

**Title:** **Different is not deficient: Respecting diversity in early childhood development**



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## Different is not deficient: Respecting diversity in early childhood development

An estimated 250 million or 43% children under 5 years in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are regarded at risk of not achieving their full developmental potential because of inadequate care.<sup>1</sup> This assessment was crucial for establishing the *Nurturing Care Framework*, a roadmap for improving early childhood development (ECD) around the globe. While the number is still based on proxy measures (stunting and poverty rates), newer research draws directly on indicators of nurturing care, provided by UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. Based on these data McCoy and colleagues recently claimed that the problem is even bigger: They calculate that 74.6% of children in LMICs aged 3-4 do not even receive 'minimally adequate nurturing care.' This figure increases to 92.1% for sub-Saharan Africa and to 99.5% for a country like Chad.<sup>2</sup>

Before scrutinizing these data, we need to consider the implications. According to the 'intergenerational transmission of poverty',<sup>1</sup> a basic rationale for the *Nurturing Care Framework*, young children deprived of adequate care are predisposed to cognitive and socio-emotional deficits, including inadequate caregiving skills, which they will transmit to

future generations. Applied retrospectively, this model suggests that caregivers of deprived toddlers suffer from shortcomings because of their own upbringing. In short, the findings of McCoy and colleagues<sup>2</sup> imply that most people in LMICs, and basically all Chadians, are cognitively and socio-emotionally deficient. While such evidence might make an effective appeal to well-intended affluent people to invest in ECD, it also serves to promote negative stereotypes about LMIC contexts and populations and resembles white saviourism.

To be clear, potential political side-effects should not prevent us from searching for and acting upon objective facts. However, such consequences should be reason enough to exercise utmost scientific scrutiny when establishing facts by due consideration to underlying biases. A well-documented bias in developmental sciences is WEIRD sampling.<sup>3</sup> Most research has been conducted with a very small and specific group – Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) people. This sampling bias is particularly misleading when the findings are held to be valid universally and applied globally.

Fortunately, some ECD researchers have begun to

confront this issue, among others the lead author of the assessment paper.<sup>2</sup> In another article, they point to the need to account for diversity when designing ECD interventions.<sup>4</sup> While we appreciate these initiatives—which partly correspond to our earlier critiques<sup>5,6</sup>—we wonder why the insights about sampling biases are not applied to basic research that establishes parameters for global ECD. If WEIRD standards and test procedures are applied to assess children in LMICs, they inevitably fall short, simply as a function of being non-WEIRD. We illustrate this point for the domain of early learning.

McCoy and colleagues assess early learning based on two indicators: "Child attends an organised learning or early educational programme"; "Child's household has at least one book and at least one toy" (p. 327).<sup>2</sup> However, as documented for many LMIC contexts, toddlers without a book or a toy at home may have free access to a much larger learning environment full of people and things to interact and play with.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, children who do not attend a formal learning programme, may be more involved in informal, but equally conducive learning routines.<sup>9</sup> To equate the absence of two specific conditions with inadequate early learning means that

different ways of learning can only emerge as deficient. Early learning can also be assessed through cognitive outcomes.

However, conventional intelligence tests build on definitions, symbols, and procedures that are derived from the WEIRD world. LMIC communities may not only provide different learning contexts for children, as indicated earlier, but also favour other conceptualizations of intelligence, as McCoy and colleagues emphasize elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Through standardized testing, such differences become deficits.<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, current large-scale ECD assessments tend to conflate difference with deficiency because they do not sufficiently consider underlying WEIRD biases. This is not to say that all forms of care are adequate, but rather to assert that early childhood care that is different is *not necessarily* deficient. As long as diversity is not adequately considered, more ECD assessment research will rather contribute to epistemological violence than to better evidence. To avoid forejudging the majority world as defective and to provide relevant and effective support for families, we must fully confront ethnocentric biases and work towards an ECD evidence base that respects diversity.

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