

ENSURING AFFORDABLE QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: WHAT WILL WE DO WITH THE CHILDREN ON MONDAY?

A STORY OF THREE GATES FOR AFFORDABLE QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES AND KEYS THAT CAN UNLOCK THESE GATES.

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Good morning to everyone

I have been asked to say a few words this morning regarding the conference and why UNICEF is a partner in this timely and interesting gathering. UNICEF has early childhood development as one of its three priorities for our work in South Africa and we firmly believe that early childhood development lays the foundation for every child for what they need immediately and for their long term prospects as individuals

The search for what quality means in early childhood development has been part of the international discourse for some time now and everybody seems to be on this adventurous journey to find it. Too often, we think that we will find the answers we seek regarding quality in faraway places and exotic locations beyond the Sinbad's seven seas or in Alibaba's cave.

And that is why this conference is so important, as it will show us that our searches often do not have to go too far...the answers for affordable quality in early childhood development are often just across the road or 100 kilometres away – HOME-GROWN!

Nonetheless there seems to be a few persistent challenges in the implementation of affordable quality early childhood development programmes. Gates that are persistently guarded by gatekeepers...and keep affordable quality early childhood development from infants and young children. I want to talk about three main gates and their gatekeepers that I have observed over time. These are the **ALPHABETTERS**, the **BUSINESS BULLIES** and **COMPLICATORS**. The **ABC**'s of gatekeeping in quality. And indeed I created two new words – but I am allowed as we work in early childhood and we can make new words to explain our world and views!

Let's start with **A**, the "**ALPHABETERS**". These are those that do not understand what early learning means and tends to be the big culprits in the *schoolification* of early learning. Some of the "ALPHABETERS" are:

Some practitioners and educators in early childhood development programmes.

Here I refer to those who do not know how learning happens in the early years. Those who run programmes as if it is formal school programmes. Who do not understand that play is at the core of early learning and development? They are the gatekeepers that prevent young children from learning through quality programmes, because they are not facilitating quality learning. *What will they do with the children on Monday?*

Then we have the parents.

And I am approaching this with great caution as millions of parents do a fantastic job every day, sometimes against all odds. But, because we do not spent time and share information with parents in an accessible manner, parents often have unrealistic expectations about the early learning of their children. And we contribute to that.

I want to share an example on what I mean. Some time ago I visited an early childhood development programme and the practitioner very proudly showed what the children "learned". She had a group of 2 and half and 3 year old children recite the alphabet – from A to Z. I could see that the children had no association between what they were reciting and their understanding of language and sounds at that age. My heart sank. Mostly because an illusion of learning was created. I could not help to explain to the practitioner and the parents present what development of emerging literacy entails for this age group, and had to add, that "*my uncle's parrot can also recite the alphabet, but that does not mean that it is going to university*". Please, let me be clear, by this I do not mean that children should not start to learn the sounds and associations of the letters of alphabet in early childhood development programmes. It is important! But

the issue here is the manner in which is done! It should be done in a playful manner with association between the sounds, etc. You know what I mean here.

Let me share with you another example on a discussion that I had with a mother of a Grade R learner. With great excitement she told me that her 6 year old girl can count to 100 and back! They practice every day – actually, she insists that they do it every day, because she wants to make sure that this little girl is good in maths when she goes to formal school. As my jaw dropped and my ever so often inability to keep quite or give a polite answer overcame me, I responded “*You are doing an fantastic job....in ensuring that your child is most likely going to hate mathematics forever*”. The mother was shocked as she truly believed that she is developing the next maths wizard. Then we talked about emerging maths learning and how play helps to lay a good foundation for this. And how we can use numbers, playing with objects and hundreds of other ways to lay the foundations for maths and a love for problem solving...

The one key to unlock this gate is most certainly **LEARNING THROUGH PLAY**.

B is for **BUSINESS BULLIES** to early learning. We have seen over the years how early learning and development of young children developed into a business, and be exploited by too many commercial enterprises. I call some of them BUSINESS BULLIES. The BUSINESS BULLIES flood markets with messages by their companies that they have just the right product that will make “*your child smarter*”! These vary from expensive “educational toys”, flash cards, specially designed programmes and many more. Cleverly, it feeds into what I like to call “*parental guilt*”, i.e. bullying parents already under pressure by making them feel that using these products will make up for the “*time that they do not spent with their children*”. Bullying all of us to believe that these programmes and materials that they are selling are per definition the quality that is needed for the early learning and development of young children. BUSINESS BULLIES are gatekeepers that make quality in early childhood development narrow, unaffordable and out of reach of those with lesser means. Obviously this does not apply to all business endeavours and products, but we need to keep our eyes and minds open for the BUSINESS BULLIES. *What will they do with the children on Monday?*

BUSINESS BULLIES also comes in the form of early childhood development programmes that operates as businesses, i.e. to make a profit at all costs. Where children become a commodity. Here I talk about programmes that employ poorly qualified practitioners, cut costs to save, while compromising the rights of children and the number of children in room is associated with the money that is made through an economy of scale rather than sound pedagogical principles for early learning and development. Often, what is compromised first, is quality. Let me also be clear, I do not refer here to quality early childhood development programmes that operate for profit as part of a small business or income generation for the owners. Many early childhood development programmes operate on these principles, without compromising quality, the rights of children or playful learning for young children.

One key to unlocking this gate is ensure that parents, practitioners, administrators, policy makers have access to **KNOWLEDGE ABOUT QUALITY EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**.

And lastly let's go to **C** – the **COMPLICATORS**, which often involve many of us sitting in this room. Where we tend to make quality so complicated that it seems to require very high levels of expertise, and exclude those everyday hero's that provide quality early learning and development opportunities to infants and young children. By this I do not mean that quality should not be rooted in evidence. Quality in early childhood development requires knowledge, skills and experience. One such COMPLICATOR is sometimes academics and researchers. Tending to make theory, evidence and practice of quality early learning complicated and difficult to understand and sharing knowledge in a manner that makes the recipients feel lost. I know I am generalising, and forgive me for that. I yet have to see academic research done on quality early childhood development where the researcher develops an easy to understand version of that research for parents and practitioners to read, understand and use. Maybe, we can open these gates by challenging universities, academics and researchers...that before an article on their research is published in a peer review journal (for other academics) and/or as a requirement for receiving their degrees (where applicable) that it should first be published and distributed in *easy-to-understand versions* for parents, practitioners, teachers and the public.

Many of us sitting in this room as experts, trainers, mentors, policy makers, etc., are often also COMPLICATORS. Let me say it upfront, I include myself here as well. In our talks, manuals, policies, books,

notes, we hide quality under a mysterious cloak. Rather than sharing explicitly and unambiguously what quality means and represents in practice. **The understanding of the meaning of quality must be the possession of everyone that works in early childhood development, rather than the privilege of the “experts”.** *What will we do with the children on Monday?*

There are three keys to unlock this gate. The first one is **KEEP IT SIMPLE**. The second key here is **ACCESS** – make evidence accessible to those who are directly and daily engage with babies and young children, e.g. parents, caregivers, practitioners, educators, etc. The third key is **INCLUSION** – leave no one behind in the understanding of quality.

Before I end let me ask you a question. *Whom of you are brain surgeons?*

Ok, no-one here. Now, let me see, *whom of you has an influence on the development and growth of a child’s brain?*

Well, I am happy to see so many hands up! That is the wonderful thing about working in early childhood development – our work goes beyond that of brain surgeons and has a profound impact on the daily lives of babies and young children as well as their long term prospects. By this I am not saying that the work of brain surgeons are not important – to the contrary! But I want to illustrate that in early childhood development we can claim similar recognition for the profound work that we are doing.

Science has confirmed the critical importance of the first years of life for the development of the brain. Every moment matters and children need nurturing, care and stimulation from the start to help with this fascinating brain building process. And this is where we work in early childhood development! We provide the care and early learning through play and interaction that supports the neural connections that builds the brain and lays the foundations for a child’s future.

Isn’t it fantastic to think that we, as people working in early childhood development, have access to this unique time human development and are able to make a lasting difference in every child’s life that crosses our way. It’s an opportunity, but also an obligation.

Before I close, I want to tell you about an exciting free e-learning in-service training programme on play-based learning that compliments existing and formal training for early childhood practitioners and Foundation Phase Educators (Grades R, 1,2 & 3). It is called **Powerful Learning Around You (P.L.A.Y.)**. This is a partnership between Department of Basic Education, UNICEF, the LEGO Foundation and Cotlands. I will place some leaflets on the tables for those who are interested.

In line with the theme of the conference, let me leave you with a question: “***What will you do different on Monday?***”.

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