

Project Vision Platform (PVP):

African Early Human Development (AEHD) Project

Website: <http://grundtvig.hio.no/index.php/Rbook>

A multiphase **African Early Human Development (AEHD) Project** is a very ambitious initiative of the Human Development Resource Centre, Cameroon (www.thehdrc.org), with the foundational goodwill of the Oslo University College, Norway and a reference group of scholars, who, on 4th November 2010 in Oslo, constituted themselves into a Nordic African Early Human Development Study Network, open to other scholars and partners/organizations.

Project Phases:

The first phase of the AEHD Project is an Open Access (Internet) Platform (<http://grundtvig.hio.no/index.php/Rbook>) that will host and eventually publish the following AEHD products: Online Journal, child development research and practice, African Theses and Dissertations, and an Open Archives on EHD. The second phase is an Invitational Orienting Resourcebook Clinic of chapter authors and project partners to collegially appraise a novel conceptual vision and the thematic sections and chapter outlines of the Resourcebook, which will serve two key purposes; namely, provide a comprehensive user-friendly resource conspicuous by its nonexistence and constitute a conceptual clarification for Grounded Theory Research on AEHD. Two highlights of each chapter will be to identify core research and scale-up themes/issues and propose cutting-edge pathways to address them. We envisage research and services across Africa on social determinants in eight (8) regional centers in Central, Western, Eastern, Southern, Northern, and Island States and four (4) centers on biological determinants in Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Africa. A pilot site is in Cameroon, an English-French bilingual country that straddles Central-West Africa. Finally, at Biennial Project and international Forums we will disseminate data-products and exchange experiences and perspectives across sites and globally.

Project Rationale:

“Children in Africa are victims of a double invisibility; both from being children and from living in Africa” (Jonsson, 2009). The state-of-the-art buzzword is “evidence-base” but African children are the world’s least researched and published children. Africa’s children are noticed more by negative publicity in western media and children’s storybooks. A most critical issue is that without own research, Africa will persist eternally as knowledge-importer. Much of the policy-based work for African children has been premised on Western datasets or on unsystematic, itinerant research produced by foreign goodwill, databases that are neither readily available nor easily accessible for policy, teaching, and services in Africa in user-friendly forms. In addition, given the scarcity of native-born human resources in Africa, international instruments and policy frameworks have seldom been suitably interpreted much less customized to African child development education and service programs. Worse of all, Africa happens to be the only world region where all the role models to which its children in their formative years are exposed (angels and saints, great

achievers, film stars, etc) are of a race that is different from theirs. African children are the only ones in the world whose socialisation begins with acculturation (learning about other worlds in a foreign language), instead of beginning with enculturation (being deeply entrenched into your own world first and foremost) (Pai Obanya, 2011). Can we begin to "look at all views, no matter how diverse, and learn what we may from them; even if we learn that a certain view is worthless, we have learned something important" (Wright, 1984, p. xiv)?

Project Goals:

We have positioned ourselves to interest, share and pursue an innovative vision of research and service with development partners and the academic community as a longitudinal, multifaceted interdisciplinary and grounded theory study whose equally multifaceted goal is to progressively outsource, document and disseminate African databases on the biological and social determinants of the early years of human development. From these databases we will evolve rights-sensitive, Africa-friendly models and scale-up strategies within the framework of international instruments and policy guidelines. We will feed them and lessons learned from process and outcome evaluations into the ongoing project. Within lifespan conceptualization, AEHD prioritizes the developmental phases from conception to puberty. We are concernedly aware that "no formally espoused programmatic structure appears to cover the cohort between the age of 8 years and entry into the pubescent period" (Nsamenang, 2007). This segment of life constitutes the sensitive, formative years of lifespan developmental trajectories in all contexts and cultures.

AEHD does not dismiss or sideline Africa's knowledge systems as anti-progressive; it blends it with all other useful knowledges. The mindset and attitudinal disposition adopted for the project is: "all cultures can contribute universal knowledge of scientific value" (UNESCO, 1999). Accordingly, the project sets out to innovatively outsource usable rights-sensitive knowledge and practices from African early human development circumstances and hone the evidences into leading-edge policy frameworks and culturally appropriate programming models and developmentally appropriate norms. The project intends to engage unprecedented Pan-African interdisciplinary researcher-practitioner networks, supported by a multidisciplinary Nordic African Early Human Development Study Network, Project Partners and Development Cooperation organizations and interested scholars and parties into a "blended approach" to customize research and services in Africa.

Conceptual and Theoretical Moorings:

Every human being begins life when male and female gametes fuse to form a single cell. Both scientists and laypeople possess sensitive knowledge about this momentous biological and not frequently so-stated cultural, event. The making of a genetically new individual is completed when the nuclei of ovum and sperm are combined. Thus, human life does not begin with birth. Africans know this too well! When born, a baby is biologically already nine months old. We have a responsibility to learn how to study the life *in utero*, and how to care for it (Beazley, 1980). All cultures provide prenatal and postnatal support in the care they give to pregnant women and their children. Children are born into families and communities as primary stakeholders who organize, within cultural meaning systems, child protection and care. Some existential issues of child survival,

protection, and nurturance all cultures grapple with, include health and nutrition, intergenerational values, spirituality and notions of the good child. These concerns are congruent with WHO definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Disciplinary and sectoral boundaries fragment holistic understanding of development, thereby rendering comprehensive, integrative approaches to early human development difficult to actualize in practice. Our new conceptual vision is consistent with the 2010 **Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation**.

The **project’s anchor concepts** are biological embedding (Hertzman, 1999), contextual interactionism (Nsamenang, 2010), ontogenetic holism (Nsamenang, 2005; Shweder, 2011), biosociation (Koestler, 1976; Damon, 2011), and developmental learning (Nsamenang et al, 2008).

1. **Biological embedding:** Children do not live and develop in a universal civilization; they develop in a specific eco-culture and have a right to that cultural background.
2. **Contextual interactionism:** Children do not merely exist, they are curious, active, responsive, interactive agents of their own developmental learning.
3. **Ontogenetic holism:** Every child has own developmental story, within an African holistic theory of the universe. The sum total of all science-based disciplinary evidences brought together cannot represent or capture the essence of the child as a unique, whole entity,
4. **Biosociation:** There are scientific and lay lenses to the best interest of children. Biosociation can integrate all the perspectives. Why and how is the same child “seen” in her/his situation differently? The conflict is not with the “situated” child but with the different “lenses”.
5. **Developmental learning:** Children are curious actors and learners from conception. Developmental learning is knowledge and skills not registered in genes but which the child requires for survival and thriving. They learn them in the process of development; much of their useful learning is self-generated and peer-group based, hence Africans think of children in their *becoming* (Erny, 1968), not as a set of organisms to be molded into a pattern of behavior specified in advance as educational outcomes, but as newcomers to a community of practice, for whom the desirable outcome of a period of apprenticeship is that they would appropriate the system of meanings that informs the community’s practices (Serpell, 2008).

Project Host and Coordination:

The HDRC in general and its director, Prof. Bame Nsamenang, in particular possess a track record in harmonious, productive academic leadership. They will lead this project into goal achievement and beyond in that they will coordinate and advance Africa’s language-sensitive scholars and linguistic blogs into a common goal-focused intellectual-cum-practice platform, synergizing it in unprecedented ways with the supportive strategies of multiple layers of the development community and international scholarship. Other members of the lead team are Mr. Jean Cyril Dalais of the Mauritius Initiative, Prof. Oumar Barry of Cheik Anta Diop University in Senegal and Prof. Jan-Erik Johansson of Oslo University College, Norway. For more on the track record, visit www.thehdrc.org for leadership on the *African Educational Theories and Practices: A Generative Teacher Education Curriculum*.

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