

Title: **Different is not deficient: Respecting diversity in early childhood development
– A response to Seiden et al. and Black and Richter**



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Document type: Preprint

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Citation:

"Seth Oppong, Gabriel Scheidecker, Nandita Chaudhary, Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, Heidi Keller, 2022, Refubium ; <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-36971>"

Different is not deficient: Respecting diversity in early childhood development – A response to Seiden et al. and Black and Richter

This contribution is a continuation of a debate in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* about the scientific and ethical challenges associated with globalizing early childhood interventions. It consists of an original article¹, a critical response², and two replies.^{3,4}

We would like to express our appreciation to the authors of the original article¹ as well as to the two leading architects of the *Nurturing Care Framework* (NCF), Black and Richter, for replying to our criticism.² Fortunately, the authors voice consent with our key message that differences should not be taken as deficiencies and that more needs to be done to overcome this problem in the field of *Early Childhood Development* (ECD).

As a way forward, we suggested to openly face the pervasive effects of the well-documented Western bias in ECD research and to fully consider diversity in caregiving practices. While Seiden and colleagues³ signal some willingness to go this way, Black and Richter⁴ chose to minimize what our key point implies. They defend their positions by referring to “overwhelming” evidence, ignoring that this evidence is affected by the very problem we pointed out. They even insist that “differences in measurements of childhood development signify that children need additional care and support to progress” and that “differences are opportunities to improve children’s nurturing care.”⁴ If they

establish the need for interventions on mere differences, they persist with viewing differences as deficits.

Furthermore, we question the intergenerational poverty-spiral assumed by Black and Richter. This line of reasoning ignores socio-structural inequalities and denies the ability of parents falling under a certain, externally defined income threshold to raise socio-emotionally and cognitively healthy children and thus categorizes whole populations as deficient.

We also disagree with Black and Richter when they say the population estimates of poverty and stunting provide crude evidence of the number of children not reaching their developmental potential. From whose perspective is the developmental potential defined here? It is well documented that developmental trajectories differ across cultures with respect to timing, stability of emerging outcomes, dynamics and developmental gestalts⁵. To universalize the WEIRD understanding of childhood creates the conditions for epistemological violence⁶ and stereotyping. We understand that population estimates are needed for advocacy and

tracking of policy implementation. However, why should we use decontextualized statistical estimations instead of the varied understandings of the phenomenon in each context? If we claim that it will be too laborious or impossible, should we really continue to use measures that potentially harm self-perceptions of others?⁷

We generally agree that the domains of the NCF are important, but we problematize that they rest on WEIRD standards and on the hidden assumption that all cultures socialize their children in the same way. Indicators such as counting toys and books in homes do not capture children’s diverse learning environments. They do not grasp the importance of learning outside the home in multi-age playgroups with a wide variety of available materials. We need a consensus that human development is a bi-cultural process before the ambitious aims of ECD interventions can be successfully addressed.

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