

# Kofi Marfo

## The 'New Early Years' movement as potential catalyst for rethinking education and schooling in majority world contexts

Critiques of the irrelevance and alienating effects of education systems grounded in a history of colonization continue to surface in discourses on schooling in the Majority World—a world in which formal education continues to be viewed as (to borrow language from Robert Serpell's classic volume *The Significance of Schooling: Life Journeys in an African Society*) producing failure, squeezing out large numbers of pupils right from the early grades, and extracting the "best" away from their native communities. The relevance challenge emanates as much from failure on the part of the colonial establishments which presented their colonies with decontextualized systems of education as it does from failure on the part of post-independent Majority World societies to appropriately "domesticate" the institution of schooling for their own purposes (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011).

The solution to the problem of alienating schooling in the Majority World is not going to come from a repackaging of traditional content and its accompanying adult-driven, didactic pedagogy into forms disguised as innovative curricula to be mass-delivered through sophisticated technology. It is going to come from models of schooling with balanced attention to knowledge and values, the local and the global, and the agentic development of the learner. Within such models, schooling and learning would be solidly grounded in scientific understandings (drawn from multiple disciplines) on how children learn and develop, how contexts and the agents of socialization support the learning process, and how emerging technologies can be appropriately put to use to support meaningful learning and problem-solving in the real world.

Since the mid-1990s, global advocacy for low- and middle-income nations of the Majority World to invest in the futures of children through early developmental and educational interventions has grown exponentially. These interventions are increasingly promoted in economic terms as tools for poverty reduction and human capital development. However, not much attention has been paid to contextualized design and delivery considerations that would ensure local relevance and meaningful attainment of the anticipated outcomes.

The central thesis of this presentation is that the "New Early Years" movement could very well present a second-chance opportunity for low- and middle-income nations of the Majority World to do what they have failed miserably to do with schooling: develop systems of programme content and delivery that are developmentally appropriate, culturally meaningful, relevant in local contexts and yet generative of competencies and dispositions necessary for functional and productive navigation across local and global contexts.

Done well, the conceptualization and design of Early Childhood Development and Education programmes could become an experimental cultural project with the potential to drive the necessary rethinking and re-engineering of schooling itself to also reflect:

- greater contextual relevance,
- enhanced continuity between early learning in home/community settings and formal learning in the context of school,
- recognition of the child as an active, self-learning agent in constant constructive engagement with the physical and social world, and
- better alignment of pedagogy with “learner-as-active-agent” conceptions of instructional design and delivery.