Early Childhood Care and Education

Developing Productive and Social Life Skills Among Six-Year-Olds in Masaka District, Uganda: The Impact of Contemporary Pedagogy

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This study investigated contemporary pedagogy and its impact on developing productive and social life skills among six-year-old children in Masaka District, Uganda. The research was prompted by the critical need to align Early Childhood Education (ECE) with indigenous African knowledge and global educational trends to prepare children for productive and socially responsible lives. A sequential mixed-methods approach was employed. This involved stratified random sampling of 18 schools and purposive sampling of teachers and pupils to gather qualitative data through classroom observations, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews. Additional data were obtained from practical skill assessments and documentary reviews. The findings reveal significant discrepancies between teachers' intended practices and actual classroom methods, with a prevalent reliance on theoretical instruction over practical life-skill development. While productive work skills such as gardening, waste disposal, and simple crafting were identified as crucial, these were rarely incorporated into daily classroom activities due to resource constraints, inadequate space, and time limitations. Social skills were more consistently addressed through routines, rules, and intentional teaching, yet these, too, suffered from insufficient practical application. A vital outcome of the study is the development of a hybrid pedagogical framework, termed the DRABE (Drop, Restore, Adapt, Blend, and Explore) model. This framework advocates integrating indigenous pedagogical practices with contemporary methods to create a balanced, Afrocentric approach to ECE. The DRABE model emphasizes the need to drop ineffective contemporary practices, restore valuable indigenous methods, adapt both to suit modern educational contexts, blend them to enhance learning outcomes, and explore innovative approaches to skilling. The study concludes that current pedagogical practices in Ugandan ECE inadequately support the holistic development of essential life skills. Recommendations include enhancing teacher training to improve pedagogical competence, revising curricula to incorporate practical skills better, and fostering stronger school-community partnerships to ensure that education remains relevant to the socio-economic realities of African children. These steps are crucial for empowering children to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the global society.

Practitioner Notes

What is already known about the topic

- Early Years Education (EYE) is recognized globally as a foundational stage that aims to develop young children's positive attitudes, values, concepts, and life skills.
- Life skills are essential for mental well-being and competence, enabling children to face life's realities, make informed decisions, solve problems, and build healthy relationships.
- There is a growing concern in Africa about finding an appropriate educational epistemology that aligns with indigenous knowledge systems and global educational trends.
- Indigenous pedagogical practices in Uganda, such as holiday intervention programs and non-formal community-based initiatives, have shown practical relevance in developing life skills among children.
- Despite the recognized importance of EYE, many schools in Uganda focus on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skill development, often due to resource constraints and inadequate teacher preparation.

What this study contributes

- The study identifies significant gaps between the intended pedagogical practices and their implementation in the classroom. Specifically, it highlights the over-reliance on theoretical instruction at the expense of practical life skills development.
- It introduces the DRABE (Drop, Restore, Adapt, Blend, and Explore) model, a hybrid pedagogical framework that integrates indigenous and contemporary pedagogies to enhance the development of children's productive and social life skills. This model emphasizes the need to drop ineffective contemporary practices, restore valuable indigenous methods, adapt them to modern contexts, blend them with emerging trends, and explore new ways of skilling children.
- The research reveals the limitations of current pedagogical practices in Uganda, particularly the inadequate use of practical methods for life-skills development due to teacher unpreparedness, insufficient resources, and restrictive learning environments.

Implications for practice and policy

- Enhancing teacher training programs to improve pedagogical competence, particularly in integrating life skills into daily teaching practices, is urgent. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should be mandated to ensure teachers have the skills to apply the DRABE model effectively.
- The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) should revisit EYE programming to ensure curricula align with the practical needs of life-skills development. This includes revising lesson durations, enhancing the integration of indigenous knowledge, and ensuring that educational content is contextually relevant to the socio-economic realities of African children.
- Strengthening partnerships between schools and local communities is essential for creating supportive environments that reinforce the practical application of life skills. Schools should engage parents and local experts in extending learning beyond the classroom and into the community.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) must prioritize resource allocation for EYE, ensuring schools have the necessary tools, space, and materials to support practical life-skills education. This also involves addressing the disparities between urban and rural schools regarding available resources and facilities.
- Policymakers should enforce standards that require schools to focus on both academic and life-skills outcomes. This includes regulating school choices and ensuring educational programs are developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant.
- The study underscores the importance of using local languages in early childhood education to enhance comprehension and cultural relevance. Policymakers should reconsider the medium of instruction policies to ensure that children first master their indigenous languages before transitioning to foreign languages like English.
- While technology can enhance learning, it should not replace human interaction and hands-on experiences that are critical for life skills development. Teachers should be trained to use technology as a complementary tool rather than a substitute for practical learning activities.

Introduction

For decades, scholars have been concerned about finding an appropriate education epistemology in Africa (Nyamnjoh, 2004; Okwany & Ebrahim, 2016; Sitoe, 2006). Securing an identity for African children should be a critical collective and objective concern for Early Years Education (EYE) providers (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). EYE determines the children's local and global circles of influence.

Universally, Early Years Education (EYE) aims to provide a proper start through positive attitudes, value systems, concepts, and life skills development (Britto, 2017). EYE ought to prepare children to be knowledge producers and users, but not containers of useless accumulated facts (Zambian Education Information Centre [ZEIC], 2020), as is the case today. Therefore, All EYE providers should offer every child an early and right start in preparation for a productive life. Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Uganda is intended to provide a safe, stimulating climate to support beginners to adjust to, appreciate, and manipulate the immediate environment through enabling approaches and supportive, inclusive school cultures that foster every child's identity (MoES, 2010; NCDC, 2005).

According to UNICEF (2020), life skills are essentially those abilities that promote mental well-being and competence within young people as they face the realities of life. Life skills include psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that enable individuals to make informed decisions, solve problems, build healthy relationships, exhibit acceptable behavior, and cope with and manage personal lives healthily and productively. Hence, life-skilling is a transformative or developmental behavior approach designed to balance knowledge, attitude, and skills. The definition by UNICEF (2020) is anchored on research evidence suggesting that shifts in risk behavior are unlikely if knowledge, attitudinal, and life-skill-based competencies are not addressed.

On the other hand, the WHO (2013) perceives life skills as those abilities that trigger adaptive and positive behavior to enable an individual to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

EYE Pedagogy is the curriculum element that translates content into skills performance, positive attitudes, and values. It is an interactive process of shaping the child's character, stimulating thought, skill training, and socializing founded on personal or well-researched theories, philosophies, policies, and principles of teaching and learning. Learning spaces are a critical element of enabling pedagogies.

To guide EYE pedagogy, UNESCO in Muskin (2015) echoed the ultimate purpose of education as condensed into four pillars: learning to know, learning to be, learning to live together, and learning to do (Quisumbing & de Leo, 2005). UNESCO here purports that the prominence of schooling in children's lives is achieved only when education plays its role in building a child's identity, life skills, employability skills, social competencies, and a strong contextualized knowledge base.

To nurture such a character, as depicted by UNESCO, EYE pedagogy must provide children with well-integrated learning experiences that engage them in meaning-making, attitude-formation, and skills-acquisition instead of passive consumption of knowledge for keeps. In contrast, the pedagogy of telling looms on in Uganda, denying beginners opportunities to gain life skills and rendering them susceptible. Noor, quoted by Lugaaju (2021), observed that many of Uganda's Pre-primary schools confine infants to 'studying' instead of creating un-limiting environments that would allow free movements for exploration to nurture life skills.

The study conceptualized Contemporary Pedagogy (CP) as present-day lesson delivery methods based on teachers' personal beliefs (philosophies) on education, principles, classroom patterns, and practices based on societal pillars and aspirations. CP occurs within a teaching context with restrictive and driving forces toward a complementary Indigenous Pedagogy (IP). Global agendas often appear to be restricting forces and suppressing Afrocentric philosophies, which are the driving forces. Global trends could be sieved through Afrocentric Philosophies to suit the African context. To nurture an Afri-global child, integration of both IP and CP is imperative.

Uganda has resorted to holiday interventions for an appropriate epistemology. Various actors have responded to the skills dilemma among children and youths by engaging them in non-formal initiatives such as skills-lab by Educate, local-language-holiday-school *Kisaakate* pedagogy [Royal enclosure]; ministerial skills development projects and Presidential Initiative on Skills Development (Lukwago, 2023; Skills Lab, 2023). The holiday packages replicate traditional apprenticeship styles, attesting to their practical relevance to date.

Many elementary schools in Uganda struggle to meet parents' skill-performance expectations of their children. Therefore, the motive of the study was to gather empirical evidence on those current methods that facilitate life-skills development for African children and how they influenced children's life-skills acquisition in preparation for their productive and successful social lives. In the quest for an Afri-global character, the findings guided the process of generating a hybrid pedagogical framework for developing children's life skills to facilitate Africa's progression and to empower them for a global citizenry. The hybrid pedagogical framework builds on the assumption that (i) indigenous and contemporary pedagogies are complementary; (ii) reverting fully to the conventional no longer works; iii) relying only on emerging trends defies essence; iv) blending emerging with conventional pedagogy works best. Complementarity connotes a relational process of augmenting CP with IP characteristics by repositioning the two pedagogies on Afrocentric philosophies as guiding archetypes. The study proposes that to complement CP with IP, it is essential to **d**rop the CP patterns that no longer work, **r**estore the dropped IP practices that still work, **a**dapt IP and CP best practices, and **b**lend CP with IP by balancing emerging with conventional enduring values in the form of items like natural resources, proverbs-the hidden truisms; then **e**xplore further insights to discover new ways of skilling. Thus, by the DRABE (drop, restore, adapt, blend, and explore) hybrid framework, complementary pedagogy asserts that effective pedagogy for skilling African children must bear original standards of the collectively acceptable good for African economic progress.

Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) has succeeded in offering basic literacy skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking to older persons and children through the indigenous home-based learning model. It involves parents in selecting a home and a volunteer teacher. Children learn using low-cost resources like letter cut-outs inscribed on card boxes or bottle tops. They write on banana leaves or the floor using charcoal and sticks. However, they combine this with digital literacy by training children to use tablets to sound letters (phonics), listen to locally recorded rhymes, and explore pictures that relate to the reality around them. As they advance in literacy, they may develop the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate while maintaining the communal spirit and support structure.

Uganda's vision to become a middle-income country depends on providing the tools for upward mobility and building an educated, skilled workforce focused on local issues. Although starting right and early through ECE is the most efficient way to accomplish this goal, the willingness to financially prioritize resource allocation for EYE seems skewed in the antithesis direction (NPA, 2016). Consequently, government and donor funding targeting ECE is still inadequate. It is clear, too, that "donor presence remains uneven across the world's poorest countries and the relative importance donors give to education in total aid is not the same for all regions" (Awopegba et al., 2013, p. 21). It is imperative that Africa realistically and objectively appreciates that it is a low-priority region in global affairs, wherein inadequate aid reaches low-income countries. Financial aid is insufficiently predictable as funding for primary education remains at less than half the requisite annual amount. National planners and providers should, thus, urgently embrace the fact that Africa's development will only sprout if ECE is prioritized.

Resource allocation, however, is not the only barrier to ECE. Awopegba et al. (2013) report that while many countries have made considerable progress in developing policies safeguarding the educational needs of marginalized children, severe barriers to enrolment, retention, and attainment persist. Only a tenth of Uganda's children aged 3-5 years were enrolled in pre-primary schools, constitutionally recognized as the first level of formal education

in Uganda (Nyabigambo et al., 2023; UBOS, 2022). Pre-primary schools are predominantly privately run, overpriced, and located in urban settings, limiting children's access in disadvantaged communities, yet they need it most. Education Partners have taken strides to offer non-formal community-based ECE through several interventions like LABE, Play-Matters, and Madarasa. The main challenge is that many rural parents do not appreciate ECD services (Noor, 2021).

Nonetheless, there is increasing realization of the significance of ECE in Uganda as many elite parents easily access literature on brain and human development. Many parents know that EYE is fundamental for brain stimulation so children can reach their full potential. The beliefs about 'a right start' do influence planning authorities. Bitature and Simba Group, echoing investors' voices, argue that if Uganda can achieve its Vision 2040, adequate investment in children's foundational learning should be prioritized, as postponing it is pointless (2018).

Today's EYE needs corrective pedagogy to undo what went wrong. Africans dropped indigenous knowledge acquisition systems and adopted Western school systems; these stressed remembering instead of reasoning and thinking. African learners moved from learning by practicing skills to cramming (ZEIC, 2020) to become more parrots who talk well about what they know but are too handicapped to apply it in real-life situations. Consequently, African children are laborers, not innovators, in Western manufacturing industries (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019; Awopegba et al., 2013; Mazrui, 2002). Most African states have sacrificed their local languages for English, as many parents mistakenly equate good English to quality education. The absence of a clear Medium of Instruction (MoI) policy denies children the right to learn through familiar languages that would strengthen their foundational learning (Sentanda, 2014).

Purpose

The study purposed to explore the best methods for developing six-year-old children's productive and social life skills and investigate how Contemporary Pedagogy (CP) influenced their development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the methods that worked best in developing children's essential life skills.
2. To examine how CP influences the development of children's life skills.

Research Questions

1. Which methods work best in developing six-year-old children's essential life skills?
2. How does CP influence the development of children's life skills?

Methodology

The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed design to establish those methods that 'work' to develop six-year-old children's essential life skills and how CP influences this. Stratified random sampling was used to select 18 schools, purposive sampling was used to identify 18 teachers and 36 pupils, yet snowballing was used to identify the 20 key informants. Qualitative data were gathered using classroom observations, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interviews with key informants and teachers; children did practical tests on skills performance. Documentary reviews were done to triangulate data to establish the standard methods listed in schemes and lesson plans and the assessment tasks the pupils were engaged in. Exercise books of 36 pupils and class timetables were studied to gauge pupils' performance, and time was allocated to different Learning Areas (LAs) per week.

Findings

The findings were recorded, coded, analyzed, and presented along themes.

Best Methods for Developing Social and Productive Work-Life Skills

Table 1 highlights the teaching patterns where most methods did not work well due to teacher-procedural and environmental limitations. A wide disparity was noted between what teachers say and what they do. They say 'desired practice' is often betrayed by unfavourable conditions like examinations, inadequate sitting and learning spaces, and limited resources.

Classroom patterns still portrayed teacher dominance, indulging more in 'telling' than 'skilling,' while learner engagement was still limited to 'inactive learning modes' mainly characterized by copycat tendencies. Thirteen out of eighteen lessons observed did not incorporate 'assessment' due to poor time allocation. Where assessment was done, learners' answers duplicated the teachers' examples. However, methods that worked best in developing children's productive work skills were those that combined head, hand, and heart: for example, shared work, model the way, and projects. Such methods enabled children to learn by doing and master procedures while enjoying the timely benefit of situational learning.

CP Employed Shared Work as the best way of Equipping Children with Productive Life Skills

Productive life skills are work-related abilities to perform tasks leading to production or service delivery. They empower children to exercise their right to participate in family and community progression. Teachers shared views on the methods they used to support children's life skills development:

> We do practical things together. We show them how to perform harder tasks like pruning. We allow them to do things their way; we correct [their failings] on the spot.

Table 1. Pedagogical Practice and Life Skills Development in EYE Classrooms

Category	Common Methods	Teaching Patterns	Learner engagement	Assessment Practices
Productive-work skills: getting ready for school, crossing the road, planting, rubbish-disposal, feeding pets, weaving sweeping, care for tools, locating places, mulching	Singing, play, demonstration, I do-You-do-We-do, role-play modelling, situational learning, 15/18 schools didn't engage children in practical work	giving instructions, demonstrate, walk around, call for attention provide material give feedback	Observing, imitating teacher, shading, painting, feeding animals, weeding, cutting, paste or draw and name, identifying,	Not observed during lesson and no record indicated assessment of productive skills
Social skills Greeting; proper sitting posture; eye contact, speak softly, walk in single file, ask for permission, use of polite language, sharing, helping	Drills, singing, Rote learning, storytelling, Routines / rules; intentional teaching	Demonstrate, write on chalk board, call for attention, open rebukes, class rules, instruct... role-play; dialogue,	Observing teacher responding, answering, sharing, listening, picture-talk, speaking, draw and shade; copy and write	12/18 schools assessed social skill development traceable from pupils' reports

They learn by being part of the work process. If you want them to learn something, do it and attract them to love what you do. (T08RMF)

It was observed that three of the eighteen teachers, T14YRF, T15YRM, and T18YRF, used practical methods by taking children from the classroom to the garden, compound, or rubbish pits to learn when teaching vocabulary. Teacher T14YRF took the children to the garden to demonstrate watering tomatoes using a watering can. Even though T8UMF was teaching practical skills of rubbish disposal, she drew a rubbish pit and a dustbin on the chalkboard. She taught 'environmental care' using rote learning and drilling as if she were teaching language. Children spent five (5) minutes on routine drills: reciting the date, name, class, and school; choral reading took nine (9) minutes using the I Do-We-Do-You-do technique. Pupils were engaged in listening and responding, and there was no time for assessing children. The teaching was mostly theoretical, yet teachers intended to use hands-on methods in real situations. Teachers stated different competencies in their schemes and lesson plans: 'I can sweep," I can take care of plants," but the activity column had passive learning experiences stated... 'read and draw', 'copy and write'; 'responding', 'writing letter shapes' and 'draw and name." Although interactive learning methods such as play-way (not used), question and answer, and demonstration were rarely implemented.

CP Uses Formal and Informal Learning Moments to Develop Children's Social Skills

Social skills denote children's abilities to interact with others acceptably. They enable children to fit into their social settings in each interactive situation. A teacher (*T1UYM)* explained how he developed social skills:

I use open conversation with children and encourage free interaction by asking questions. ... I bring them closer. They learn to give, ask for help, greet, and take turns. I

sometimes take them for a walk, where they learn to keep order, give way, and show a friendly attitude. I sometimes 'call names' of those misbehaving. (T1UYM)

This study derived the best methods for developing social skills as routines, rules, and intentional teaching from the postulations of the teachers as below:

Situational dialoguing, for example, 'please say sorry'; class rules like 'talk softly'; intentional teaching ... 'When I give you something, remember to say, 'thank you.'' 'Good children listen.' (T1UYM)

Situational teaching, on-the-spot correction, storytelling, and spontaneous dialoguing were among the best methods to promote children's social skills. Teachers naturally reverted to the traditional ways of training, confessing that they apply similar methods on their biological children as narrated below as a teacher (T12UYF) narrates:

I teach social skills through explanation, role-plays, demonstration, class rules, group work, and situational dialogue. I model situations like those at home, for example, welcoming visitors, serving tea..., and timely guidance and correction, which help [children]by approving or disapproving their speech patterns. (T12UYF)

Some teachers occasionally used 'simulations' to develop social skills, connecting learning to similar home experiences. Teachers applied open interaction, rules, routines, and regulation of behavior. Two Teachers portrayed this as below:

I use direct instruction to train children on public skills or create life situations like 'meal-time,' at the hospital,' and at the well' [in order] to teach children the proper language to use. I also use storytelling, self-awareness games, and rules and controls (T14RMF).

Conclusively, Teachers used formal and informal ways of training children in social skills, including 'English-speaking.' The methods employed by teachers had great potential

to affect children's productive work and social life skills development positively or negatively, as presented in the successive paragraphs.

Influence of CP on Children's Life Skills Development

The findings validate that CP could contribute significantly to the productive and social development of six-year-old children's life skills. However, their effectiveness was minimal due to the inappropriate usage of specific tested and trusted methods.

CP inadequately Develops Children's Productive Work Skills

CP was used elusively in unsupportive climates. No deliberate lessons to develop children's productive work skills were seen in the 36 selected schools. Teaching was skewed to enhance examinable Learning Areas (LAs) through paper-pencil-tests. Those LAs intended to skill children in productive work like free activity, Crafts, and Creative Arts were rarely taught. Data from teachers' interviews and FGDs were consistent regarding the expected skills-performance of six-year-olds as reflected below:

Mediocre Performance of Six-year-olds on Essential Productive Life Skills

Thirty-six children were selected for five practical tasks to assess their work skills. The tasks were setting up a dinner table *(olujjuliro)*, digging, washing utensils, watering flowers, and sweeping. Field notes generally revealed good performance by most children: Of the thirty-six children participating in each task, twenty-nine could dig, while seven knew the hoe but had not used it before. Eleven children could set up a dinner table with tableware and seats corresponding with expected visitors within 3 minutes. Twelve[children] had mismatched tableware or seats with the expected visitors, while twenty-eight children could wash utensils. All children interviewed could sweep and mop the floor, though [they] did not fully observe quality-work procedures.

Whereas children exhibited some productive work skills, they acquired them informally, since 89% of the selected schools did not deliberately engage children in productive activities. This was inconsistent with parents' expectations for schools to prioritize skilling for economic independence.

Teachers' lacked confidence in pedagogical-content-knowledge

Teachers in schools that offered computerized lessons tended to use computer games exclusively, regardless of the content being taught. They believed that computers could 'do it all' and that the rest of the methods were less adequate without technology.

> *At our school, we use audio to teach sounds, spelling, and speech. We also use role-play. Situational games like 'fishing' seem out of date for modern children (T2YUF). Our school does not use nature walks. Pupils see the environment in videos. These are city children. At home, they stay indoors with no space to do garden projects. They do projects like collecting pictures of birds online. (T8YUF)*

This raises questions about teachers' perceptions of the role of technology and human skills, which need further probing. The study also revealed a likely disconnect between initial teacher preparation and their performance in using specific methods.

Inadequate CP Teacher preparation impedes essential life-skill development

Seventy-two percent of teachers attained certificates from different Teacher Training Institutions (TTIs), while 13.7% were O' Level leavers. However, both trained and untrained teachers lacked the competence to develop children's essential life skills. Twelve of the eighteen teachers interviewed said they did not know the difference between domain-related skills and life skills. During the focus group discussion, they admitted a lack of pedagogical competence to equip children with essential life skills related to the LAs entirely they taught:

> *We write life skills but hardly develop them due to time, resources, and space limitations. We are not sure how to develop them. We were not guided during training. The regular teachers helped us to include life skills in lesson plans during School Practice. I only teach the content because I don't know how to mix [integrate] life skills in a lesson. (T8YUF)*

The above confessions related to pre-service teacher education gaps. Accordingly, lesson observations revealed similar incidences. During post-observation feedback, a teacher (T10F) was asked why she had written problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-awareness in a vocabulary lesson and how these were related to the lesson content. She responded:

> *I write any 3 life skills as part of lesson planning, but I don't know how to match them with content...children repeat and read these new words. (T8YUF)*

The above submission confirms that teachers lack confidence in pedagogy and teach essential life skills by chance. The next theme explains how space and teaching processes disable CP efficacy.

Inadequate, Tightly Controlled Learning Spaces Restricted CP

Although classroom sizes defied the recommended standards and had an average number of 60 pupils per class, the classroom setting was conducive to developing social skills. Conversely, schemes and lesson plans depicted the prevalence of deskbound routine activities in Numeracy and Literacy, which were the most dominantly taught LAs in selected schools. Instructional resources and facilities

Table 2. Classroom Climate and Essential Life Skills Development

Category	Primary 1		Pre-primary	
School Type	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
School library	Had teachers' reference books in all 4 schools	Mainly had teachers' and pupils' course books	3 schools had pupils' Readers but rarely used them	Teacher-made libraries were seen in 2 schools
Classroom environment	Spacing, chalk board, furniture were not to standard in 4 schools, 2 schools had slates, visuals	3 had standard rooms, furniture, storage, small chalk board and some slates. Had few learning aids for use by pupils.	5 schools lacked ample space, but had standard chalk boards, storage; furniture; charts, 3Ds, realia	2 schools had standard rooms, but no storage, or furniture. schools had learning aids on display/in use.
Schemes	3-8/12 weeks, irregular in all schools	1-5/12weeks, irregular in all schools	3-7/12 weeks, irregular in all schools	3-7/12 weeks, irregular in all schools
Lesson Plans	3 teachers were regular; 4 had shallow lesson-plans, with routine choral, paper pencil tasks	5 teachers planned lessons regularly. Activities made learning passive, repetitive, dull, and less progressive.	4 teachers had one lesson-plan on paper; no trace of prep books, pupils' tasks: listening, responding…	3 teachers had 3 lesson-plans in 2 months. Others had one lesson-plan on paper; oral work was common.
Timetable Numeracy, Literacy, News, PE, RE, Story, English	All had 30 min. lessons, no free activity or quiet time, no hygiene parade; RE, PE, no Art, and Craft	5/9 schools had free-activity, RE, Luganda, story-time, P.E… 5 schools had Math., Literacy, CAPE,	Numeracy, English, Story, snap, snack, play, hygiene, literacy, RE, Reading,	Had hygiene parade, snack time, drawing, free-activity, snap, play, RE
Resources	Counters, 2Ds, 3Ds, realia, readers, paint 4 had dust bins	2D visuals, realia, slates, and Readers. 4 had improvised rubbish bins	Brooms 2D/3D visuals, Readers counters, cards 5 had dust bins	Counters, plants, 2D/3D visuals No ICT, 3 had improvised bins

strongly influenced the effective use of methods. Limited resources affected children's acquisition of essential productive life skills, as narrated below:

> *Our classrooms are so small. The directors are not teachers, so they don't understand when we ask for resources like play space, paints, and play dough. …; it is hard to get clay or fiber for crafts in urban areas. So, we dodge practical lessons or draw, shade, color, and sing during Crafts and/or free activities* (FGRT03)

The observation records depicted similar trends: the timetable in 12/36 schools excluded practical LAs like PE, Taking Care of My Environment, and Performing Arts. The 30-minute time limit did not allow pupils to prepare and use materials to make Crafts in six of thirty-six schools where some of these subjects were taught. There is a need to revisit time allocation to match it with the pupil's skilling needs per LAs. The timetables must also reflect UNESCO's desire for a balanced individual who is learning to be and who is learning to live harmoniously.

English as MoI and Language of Interaction Limits Learner Social Interaction

Whereas using English as a medium of instruction (MoI) deterred some pupils' engagement and understanding levels, some schools emphasized its speaking as reflected in the messages displayed in strategic spaces:

> *We encourage pupils to speak English because they already know their local language and have enough time to practice it at home. We are a private school, and parents want good results. When children do not pass, enrolment goes down* (SL1UYM).

The above teacher endorsed good English as a precursor to quality school-learning outcomes, disregarding the inappropriateness of theoretical assessment in the Learning Framework (LF) and Thematic Curriculum (TC). Teachers held several myths about using a language as MoI, language of interaction (LoI), language teaching, EYE learning theories, and assessment practices, requiring clarification by TTIs. Some teachers believed in the use of local languages first, as elucidated below:

> *Schools should build on children's local language. When we use it as MoI, children participate more and understand better. Children who do not know English remain silent. It is improper to learn a foreign language before mastering their own … 'we should teach from known to unknown'. Let's first convince parents about 'the weight[value] of balanced education … through mindset-change….'* (FGT02)

Several teachers emphasized that 'children learning in local languages first' is for a deep understanding of concepts and laying a solid foundation on indigenous wisdom. The elders supported the teachers' view to first teach in local languages to ground children in ecological content, as stressed below:

Table 3. Physical School Environment and Development of Essential Life Skills

	Primary 1		Pre-primary	
School	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Sick Bay	Not in place Sick children sent home	Not in place Sick children sent home	Not in place 2 schools send children to a nearby clinic	Not in place. Parents are called to pick children or they rest on mats
Flower gardens	1 school had well-cared for gardens, 1 had bushy ones, 3had none	2 schools had gardens not well-unattended to, had no flower gardens	Available, bushy unattractive in 7 schools, 2 had nice ones	Available in bad shape for 3 of the schools, 1 had attractive gardens
School garden	Available but inactive in 3-4 schools	Available but not active at all in all schools	3 schools had space for it but not utilised	Space available but not in use for learning
Animal shelter	2 schools had rabbit shelters. Boys fed them and cleaned shelters	3 had: 1goat, 2 pigs for teachers, children fed them in turns; cleaned shelters	2 had rabbits, poultry shelters were in 2 other schools	1 school had a birds' shelter belonging to a teacher
Dining hall	3 schools had multi-purpose halls, not used for meals but for classes	1 school had multi-purpose halls used as classrooms	2schools had a shelter for snack time; teachers monitor children	None had a shelter for meals; children eat from class
Security measures	4schools had fences, gates. 3 had gatekeepers, lawn was well-managed	5 schools had no fence, no gates: no gate keepers. No fire extinguisher	3 schools had gates, fences, gate keepers.	Hedges/fence in 1 school, 3 had none; no safety security measures
School compound	Acreage=½ to 4. Schools mostly lacked play space. Had shrubs, flowers but no trees, no rubbish pit	Had sufficient acreage: ranging from 7 to100 plus. Had some trees, grass and flowers but compounds were bushy	4 schools had 1 acre with little play space; had some flowers and grass, but no trees	2 schools had 2-3 acres with some trees but no flowers. Had very bushy compounds

> *First, be yourself, then connect with others. Schools can build on [local] languages spoken in families and communities. They discover surroundings essential for growing up and building solid learning foundations. It is okay to teach English as a subject from kindergarten, then use it as an MoI from P.4.* (FG1EL)

Language is central to children's social skills and living harmoniously with others. Society is woven together through respectful interaction within a well-resourced, supportive environment. So, teachers should support children's systematic progression in language acquisition for more confident use in social settings.

The urban school setup did not adequately provide for the development of children's essential productive life skills. Thirteen of 36 study schools operated in a space less than an acre. Rural schools had sufficient but dormant land. Urban schools had no proper dining facilities. Regrettably, even schools with dining halls had repurposed them into classrooms. The absence of proper dining etiquette is probably responsible for declining social skills like turn-taking and values of fairness, justice, and concern for others.

Discussion

Using appropriate methods for life-skilling is critical because growing children are constantly baffled by and at odds with their inner selves, the environment, and other people with whom they constantly interact (Winnicott, 2021). Prajapati et al. (2016–2017) affirm that new challenges require immediate and effective responses from a socially responsive education system. Thus, education that supports children in making choices and living better (FHI, 2007; 2011; 2018) is more important than education that focuses on facts. So, developing children's essential life skills prepares them for an unpredictable life. This paper focused on present-day methods for life-skilling children in productive and social aspects.

The little positive efforts by teachers indicated that the best methods for children's productive and social life skilling often combine learning with real life through hands-on, mind-on, and heart-touching integrated experiences. Such methods were used by a handful of teachers in three schools. These were role-play, spontaneous dialoguing, task-based learning, shared work, situational modelling, projects, and storytelling. The methods created situations for learning in action, where children navigated concrete action steps, challenging them to learn and work together. Teaching patterns should involve adequate preparation, creativity, practice, immediate assessment, and feedback on processes and products anchored on the 'mamacholasu' principles of material manipulation, choice, language use, and support to spice learning novelty. Learning experiences that automate children's essential life-skill development promote doing and questioning, the drivers

for looking into a child's brain. This implies that teachers must take lesson preparation and method selection seriously, using a frame of reference on what makes a method more suitable for specific content. The content-method-compatibility framework assesses the nature of knowledge to teach, whether factual, practical, hypothetical, empirical, multidisciplinary, revealed, intuitive, experiential, or experimental, against the selected method's guiding philosophy, principles, and procedures. Examine the purpose and context of learning; ascertain time, class size, relevant resources, and space; then match tasks to targeted competencies. It is also helpful to probe teachers' personal beliefs and principles, which often influence pedagogical preferences or orientations unknowingly. Consider technology as a companion in learning and not as a sole solution to learning challenges. Concrete experiences provide the best conditions for exploring reality, while a video is secondary.

To integrate IP/CP, interrogate the relevance and compatibility of content, activities, pillars, resources, procedures, teacher competence, methods, assessment, learning spaces, beliefs, principles, and perceptions/mindsets of both current and conventional practice.

Teachers lauded methods for developing productive skills at home since schools did not deliberately focus on productive work skills. Work skills were integrated into teaching vocabulary words like 'burning rubbish'. Such lessons did not have tangible outputs expected of skilling for productivity. Practical skills are better trained through 'engaging tasks' in a more deliberate learning process than observing and demonstrating vocabulary actions. Inconsistency in the 'should be used methods teachers mentioned during interviews, and those adopted in practice needs further interrogation.

Although CP has a high potential to support children's life-skills development, it was limited by irregularities and inappropriate application of methods to serve their purpose. EYE teachers' use of CP encouraged 'domain-specific-skilling' like listening and speaking in Literacy. Still, the disconnect of pedagogy from children's learning, language, and realities restricted essential life-skill acquisition (Son & Morrison, 2010). Nelson Mandela's archetypal statement affirms the danger of using a foreign language, which limits learning to the head; using local languages would enable children to appreciate the knowledge through the heart' (Shaules, 2019).

Accordingly, effective pedagogy requires teachers to track previous performance and handle transition issues. Thus, the drastic shift from local language to English, oral to written work, productive work to seatwork, detaches children's home experiences from schoolwork. Disregarding the required learn-link from home to school reduces method effectiveness.

CP lacks thoroughness in lesson-delivery processes, which are critical in skill training. Several lessons were delivered superficially. For example, a teacher mimed 'digging' within the classroom. In her view, she was modeling a productive work skill. A suitable method used out of context is rendered ineffective. The scenario indicates theoretical teacher education practices, where teachers emulate

their Tutors. It also explains the under-utilization of resources like ICT labs, libraries, and land owing to concentration on teaching facts while ignoring skills, values, and attitudes, which propel individuals to apply knowledge.

Both Government-aided schools with underutilized spaces and private schools without hands-on training spaces did not excel in productive life skills. This clearly indicated that resource inadequacies were not the core issue. Recent research briefs cite teacher quality and scarcity dimensions and pedagogical inadequacies. The main driver of low teacher quality is insufficient teacher preparation (García & Weiss, 2019; Unicef, 2021).

Resolving the puzzle of the prevailing pedagogical malpractices is hampered by the ping-pong game played by stakeholders. Teachers blame the proprietors for exceedingly bending to commercial interests. Teachers attribute their pedagogical decisions to parents' demands for their children's excellent performance in English. Instead of equipping children with the skills they need to perform tasks, CP compels them to excel in spoken English. Thus, the curriculum is selectively implemented to save time for continuous testing. Parents, in return, blame the school for failing to equip their children with essential productive skills.

Large-scale research is required to develop a policy position on EYE regarding the most practical and beneficial root to take, guided by the principles of starting from the known to the unknown, active learning, developmentally appropriate practices (DAPs), firm-but-friendly, and learn-to-earn to salvage education for economic growth.

Additionally, schools had no clear goals for deliberate skilling. Children were taught towards an indeterminate destiny, where they may remain handcuffed. This was seen in the way teachers gave routine tasks of reading and drawing, drawing and shade, and copy and writing for practical lessons on rubbish disposal. Most elementary schools perpetuated the unyielding practice of confining pupils in seatwork, which limits their acquisition of essential life skills (Noor, 2021), and to ultimately become laborers upon graduation from the school of 'remembering' (Zambian Education Information Centre [ZEIC], 2020).

Based on the principle of teaching from known to unknown, Teachers could integrate elements of IP and CP, supported by the environment, to skill all learners. CP has a lot to adapt from IP because the latter is based on concrete experiences and has, for many years, proven to teach learners how to perform tasks. They can leverage the existing opportunity where parents and local experts desire to teach the younger generation Indigenous skills to contribute to the progress of their communities (Rhea, 2014). Hence, indigenous elders and schoolteachers collaborate to learn from each other.

According to Mukuka (2010), the differences between Western and indigenous knowledge (IK) systems cause them to clash. Similarly, Nomlomo & Sosibo (2016) agrees that there is a severe discrepancy between how learners acquire IK in their cultural settings and how content is presented in classrooms. Singh and Reyhner (2013) advise on the need to reverse assimilationist education, which re-

garded IK/IP as inferior and unable to add value to learning. Instead, IP should be complementary to CP. Teachers need to integrate IK content to enhance life skills. Ntuli (1999) laments that the current curriculum excludes learners' IK, which hurts their learning. The above argument is reiterated by Singh and Reyhner (2013), who state that curricula that exclude cultures disadvantage Indigenous learners, leading to poor school performance and failure in life.

What children can do is determined by the methods teachers use daily (Prajapati et al., 2016–2017). Therefore, methods used for children's essential life-skills acquisition must be deliberate. Intentionality emerges from the invisible drive of the teachers' beliefs and pedagogical competence. The teachers' intentions enable them to teach the way they do. Their principles distinguish their delivery as unique. Teachers must examine their conventional philosophies to discover the reasons behind their choices. Kucera (2019) cautions that life philosophies, values, and missions must align with the natural laws to guard against struggling in vain; we cannot achieve our life goals by rejecting these laws driven by human prejudices, and fighting them is futile.

Children spend the most time in school during the decisive formative years (Awopegba et al., 2013). So, when schools emphasize English, they may indicate their limitations on the purpose of local languages in passing on their heritage. Solving differences in stakeholder perceptions may clarify issues on the significance of contextual realities since knowledge detached from children's realities handicaps them (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2020). Bridging the skills gap requires a symbiotic partnership between school and home.

The climate where CP is used comprises teaching, mainly skewed to a few subjects, emphasizing factual content to prepare children to pass exams. The timetable allocates 30 minutes for practical and theoretical lessons. Inadequate time deters teachers from giving hands-on activities. The 30-minute periods are chiefly premised on the 'children's short attention span'. Modeling to teacher-trainees how to teach practical lessons in 30 minutes would help, or change EYE timetables to contain fewer prolonged lessons, with a series of sub30-minute sub-tasks developing concepts, skills, values, and attitudes. According to Awopegba et al. (2013), best EYE programming adopts a multi-sectoral approach and respects the best interest of the indigenous African child.

Teachers must interrogate the status quo to ensure that lessons produce tangible output in terms of usable products. Findings agree with ZEIC's (2020) video clip, arguing that teaching without training fails to skill children for a purposeful life. Today's schools can defend their existence only if the parents do not have to wait 19 years to see their children contribute to society. Senonsi (2014) acknowledges that parents, as primary educators of their children, should consider themselves partners with the school as the family's formalized extension.

CP features developmentally inappropriate practice (DIP) of starting with a foreign language, such as MoI and LoI, to socialize the child into a local context. Language, an essential socialization tool, determines the civilization that is being advanced. It is unlikely to promote one's civilization in a foreign language. Museveni, Uganda's President, affirms that African languages are too rich to replace with English adequately. Hence, schools limit learners' depth of understanding of the local context by using English as MoI/LoI before they fully master it. Despite several studies proving that children handle more complex concepts if taught in the vernacular first (World Bank, 2019), Uganda's schools still promote English as a compulsory subject and MoI, while life skills are optional.

Unfortunately, stakeholders' inconsistent views on using local languages and competence-based assessment complicated EYE provision. This portrays that Western education convinced us to lose our identity for examinations. Cultural poverty suffocates development in all respects due to low confidence in indigenous potential. So, the real enemy of Africa's progress is the lack of solid funding in EYE due to natives' perverted mindset and indecisiveness to take a firm stand to craft local solutions. Methods to advance Africa lie in self-realization and home-made strategies, one of which is 'glocalising' ECD.

Effective teachers naturally codeswitched to put across unique concepts like *ekyogero* better. Based on their inescapable reverting to the Indigenous methods of conversational and situational language teaching, teachers recommended a need for hybrid Indigenous methods that still work in contemporary life skilling. Skills are best developed in informal ways within situations that make interaction sensible. Informal skilling methods take precedence over restrictive formal methods because they relax the climate to empower children through free-choice skilling and language development opportunities.

Schools must build on home knowledge, grounding pupils in ecological foundations upon which to construct connections when creating mental images at later levels of education. School-home partnerships bring about complementary efforts in space and natural resources provision as social capital. Above all, EYE programs must give every child a sense of pride and identity to minimize feelings of inferiority (Awopegba et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In the quest for the tangible outcomes of CP, teachers only gave scored scripts, reports, and certificates! CP is, thus, greatly challenged by evidence-deprived learning, ill-equipped teachers, inappropriate learning spaces, and inadequate time to support learning due to book-laden schooling. Detaching learning from children's real lives makes it superficial, worthless, and momentary. The remedy is to use methods and activities that link schools to homes, the archetype of practice. Teachers must situate children's learning by engaging parents in extended, practical skilling assignments. The house, the epitome of knowledge application, must create spaces for children's skill practice. The pending question for EYE is: 'What can the pupil do at any one time?' EYE must consistently meet the minimum standards of enabling facilities; competent and innovative teachers with positive attitudes are a prerequi-

site for pupils' active engagement to harness their future, knitted to their context, and well-routed to their past. Any pedagogy that sustains children's vulnerability and dependence must be condemned. The study concludes that CP minimally supported children's development of essential social and productive life skills due to low teacher competence in selecting and applying suitable methods in real-life situations. A good process cannot effectively develop social and productive life skills unless the teacher applies it appropriately and is well-anchored into the philosophy and principles that define it. Teachers were found to lack the confidence to use stories to nurture social skills, and few had acquired basic skills of using technology to support learning but not to develop life skills.

Teachers must remain cognizant of the irreplaceable elements of children's relevant contextual humanitarian learning abilities. Children need concrete experiences to develop life skills in cooking local cuisines, sustaining ecosystems, making crafts, self-management, interpersonal abilities, and managing machinery. Accordingly, paying heed to the guidance of Pope France, Artificial Intelligence (AI) only suffices if serving the best human potential and highest aspirations of learners (December 14, 2023). Solely relying on technology may ultimately prove counterproductive. Teacher pedagogical competence should be prioritized to increase children's life-skill performance in immediate tasks, and technology-enabled teaching needs to support children's developmental needs and innate abilities. Human potential to harness the environment using technology remains at the top of becoming slaves to technological advancements.

Recommendations

The Drop, Restore, Adapt, Blend, and Explore (DRABE) framework for harmonizing contemporary and indigenous methods must be piloted and fully developed as a national framework applicable to teacher education. This calls for a collective effort of all players to engage in a deliberate programming reform to redirect EYE. Applying the framework at the classroom level requires multi-stakeholder collaboration. This demands a policy shift in the delivery of ECE, evolving into a shared responsibility of the local school and its community. This policy should control school choices and learner mobility within a prescribed radius from a child's home. This would reduce the distances children travel and commit parents and local communities to develop quality customized ECD programs and learning centers to bear skilling facilities resonating with the local natural resources.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) should enforce policies on mandatory Continuous Professional Development (CPDs) for teachers to eliminate mediocrity in EYE and accord every child a firm foundation. Teachers are universally the single most important factor in human capital development. So, the MoES ought to set and enforce standards for EYE providers to offer empowering education through communities of practice.

TTIs should author books on pedagogy that best develop children's essential life skills; interrogate trainees' beliefs and principles, which indirectly affect pedagogical choices; write CPDs on pedagogy for life skills development to strengthen teachers' competencies to be validated through research on competency-based life skills assessment.

The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) ought to rethink EYE programming, lesson duration, and packaging to ensure adequate quality learning time for balanced outcomes. NCDC must provide a pedagogical framework for children's essential life skills development and craft home-grown ICT-enabled learning resources.

> EYE school proprietors should regularly sponsor teachers' CPDs to develop pedagogy that enables children to develop life skills to navigate their challenges. Teachers need mentorship in designing and applying children's pro-life skills tasks and differentiating domain-specific and multi-disciplinary skills, which are essential tools for children to negotiate life's turbulences.

EYE Teachers should undertake CPDs on essential life skills and concretize supportive pedagogy that builds from home-community experiences to a natural transition into school. They should also use the local language to enable family and village participation in EYE.

Teachers at the foundational level need conscious ICT-enabled teaching skills meant to empower both the teacher and taught not to disable their human potential to think creatively to gain efficacy and agency in developing their world.

Religious and local leaders must reinstate the broken link between schools, families, and communities by initiating school partnerships to connect formally with informal, Faith-Based Organisations and family EYE activities targeting stronger foundations for children during the formative years.

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