chapter in the Sage Handbook of Early Childhood Research, “being attentive to the in between spaces and perspectives in early childhood care and education.” Attention to these spaces is useful in bridging the polarity of the dominant and Africentric narratives and demonstrates the way they can draw from each other. The dominant should be informed by children’s contextual realities. Such a perspective has implications for policy, theorising and practice in that it calls for a critique that does not border on closure and war between dominant and subjugated models of ECCE. She thus calls for the need to ensure deep inclusion by questioning **what we know about children; how we know about them and from which knowledge frameworks we draw**. This is because what we know about children determines the way we engage with them in terms of policies and practice.

Her inclusive approach highlights the need for taking into consideration the relational aspects of children's voice and how historical, race, gender and geo-political perspectives interact to influence children and their wellbeing. While acknowledging the importance of a child as a generational category, she argues for a need to be aware of the "hundred languages" of children by acknowledging the multiplicity of childhoods in policy, practice as well as the academy. She also points that this calls for deep inclusion, which respects different knowledge frameworks and challenges the epistemic inequalities in the field of ECCE.

This inclusivity is from a social justice framework that I now turn to. In my research on how communities use their valued ways of knowledge and philosophies in Eastern Africa, I unearthed different ways in which communities and societies were taking care of their children. These valued ways of caring for their children draw on indigenous philosophies and ways of knowing as well as pedagogies. This philosophy where each culture and community has resources for taking care of their children was represented in the powerful proverb among the Bukusu in Kenya: "Every mother dances her baby." Such a perspective also positions practitioners not as deficient but as important in children's learning and care. This is a useful starting point in understanding conceptions of childhood and child care that is generationally, historically, culturally and relationally embedded. This is key in supporting a perspective that does not marginalize scholarship from Africa but one that strives to include different scholarships by focusing on contextual accounts from the South about childcare and support. Given the epistemic injustice, it is a much-needed perspective that gives Africa a voice in childcare as well as affordances for generating knowledge about young children. In this endeavor, she has found and linked up with useful allies - scholars who have suggested and tested contextual ways of doing ECCE in West and Eastern Africa.

She is also pushing this knowledge space and pursuing epistemic justice by nurturing and mentoring emerging scholars in Africa on Afrocentric, contextual models and theories of childcare including very young children. The latter, children 0-3 years have received marginal attention in scholarship as well as attention policy discussions because their wellbeing is often subsumed under those of their mothers. In 2015, she co-directed the first ever child and youth institute focusing on children 0-3 years in the continent. These multipronged strategies are pushing the knowledge boundaries and opening up new spaces for the application of non-dominant ways of knowing and practice of ECCE. They also raise several questions that are important for practice around conceptualization of the child and pedagogy of the teacher:

What image do teachers/practitioners have of children?

What are their starting points?

How do we look at the child from a practice perspective?

The inclusive paradigm that Prof. Ebrahim proposes thus encourages:

- Pedagogic flexibility
- Curriculum that privileges children's voices
- Recognition of teachers'/practitioners' prior knowledge
- Affirming belonging and rooting children in their cultural context

As a great admirer of Professor Ebrahim's varied scholarly work and social justice activism, it has been an enormous privilege to respond to her inaugural. She is also a warm and very generous academic and mentor. My heartfelt congratulations to you Professor Ebrahim on this very special and well-deserved occasion.