

Localizing Play-Based Pedagogy: Nigerian Educators' Appropriation of Sesame Classroom Materials

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Abstract

This article examines how international organizations promote play-based pedagogical approaches in early childhood settings around the world, and how local educators respond. As a case study, I investigated Sesame Workshop's efforts to introduce play-based approaches in Nigerian classrooms. In addition to producing a Nigerian version of *Sesame Street* (called *Sesame Square*), Sesame Workshop trains educators in play-based approaches and has distributed alphabet flashcards, puppet kits, and storytelling games to more than 2,700 early childhood classrooms across Nigeria. These materials were intended to support *Sesame Square's* messages, and to foster interactive, child-centered learning experiences. However, teachers often used the materials in ways that reflected more rote-based, teacher-centered approaches.

Data was gathered through observations and interviews in 27 educational sites across Nigeria that use Sesame materials. Findings reveal that teachers' resistance to play-based approaches was sometimes for structural reasons (e.g., large class sizes), and sometimes related to their knowledge and training (e.g., they were accustomed to drilling the alphabet). I argue that ideals about constructivist, play-based learning are being disseminated by international organizations—alongside contrasting formalistic pedagogical approaches—and that all approaches will shift as they are *localized*. I question if approaches that are considered universally *developmentally appropriate* are relevant in all settings, and explore how early childhood educators adapt global pedagogical trends to make sense in their classrooms. I call for international organizations to explore *context-appropriate play-based approaches* that develop educators' capacities to help all children thrive, while also incorporating local cultural beliefs about childhood and teaching.

Keywords

Play-based approaches, pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, globalization, Nigeria, Sesame Workshop

Introduction

In recent years, international development organizations have increased their focus on developing and expanding early childhood educational opportunities around the world. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal

4.2 (adopted September 2015) states, "By 2030,

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ensure that all boys and girls have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” (Sustainable Development Goal 4, 2017). As formalized early childhood education has expanded around the world, debates continue (and take new forms) about the best ways to educate young children. While many experts emphasize the importance of play-based and interactive learning, more *academic* and teacher-directed approaches are also widespread (Davey & Lundy, 2011; Fuller, 2007). Some raise concerns that increasingly rigorous accountability measures are leading to inappropriate academic pressure and testing even at very young ages, and that these practices do not reflect what we know about developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies (Bodrova, 2008; Fuller, 2007).

International organizations play a role in diffusing various early childhood education approaches. Scholars critique a *global education reform movement* (GERM) for exporting market-based accountability measures to education systems around the world (Sahlberg, 2014). Such reforms are often associated with increased assessment and more rigid, teacher-led pedagogical approaches. However, international organizations are also disseminating play-based approaches for early childhood education.

This article examines one such organization, Sesame Workshop, which creates television programs, trains educators, and distributes interactive educational materials around the world (Cole, 2016). Sesame Workshop collaborates with local production companies to create more than 30 international versions of *Sesame Street*, which are viewed by more than 156 million children in 150 countries around the world (Cooney, 2016; Sesame Workshop, 2017). Sesame Workshop also distributes educational materials to schools, community centers, and orphanages (described further below). In Nigeria, these materials were

intended to support the messages on Nigeria’s version of *Sesame Street* (called *Sesame Square*), such as literacy and numeracy skills, healthy habits, and respect for diversity.

In this article, I examine how Sesame Workshop promotes play-based learning in Nigeria, and how educators respond. My research questions are:

1. How does Sesame Workshop promote play-based approaches to early childhood educators in Nigeria?
2. How do Nigerian educators use Sesame’s play-based educational materials in their classrooms?

To answer these questions, I conducted ethnographic observations in two caregiver¹ training sessions and 27 educational sites in five states across Nigeria. I also repeatedly interviewed Sesame teacher trainers and conversed with teachers. Findings reveal that many educators struggled to implement play-based learning approaches and sometimes used the Sesame materials in teacher-directed ways that promoted rote memorization. These findings echo those of other scholars who have observed educators’ discomfort in African countries with constructivist, learner-centered pedagogical approaches (Mtika & Gates, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2004; Vavrus, Bartlett, & Salema, 2013). Studies have documented several possible reasons for why teachers resist constructivist approaches, such as structural reasons (large class sizes, inadequate classroom space, and rigid school schedules) and knowledge and attitudinal reasons (including inadequate training, previous experiences, and cultural beliefs about authority and knowledge acquisition) (Schweisfurth, 2011; Vavrus et al., 2013).

My findings align with these scholars’ findings; I document how structural, knowledge, and attitudinal factors contribute to teachers’ discomfort with play-based methods. However, this study is different in that it highlights

specifically how educators repurpose materials that are designed to be constructivist, and use them in more didactic ways. Moreover, this study is unique because it examines these dynamics in early childhood settings, rather than in primary or secondary school settings. Many early childhood experts suggest that constructivist, exploratory, play-based pedagogical approaches are particularly important in early childhood settings (Bodrova, 2008; Lobman & Ryan, 2007). The fact that rote-based, teacher-centered approaches persist in early childhood classrooms in Nigeria may have a negative impact on young children's development.

On the other hand, this study questions whether play-based pedagogical approaches are logistically and culturally appropriate in all contexts. Early childhood experts who speak about pedagogical approaches that are *developmentally appropriate* suggest that all children go through similar biological stages that require certain pedagogies. However, ideas about child-rearing are culturally bound (Lancy, 2015). While it may be impossible to determine what pedagogical approaches are culturally *indigenous* to Nigeria, educators may need to draw from different approaches to find one that best suits their sociocultural context. I borrow from Vavrus's (2009) concept of *contingent constructivism* to investigate how Nigerian teachers adapt Western conceptualizations of play-based learning to be more appropriate in Nigerian settings.

The Global Diffusion of Constructivist and Formalistic Pedagogical Approaches

In recent decades, debates about pedagogical approaches are increasingly circulating in international development discourses. As enrollment levels in formal schooling have expanded dramatically around the world, concerns about the quality of learning have become central (Barrett, Sayed, Schweisfurth, &

Tikly, 2015). A key component of these discussions are concerns about teaching quality, and whether teachers engage in "teacher-centered approaches" or "learner-centered pedagogy" (Schweisfurth, 2015; Vavrus, Thomas, & Bartlett, 2011). These two pedagogical approaches are linked respectively to formalistic and constructivist educational philosophies (Fuller, 2007; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012). Teacher-centered approaches are often associated with formalistic pedagogical theories that emphasize rote learning, rationalized and standardized knowledge, and teachers lecturing from the front of the room (I borrow the term "formalistic" from Vavrus, 2009). In contrast, learner-centered pedagogies are understood as constructivist classroom practices wherein students interact with the teacher in more egalitarian ways, may work in cooperative groups with other students, and construct knowledge through interaction, questioning, and experimentation (Mtika & Gates, 2010; Vavrus et al., 2011).

Scholars emphasize that these two pedagogical approaches are better understood as a continuum than as absolutes (Schweisfurth, 2015) and that many teachers employ "hybrid practices" and "mixed pedagogies" (Mtika & Gates, 2010). That is to say, there are approaches that are more and less learner-centered, and teachers may utilize different approaches in different contexts and for different purposes (Barrett, 2007). The pedagogies that teachers use are intimately tied to cultural contexts, beliefs about authority, and conceptions of knowledge production (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012).

Many international development organizations promote constructivist, learner-centered pedagogies (Mtika & Gates, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2015). Reports from organizations such as The World Bank and UNESCO highlight the need for teachers to adopt more constructivist approaches (Vavrus et al., 2011). Following global trends, many national

governments are also instituting educational reforms—including teacher education reforms—that promote constructivist pedagogies (Vavrus et al., 2013). At the early childhood education level, related recommendations often advocate play-based learning as a foundation for approaches that prioritize children exploring, interacting, and questioning authority (Davey & Lundy, 2011; Subramanian, 2015).

Some scholars laud the global diffusion of constructivist approaches. In addition to fostering students' academic learning, they explore how such approaches develop students' critical thinking skills and their ability to question authority—and that these are important skills for promoting human rights and peaceful attitudes (Bajaj, 2011; Schweisfurth, 2015; Subramanian, 2015). Others raise concerns about the global promotion of learner-centered approaches. Tabulawa (2003) asserts that while learner-centered pedagogy is often justified in educational and cognitive terms, it should be understood as affiliated with certain economic and political ideals. He connects learner-centered approaches to Westernization, neoliberalism, democratization, and capitalism. Other scholars, who may be less cynical about aid agencies' reasons for promoting constructivist pedagogies, still question whether these approaches make sense in all settings (Hardman, Abd-Kadir, & Smith, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2004; Vavrus, 2009).

Despite global efforts to promote more constructivist approaches, formalistic approaches persist in many countries. Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, researchers have found many classroom interactions to be based on a “We teach, students listen” (Stambach, 1994) model wherein teachers lecture and students are expected to memorize (Hardman et al., 2008; Moloji, Morobe, & Urwick, 2008; Mtika & Gates, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2004). Scholars explore many possible reasons for why formalistic approaches persist, including teachers' training and experiences, cultural

authority structures and epistemological beliefs, and infrastructural reasons (such as large class sizes and limited materials) (Schweisfurth, 2011; Vavrus et al., 2013).

Scholars also document how teachers may be hesitant to use constructivist approaches when students are still assessed in standardized ways (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2015). These concerns are connected to fears that a *global education reform movement* (GERM) is leading to greater standardization, increased assessments, and more stringent accountability measures (Sahlberg, 2014). Accountability-based reform measures in the U.S. have led to more assessment and standardization—even at the preschool level—leading many early childhood educators and policymakers to focus more on academic versus play-based, interactive pedagogies (Bodrova, 2008; Fuller, 2007). GERM may be leading to more teacher-centered, standardized early childhood approaches around the world.

Throughout debates about constructivist versus formalistic pedagogical approaches—and who is promoting, appropriating, and resisting these approaches around the world—we have limited knowledge of how these dynamics play out in early childhood settings (for an exception, see Subramanian, 2015). Debates between constructivist versus formalistic approaches run parallel to longstanding discussions about the best ways to educate young children. Fuller (2007) outlines the history and tenets of three approaches to early childhood education. First, the “liberal humanist” approach (drawing on philosophies from Froebel to Rousseau and Piaget) emphasizes constructivist notions, wherein learning occurs when children's natural curiosities are fostered and children engage in discovery and play to develop knowledge. Second, Fuller defines a “skilling” approach as the belief that “the upbringing of children should focus on imparting certain cognitive *skills* and plugging three- and four-year-olds into the classroom's social routines, getting them ready

for school” (2007, p. 6). The third approach is a “cross-cultural” conception of childrearing, which denies that there is—or should be—one universal way of raising children, and highlights the importance of building on children’s cultural frameworks (2007, p. 7). The “liberal-humanist” and “skilling” approaches, in particular, align with constructivist and formalistic pedagogical approaches, respectively. Notably, both “liberal-humanist” and “skilling” approaches adopt *developmentalist* perspectives—believing that children progress through certain stages. “Cross-cultural” approaches (related to *reconceptualist* early childhood theories) critique the concept of “developmentally appropriate,” emphasizing that constructions of “normal” development are culturally bound (Cannella, Swadener, & Che, 2007).

Vavrus’s (2009) study provides a particularly apt model for this study on Nigerian educators’ responses to play-based materials. She conducted ethnographic research at a Tanzanian teachers college that promoted constructivism and learner-centered pedagogy. While pre-service teachers in the college seemed to understand and accept constructivist approaches, they struggled to implement them in their own secondary-level classrooms. Vavrus explored possible structural, knowledge, and attitudinal reasons for this disconnect. She also observed one teacher who modified constructivist approaches to fit the constraints of his classroom. While he continued to teach in a lecture-based whole-group format, he utilized question and answer techniques that promoted critical thinking. Vavrus deemed this practice “contingent constructivism” and emphasized that such teachers “need to be rewarded, not admonished, for recognizing the limitations of [constructivist] methods when conditions do not warrant their use” (2009, p. 310).

My study follows Vavrus’s (2009) work—and similar work by other scholars (Moloi et al., 2008; Mtika & Gates, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2004)—by examining how teachers are trained in

constructivist, play-based approaches, and how they use (or do not use) these approaches in their classrooms. My findings show that teachers rarely used Sesame materials in the play-based, learner-centered ways that Sesame Workshop intended. These findings align with several other studies that show incongruences between the learner-centered approaches teachers learn and what actually occurs in classrooms. It is notable that my findings in early childhood classrooms align with findings of studies that take place in primary (Moloi et al., 2008; O’Sullivan, 2004) and secondary (Mtika & Gates, 2010; Vavrus, 2009) classrooms. We may expect that early childhood educators would be more likely to use play-based, interactive approaches. My findings suggest that formalistic approaches pervade at all levels of education in Nigeria. Some scholars fear that teacher-centered, rote-based methods may be particularly inappropriate at the early childhood level (Bodrova, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2010). Scholars, policymakers, and educators may need to negotiate pedagogical approaches that make sense in Nigerian settings but also promote learning among Nigeria’s youngest children.

Sesame International and the Promotion of Play-based Learning

Sesame Street is one of the longest running children’s television programs (on air in the U.S. since 1969), and certainly the most widely broadcast around the world (Cole, 2016). Television is only one of the platforms it uses to pursue its stated mission to help children “grow smarter, stronger, and kinder” (Sesame Workshop, 2017); it also creates radio programming, DVDs, website/mobile applications, and classroom materials. While international versions of *Sesame Street* have aired since the early 1970s, Sesame Workshop has recently focused more on using the program as a tool for international development. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has funded nine versions

of the program, and the program's goals align with international development objectives about promoting universal primary education and girls' education, combatting HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and fostering intercultural peace (Cole, 2016). In general, research has shown that *Sesame Street* and its international versions have been successful in teaching academic skills, healthy habits, and peaceful and tolerant worldviews (Cole, 2016).

Educating children in entertaining, play-based ways has been central to Sesame Workshop's approach since the beginning, and these strategies are consistent across Sesame's international programming. Sesame Workshop researchers have found that co-productions have helped shift attitudes about early childhood education. For example, Cole and Lee (2016) summarized internal research on *Sisimpur*, the Bangladeshi version of *Sesame Street*:

Education [in Bangladesh] was often seen as a process of rote memorization rather than engaged, joyful learning (Kibria, 2005). Researchers noted a shift in these attitudes a year after *Sisimpur*'s broadcast. Teachers reported that the series inspired them to be more creative in their teaching [...] and parents were more likely to think about parenting as involving active interactions with children than before (Kibria, 2006).² (Cole & Lee, 2016, pp. 59-60)

This reporting of research illustrates Sesame Workshop's hopes that co-productions can promote creativity, "engaged, joyful learning," and "active interactions." Similarly, Lee et al., (2016) write about how the radio version of the Afghan co-production, *Bagch-e-Simsim*, "helped mothers understand how to treat their children, and to encourage their learning and self-expression" (2016, p. 113). These examples show how Sesame Workshop staff members and researchers (including local staff) hope that programs can promote play-

based learning among young children, and influence teachers and parents to interact with children more creatively.

While Sesame television and radio programs may influence teachers' and parents' approaches, Sesame Workshop also engages in more direct caregiver training. In the U.S. and around the world, they have created kits with caregiver guides and educational books, games, DVDs, and other materials for children. Sesame trains caregivers on the use of the materials (as described below in Nigeria). Such trainings are also intended to teach developmentally appropriate strategies for teaching young children.

Sesame Square Comes to Nigeria

When Sesame Workshop and USAID decided to create a co-production in Nigeria, they were fully aware of the educational challenges there. The Nigerian government has struggled to provide adequate education for its population, and regional, ethnic, and gender inequalities persist (Moland, 2015b). The fact that Nigeria has eight million children out of school—the highest number in sub-Saharan Africa—reflects Nigeria's massive population (186 million) and relatively low enrollment rates (CIA World Factbook-Nigeria, 2017; Kazeem, Jensen, & Stokes, 2010). Literacy rates vary largely by region: approximately 72% of Nigerians ages 5-16 in the southern regions are literate, as compared to 28% in the northern regions (NDHS, 2011, pp. 44-45). Regional boundaries align significantly with ethnic and religious boundaries; northern Nigeria is predominantly Hausa and Muslim, and southern Nigeria is predominantly Igbo, Yoruba, and Christian. As a result, regional inequalities map onto other inequalities. For example, Christian children are five times more likely to attend school than Muslim children in Nigeria (Kazeem et al., 2010, p. 312).

Persistent inequalities in Nigeria have contributed to ongoing ethno-religious conflicts (Campbell, 2013; Moland, 2015a). These

conflicts in turn compromise educational access. For instance, the conflict between the terrorist group Boko Haram and the Nigerian government has led to attacks on schools that have killed 611 teachers, destroyed 910 schools, and forced 1,500 additional schools to close (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In northeast Nigeria, millions of people have been displaced, and millions of children are out of school.

The Nigerian government has made commitments to providing preschool education (called crèche, nursery, and kindergarten at different levels) (Nigeria National Policy on Education, 2004). However, such programs are limited in an already under-resourced education system, and fewer than 20% of children attend preschool (Fluent Research, 2013). In the preschool classes I visited, I noted similar aspects to those other researchers have observed in primary classrooms in Nigeria, such as large class sizes, rote-based pedagogical approaches, and limited materials (Hardman et al., 2008).

Amidst these challenging circumstances, Sesame Workshop staff members (Nigerian and American) hoped that *Sesame Square* and its accompanying educational materials could help increase young children's access to education. In April of 2011, the first episode of *Sesame Square* was broadcast. With funding from USAID, *Sesame Square* creators produced three seasons of 26 thirty-minute episodes each. Similarly to other international versions, *Sesame Square* teaches about preschool-level academic skills, socio-emotional skills, healthy habits, and diversity and tolerance (Moland, 2015a).

In the spring of 2012, the Nigerian Sesame team rolled out the first materials kit: the literacy kit. This kit was a plastic bin (approximately two cubic feet in size) with a fitted lid and a handle. Each literacy kit included a Story Tree mat, a paper puppet set, alphabet flashcards, a children's book, and instructions for caregivers (described further below). The creation and distribution of these kits was a massive logistical undertaking coordinated by

the *Sesame Square* team based in Abuja (Nigeria's capital city). In the end, approximately 2,700 English literacy kits were distributed to schools, orphanages, and community centers in five states across Nigeria. In months that followed, an additional 1,600 Hausa literacy kits were distributed in northern Nigeria, and 2,700 math/science/health kits were distributed throughout the country. In each of the five states, Sesame Workshop contracted a regional "Master Trainer" to conduct a Caregiver Training. Between 40-50 caregivers attended each training, and they each in turn conducted a "step-down training" for at least 10 additional caregivers at their school or community center. In this way, approximately 2,700 caregivers were trained to use the materials, and each of them received a kit for their classroom or center.

The materials in the literacy kits are designed to promote creative, child-centered learning. The *Alphabet Story Quilt* book includes colorful illustrations of characters and scenes from ethnic groups across Nigeria, and teaches alphabet sounds and alliteration. For example, the "O" page reads: "Oluchi's okra has overgrown her yard in Oyo state." The puppet set includes 23 laminated paper puppets (about six inches tall) that caregivers are instructed to cut out and attach to wooden supports, as well as background scenes. The Puppet Kit Guide explains, "puppets are a great way to teach children new concepts and tell them stories in a fun and engaging way," and includes instructions, sample scripts, and character descriptions.

The laminated alphabet flashcards (six inches by eight inches) show a capital and lowercase letter on one side, together with a picture of a Muppet and lines for the child to copy the letter (crayon markings can be wiped off). The other side shows an object that starts with the letter. For example, the B card has a picture of Cookie Monster playing ball on one side, and a picture of a ball on the other side. The set includes instruction cards that list eleven

suggested activities divided into “early learners,” “early readers,” and “advanced readers” (examples below).

Finally, the literacy kits contain the Story Tree mat, a large vinyl mat (five feet by five feet) with a picture of a tree on it. Each leaf of the tree has an object pictured. For example, leaves included pictures of a school, nurse, duck, bicycle, and so on—almost sixty items are pictured. The kit includes a Story Tree guide, which explains that it is a floor game designed to help children “increase vocabulary by learning new words, describe/ categorize animals, familiar objects, places, etc., build sentences, narrate events in sequence, creatively imagine stories, and have fun learning!” The guide also tells caregivers what each item is, and gives examples of stories to tell. Children are to jump on different leaves as they identify objects or tell stories. For example, a child might jump on a picture of a boy, a woman, a bus, and bananas, and tell a story about how a boy went with his mother on the bus to buy bananas.

It is important to note that all of these materials were meticulously created (mostly by Nigerians) to be culturally relevant to children across Nigeria. The Story Tree includes a picture of a girl in a hijab to represent Nigeria’s large Muslim population (approximately 50% of the population) (CIA World Factbook- Nigeria, 2017). The Y alphabet flashcard has a picture of a yam (a staple food across Nigeria), and the puppet kit and the *Alphabet Story Quilt* include characters from ethnic groups across the country (as depicted by their names and clothing). While the materials were carefully tailored to Nigerian cultural groups, however, the intended play-based activities were unfamiliar to many Nigerian educators. In order to learn how educators used the materials, I conducted observations in educational settings across Nigeria.

Methods

This article draws on data collected as part of a larger study on the production of *Sesame Square*. During nine months in Nigeria, I conducted interviews, ethnographic observations, and episode analysis to learn how *Sesame Square* was localized into the Nigerian setting, and how the program taught about diversity and tolerance (Moland, 2015a, 2017). I interviewed 35 *Sesame Square* staff and 37 educators who use *Sesame Square* materials in their classrooms. I also observed meetings and film shoots in the *Sesame Square* studios, and conducted textual analysis of all 78 episodes produced thus far.

This article focuses on data from ethnographic observations of Caregiver Trainings and classroom use of the Sesame materials. I observed two Caregiver Trainings (in Lagos in February 2012 and in Abuja in March 2012), and repeatedly interviewed the Master Trainers who conducted these trainings (Folake and Damilola) (all names are pseudonyms). Near Lagos and Abuja, I accompanied Folake and Damilola as they visited sites to monitor how caregivers were using the Sesame materials. I also visited Abakaliki, Calabar, and Kano, and met with the Master Trainers there, and accompanied them on monitoring visits to sites.³ In total, I visited 27 educational sites that used Sesame materials, including one orphanage, one community center, one family center, one NGO, one clinic, and 22 schools. In several schools, I visited multiple classrooms.

Site visits ranged from thirty minutes to two hours. When we arrived at a site, the Master Trainer (or one of his/her staff) and I would first speak with the headmaster, and then walk around to visit classrooms. Visits were intended (by the Master Trainers) to monitor how caregivers were using the materials, and it sometimes seemed as though caregivers took the materials out to use them when they saw us coming. Headmasters and teachers often believed that I worked for Sesame Workshop or

USAID, perhaps due in part to my identity as a white, American female, despite my best efforts to explain that I was an independent researcher and was not evaluating them.

Because my time at each school was limited, I often took photos and videos to guide me as I wrote my fieldnotes each evening. Taking short videos allowed me to record verbatim what teachers and students said while using the materials. I also took notes during observations and conversations. To analyze my fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I entered them into the qualitative software *Dedoose 7.0* and used a combination of deductive and inductive codes. For example, I began with codes based on themes from scholarly literature, such as “materials promote play-based learning,” and added codes that emerged from my fieldnotes, such as “educators worried about theft of materials.” Together, my ethnographic and interview data illustrate how Sesame Workshop promoted play-based learning in Nigeria, and how educators responded.

Training Nigerian Caregivers in Play-Based Approaches

During Caregiver Trainings, Nigerian Sesame Master Trainers taught early childhood educators how to use the materials in the literacy kit. The five Master Trainers throughout the country were experienced educators, several of whom had served on local or state education boards. Most of them also had experience working with international aid agencies such as USAID or the U.K. Department for International Development (DfID). As such, they had far more exposure to American and British educational approaches than most Nigerian educators. Folake, the Master Trainer in Lagos, had worked at the Lagos State board of education and had decades of experience training teachers and developing curriculum. Damilola, the Master Trainer in Abuja, was president of a large association of private schools and ran an elite private school outside of Abuja that utilized a

British curriculum. As such, both Folake and Damilola were experienced with constructivist approaches, and were also likely more elite than most of the teachers they trained.

During the one-day Caregiver Training in Lagos in February 2012, Folake started off by telling the 28 caregivers from nearby NGOs and schools that they were going to be very active that day. She led them in a song, and then began speaking about how children learn best:

We need to change attitudes. I saw a program on TV that [said that] a child who is not exposed to interactivity in education is doomed. Now, SUBEB [the State Universal Basic Education Board] is doing a good thing, starting crèches... [but] I've seen some, where the teacher says, “Who is running around? Put your head on your desk!” - That's not interactivity. (fieldnotes, February 9, 2012)

At this point, Folake began to solicit ideas from the caregivers about how children learn best. She wrote their suggestions on a piece of chart paper, “children learn when they use materials, learn through role play, models, imitations, interaction, observation, gesticulation, eye contact.” Folake also added that children learn when they are inquisitive, ask questions, when they are put at ease, explore, experiment, use their senses, and through a variety of media (fieldnotes, February 9, 2012).

Folake then directed the caregivers to the *Sesame Square* Outreach Training Manual, which includes a page titled, “Ways Children Learn and Develop Skills During Early Childhood” with subsections, “Learning through the Senses,” “Learning by Exploration and Experimenting” and “Learning through Play” (Sesame Workshop, 2011, p. 9). They discussed these themes, and brainstormed suggestions for incorporating them.

Much of the rest of the Caregiver Training was spent with teachers practicing how to use

the materials in the literacy kit. For example, Folake called up a group of teachers to do an activity with the alphabet flashcards. Caregivers attempted the “ABC Wave” game, wherein alphabet flashcards were distributed to caregivers. As the whole group sang the alphabet song, the caregiver with each letter was expected to raise the corresponding flashcard. Caregivers seemed confused at first, but soon mastered the activity. During the afternoon session, she explained how to use the puppets, *Alphabet Story Quilt* book, and Story Tree. Caregivers had some opportunities to practice using the materials, although time was limited.

A similar Caregiver Training took place in Abuja in March 2012. The Master Trainer, Damilola, led the group in a discussion of how children learn, and described three learning styles—auditory, visual, kinesthetic. After a break, she divided participants into small groups to practice alphabet flashcards games. Damilola then turned their attention to the puppets, and explained that the puppets could encourage children to tell stories and be creative, and that caregivers could use the puppets to teach all kinds of messages about health, staying in school, professions, and so on (fieldnotes, March 28, 2012). When showing caregivers how to use the *The Alphabet Story Quilt* book, Damilola modeled how to read to children in engaging, dialogic ways that would help build knowledge and vocabulary. Afterwards, she reflected with caregivers on how even reading books aloud could be done in ways that encouraged interactivity, imagination, and play.

Finally, caregivers had the opportunity to practice using the Story Tree. Small groups gathered around six mats. Damilola began a story, and then one caregiver from each group continued it.

Damilola: Story, story, story! Story, story, story! (*Caregivers clap and chant along*). Once upon a time
Caregivers: Time time!

Damilola (*steps on boy picture*): There was a boy called Ade. Ade is a lovely boy, who loves to go to school. One day, he wore his school uniform, his white shirt, and his blue shorts.

Caregiver 1 (*in next group*): When he got to school, he met his friend playing ball (*steps on ball*). And he joined in the playing. But during the playing, he injured himself.

Caregiver 2: From there, the nurse was called (*steps on nurse*). The nurse called Ade, and he was taken to the clinic (*steps on clinic*).

Caregiver 3: At the clinic he was given an injection by the nurse, and he was admitted in the hospital, and stayed in the hospital, and slept (*steps on bed*).

Caregiver 4: And then his father was sent for (*steps on picture of man*), and using a keke-NAPEP (*steps on keke-NAPEP, a three-wheeled rickshaw taxi*) to go to the hospital and see Ade. And they took him back home.

Caregiver 5: And when they got home, his mommy used the telephone (*steps on phone*) to call the Aunty, to tell the Aunty what has happened

Caregiver 6: When at home, his mother bought him banana (*steps on banana*) because he loves banana.

Caregiver 7: And his friend (*steps on boy*) brought him his homework (*steps on books*).

Damilola: Okay! Nice story! (fieldnotes, March 28, 2012)

After showing them how to use the Story Tree, Damilola again explained to the caregivers that this mat could help children to tell stories, be creative, build vocabulary, and have fun.

My observations at these two trainings showed me how the Sesame Master Trainers (Folake and Damilola) taught about interactive, play-based methods—and that caregivers seemed to agree with these approaches, and to

understand how to use the materials in the ways that Sesame Workshop intended. After the Caregiver Training in Lagos, I asked Folake what changes she would hope to see in a school six months after they began using the Sesame materials. She responded:

I would expect that a child is given a better opportunity to explore... For example, when we are talking about the Story Tree, there are so many objects probably [children will see] for the first time. So that shows they add on to the wealth of vocabularies that they've learnt... the Nigerian child is not forthcoming with the use of words.... the child has not been given an opportunity to express themselves. Because most times, the teacher would not come to the level of the child. But with these kinds of materials, we see the teacher coming to the level of the child. Then there's lots of interactivity. (interview, February 14, 2012)

Folake's expectations echoed those of proponents of play-based learning. She hoped that more interactive teaching methods, combined with more egalitarian teacher-student relationships ("the teacher coming to the level of the child"), would enable children to gain self-confidence and learn more.

As caregivers left the Caregiver Training, they seemed enthusiastic about using the materials in the literacy kit. As shown above, many of them, when asked, "How do children learn?" mentioned methods that align well with constructivist approaches—they spoke of the importance of play, using the five senses, exploration, interaction, and so on. The fact that caregivers raised these points suggests that play-based approaches were not foreign to them. They were not hearing about such approaches for the first time.

As I accompanied Sesame Master Trainers to observe caregivers training additional caregivers during step-down trainings, and using

materials in classrooms, there was some evidence that play-based approaches were "trickling down." For example, at a step-down training near Abuja, we saw all the participants stepping on the Story Tree and telling a story together (fieldnotes, March 29, 2012). At a primary school outside Abuja, we observed a caregiver leading a discussion with his peers about the best ways to motivate children to learn (fieldnotes, April 3, 2012). At an Islamic school outside of Lagos, young children (ages 3-4) were stepping on the Story Tree and telling short stories. One girl stepped on several different pictures as she said, "This is a farmer. He grows corn, banana, yam, apple, carrots, and tomatoes." Her teacher repeated her story and then invited the other students to "Clap for her!" (fieldnotes, February 15, 2012).

Much more frequently, however, we observed caregivers using the materials in more formalistic ways. Despite the fact that caregivers at the trainings seemed to understand and espouse play-based approaches, and seemed to be excited about using the materials, they struggled to implement such approaches in their classrooms.

Caregivers Using Sesame Materials

Are Caregivers Using the Materials?

After Sesame Master Trainers (including Damilola and Folake) completed the Caregiver Training, they visited educational sites to ensure that caregivers were using the materials effectively with children. As I accompanied them on site visits, one concern that emerged frequently was that the materials were not arriving at their intended classroom or not being used afterwards. Folake explained to me, "Sometimes maybe the head teacher will say, 'Oh, these materials are nice, I'll take them home so my children can use them.' And then when we go to the school, there are no materials in sight!" (interview, February 14, 2012). In under-resourced contexts where many classrooms do

not have locks, fear of theft was high. Indeed, in one of the preschools where Sesame Workshop provided a small television and a generator so that children could watch *Sesame Square* episodes (as part of a pilot study), thieves had stolen both. When they were replaced, a teacher began carrying them back and forth from his home every day (fieldnotes, February 15, 2012).

Some schools seemed hesitant to let the children handle the materials because they were worried the materials would get ruined. To avoid the loss or damage of materials, schools often kept the kits locked up in a headmaster's office, where teachers could check them out (fieldnotes, March 22, 2012). At one school in Abakaliki, we saw seven Sesame literacy kits stacked in a back room next to boxes of discarded workbooks (fieldnotes, March 26, 2012). It appeared as though they had been forgotten. It seemed deeply ironic that the materials were sometimes considered so precious—because they were so rare—that children seldom got to use them.

At other schools, however, we observed caregivers using some of the materials, such as the alphabet flashcards and the Story Tree. In the visits I accompanied, I never saw anyone using the puppets or *The Alphabet Story Quilt* book. The reasons for this were unclear, although many of the class sizes may have been too large for children to be able to see the book or to play with the small paper puppets. The Story Tree and the alphabet flashcards were more popular, perhaps because they had larger pictures and were more durable.

Caregivers Use Play-Based Materials in Formalistic Ways

In several classrooms, we observed teachers drilling the alphabet flashcards, by holding them up one at a time and having children chorally repeat the names of the letters and the objects. In one school outside Lagos, Folake and I observed an NGO staff member, Mariela, visiting the school to use the Sesame materials with children. We entered a classroom where

approximately 40 children (ages 2-4) were sitting in small plastic chairs in rows. Mariela was accompanied by another staff member from her NGO and there were three additional caregivers in the room who worked at the school. She began by showing the children the alphabet cards and using a call-and-response method to say the letters:

Mariela: Here are some alphabet cards. Do you like them?

All children: Yes!

Mariela: Who can tell me what is on this card?

A few children: A

Mariela: Good, it's the letter A. What is it, everybody?

All children: Letter A.

Mariela: How many letters do you see on this card?

Child: Two

Mariela: That's right, there's capital letter A, and small letter A. There's...?

All children: Capital letter A

Mariela: and there's...?

All children: small letter A.

(fieldnotes, February 15, 2012)

After this continued with a few letters, Folake encouraged Mariela to pass out the flashcards to the children. Mariela told the children they were going to play the "ABC Wave," a game where they sang the alphabet song, and each child lifted his/ her letter when he/she heard it. She passed out the cards (using two sets, since there were more than 26 children) and had children practice raising their cards. She started singing the alphabet song slowly, but no children raised their cards. Mariela asked, "Who has letter A?" The three caregivers were walking among the children, trying to find who had the letter A. One of the caregivers found him and lifted him up by the arm. When the boy stood up, three children around him also stood up. "No, no, no," Mariela said, "You sit down!" This continued through letter B and C until Folake interrupted:

Folake: Excuse me, we don't want the aunties (i.e. caregivers) to probe them. The aunties shouldn't help them (*caregivers laugh*). Also I see a challenge that the children are different ages. Some of them are 2, some of them are 3, some of them are 4. Maybe we can divide them into groups? ... Also the class is too large, it should be divided into groups. Okay, you can continue, but please, aunties, don't help them.

Mariela: Okay, children, let's start. What letter did we stop with?

Caregivers: Letter C!

Mariela (to caregivers): Don't say it, don't say it! Who has the letter C? (*A caregiver goes to the boy with C and lifts him up by the arm*). (fieldnotes, February 15, 2012)

Mariela, seeing the children's confusion, tried to begin the activity again and explain it more clearly. The same confusion persisted for several minutes, with children unable to recognize their letters and many children standing whenever a caregiver told one to stand up. After a little while, Folake recommended that the caregivers pass out crayons so the children could color the flashcards. Each child received one crayon, and they began coloring, although it was difficult for some because there were only a couple of plastic tables. As the children colored, Folake pulled Mariela and the caregivers aside and asked them why they did not have enough tables for the children to color and write on. The caregivers pointed out several broken plastic tables in the corner of the room. Folake again told them that the children needed to learn for themselves, so the caregivers should not always give them the answers (fieldnotes, February 15, 2012).

After our visit, I asked Folake about her observations. She said it was understandable that some of the children did not know their letters because they were very young, but she was also worried that the children were not going to learn their letters because the caregivers

kept giving them the answers and the children were never given time to figure things out (interview, February 15, 2012). The fact that the caregivers in Mariela's classroom continually gave children the answers illustrates pedagogical approaches that may be more concerned with children getting the *right* answers than with children exploring, discovering, or acting on their own. Even when the flashcards were distributed to children in this classroom, the caregivers were still the ones acting, as they found the child with the appropriate letter and lifted him or her up. An activity that was designed to be more playful and child-centered, was challenging for both the caregivers and the children. It is possible that the caregivers continually intervened because they felt they were being evaluated and wanted to make it look as though the children could identify letters.

The fact that many children in this classroom stood up whenever Mariela told one child to stand up also revealed the habits of the classroom. When the primary mode of instruction was for the teacher to ask a question and for all the children to answer in unison, children were unaccustomed to doing something separate from their peers. The choral response strategy may reflect a more communal way of learning—and may be the only type of instruction possible in a classroom with forty children—but it also makes it difficult to judge if individual children know the answers or if they are chiming along with their peers. This new type of activity was confusing for children.

In many classrooms, we observed teachers using the Story Tree with the children, but in quite different ways than they used it during the Caregiver Training. The Story Tree was almost always hanging on the wall, either held up by tape or by two students holding the corners. The teacher would then use a ruler or pointer to point at different pictures. I recorded the following in a classroom in Abakaliki, where 51 students (ages 4-6) responded in unison to each prompt by the teacher:

Teacher: This is the story...?
 All students, chorally: tree.
 Teacher: The story...?
 Students: Tree.
 Teacher: What is this (*points to banana*)?
 Students: Banana
 Teacher: What?
 Students: Banana
 Teacher: Very good. What is this (*points to umbrella*)?
 Students: It is an umbrella
 Teacher: Again!
 Students: It is an umbrella.
 Teacher: What is this (*points to yam*)?
 Students: It is a yam
 Teacher: Again!
 Students: It is a yam.
 Teacher: What alphabet starts from yam?
 Students: Yam starts from Y.
 Teacher: Very good. Again!
 Students: Yam Starts from Y. [...]
 Teacher: Very good. Clap for yourselves (*students clap six times rhythmically*)!
 (fieldnotes, March 27, 2012)

During this activity (which lasted more than 10 minutes) some students responded more loudly than others, but most answered together. This teacher went a little beyond drilling names of pictures by asking what letters different words began with, and what certain objects were used for, but she primarily used the Story Tree to drill vocabulary.

I observed this same activity, with slight variations, in many other classrooms. In a classroom near Lagos, with approximately 75 students (ages 5-6), a teacher first pointed to different words and had children repeat them and then asked a few students to come up, one at a time, to say a sentence with one of the words.

Student 1: I like to go to school every day (*points at school picture*).

Teacher: Yes, I like to go to school every day. Clap for her!

Student 2: My mommy buys bananas for me every day (*points at bananas*).

Teacher: Yes, my mommy buys bananas for me every day. Clap for him!
 (fieldnotes, February 15, 2012).

In such a large class, all students could not come up to the Story Tree, but some of the others could see what the child was pointing to, and the teacher repeated the child's words so everyone could hear. In other classrooms, I observed teachers using the Story Tree to point to living things (fieldnotes, Abakaliki, March 27, 2012), to talk about what letters objects begin with (fieldnotes, Calabar, March 22, 2012), and to have children point to different foods (fieldnotes, Abakaliki, March 22, 2012). While teachers differed slightly in how they used the Story Tree, I only saw one school with the Story Tree on the floor (described above). In all the other classrooms we visited, most students remained in their seats and named objects as the teacher pointed to them.

Teachers used the Story Tree in ways that reflected how they were accustomed to teaching. There were benefits to how they used it. In classrooms devoid of resources, where there were rarely educational posters, and teachers often relied on the blackboard and chalk to write words or draw pictures, the Story Tree offered bright, colorful drawings of 60 objects. It provided a broad list of vocabulary items, including foods, modes of transportation, people, and places. Teachers used it somewhat interactively, in that they solicited names of objects from children, and sometimes asked individual children to say sentences or stories. Many of the teachers were very enthusiastic, loudly calling out the object names and encouraging students who named objects correctly.

Nevertheless, the Story Tree was rarely used in the way that Sesame Workshop intended: to engage children in play and to help them develop oral language and story-building skills. It seemed surprising that even though caregivers seemed to, at least, somewhat understand the intended use of the Story Tree

during Caregiver Trainings, they used it much differently in their classrooms. They took instructional tools that were intended to promote play and creativity, and used them in ways that were often teacher-centered and rote-based.

Why Do Formalistic Teaching Approaches Persist?

Other researchers have observed how formalistic pedagogical approaches persist in many classrooms around the world, as described above—perhaps particularly in developing countries. Scholars point to many reasons that such approaches persist, including structural reasons, teacher knowledge and attitudes, and cultural beliefs (Schweisfurth, 2015; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012). While observing classrooms in Nigeria, several of these same reasons surfaced.

First, as is obvious in the above descriptions, class sizes were very large in many of the schools we visited. It was not uncommon to see between 40 and 80 students in one room, even in nursery classes. Large classes seemed to be more a result of limited space than of insufficient teaching staff. For example, one classroom in Calabar had 150 students—75 were facing one direction, and 75 were facing the other direction, with teachers at both ends writing and teaching (separate lessons) from a blackboard. In the classroom where Mariela taught (described above), there were 40 young children but three caregivers. It was unclear whether each caregiver was qualified to teach a class on her own, but it might have made sense to divide the children into smaller groups (as Folake recommended) if there had been sufficient classroom space. When Folake suggested that they take small groups outside, caregivers responded that it might be too hot, and they did not want to get the Story Tree dirty (interview, February 15, 2012). Without smaller classes, it seemed unlikely that teachers would use the Story Tree in the ways that they were taught.

Second, caregivers' formalistic use of Sesame materials were likely influenced by their training, their knowledge and beliefs about how children learn, and their comfort (or lack thereof) using new materials and strategies. These various components of teachers' "cultural politics of pedagogy" (Vavrus, 2009, p. 303) were difficult to determine in this study, as it was a multi-sited ethnography with limited opportunities to conduct interviews or repeated observations of the same teacher. However, I gained some insights into teachers' training, knowledge, and attitudes. For example, Folake described some teachers' habits and training:

If as a teacher you've gone through the system, the way you were taught when you were in school is most likely to affect how you function as a teacher... [Teachers] go to the university, [but] the time that is actually given for teaching methods is limited... so the teacher now goes back to use the lecture method. (interview, February 14, 2012)

It is a common refrain from teacher educators around the world: teachers teach how they were taught (Cuban, 1993; Mtika & Gates, 2010). Particularly in a country where university systems and teachers colleges are often under-resourced and of low quality (Moland, 2015b), teachers may have limited pedagogical training—especially in early childhood education.

The fact that many early childhood teachers in Nigeria have limited training means that they also have limited experience with play-based approaches. As early childhood education access has expanded recently in Nigeria, it is unlikely that most teachers themselves attended preschool. When they picture what classrooms should look like, they probably picture the typical primary or secondary school classroom in Nigeria, where the teacher stands at the front of the classroom and copies definitions from the textbook onto the board (Hardman et al., 2008).

Sometimes, therefore, the Sesame materials were confusing to educators. During the Caregiver Trainings, some had difficulty understanding the different activities they were supposed to do with the materials. They sometimes argued about what objects on the flashcards were, and seemed anxious about using the materials “correctly.” After returning to their classrooms, some were unaccustomed to using the same materials repeatedly to enable students to practice skills. For instance, when Folake visited a school near Lagos about two months after they had received the Sesame materials, teachers told her, “Oh, we finished the materials. The kids know them” (interview, February 15, 2012). If teachers were using the Story Tree to drill children on vocabulary—as we often saw—then it does seem possible that they could “finish” the materials after children memorized all the objects. This suggests that teachers did not understand how materials could be used in ongoing ways to support children’s storytelling, oral language development, and creativity.

Another point of confusion for teachers was where, exactly, in the timetable they were expected to use the Sesame materials. Schools had rigid schedules with different periods for different subjects. For example, in a headmaster’s office in Calabar, the primary school schedule was written on the board. The school day (Monday through Friday) was divided into eight 35-minute class periods. The order and subjects of classes varied by day, but across the week, students had the following subjects (some two times, some five times): P.E., Moral Instruction, Health Education, Math, English Studies, Basic Science, Agricultural Science, Fine Art, Handwriting, Citizenship Education, French/local language, Social Studies, Craft, Computer Studies, Music, Tourism, and Compound Work (fieldnotes, March 23, 2012). Most of these courses had textbooks, and teachers were expected to “cover” certain lessons on certain days. In several

schools we visited, caregivers told us they worried that if they used Sesame materials during one of the periods, they would get in trouble with their headmaster or the local education board. A few teachers suggested that they could speak to the education board and ask if the following year’s timetable could include a Sesame period in the day, so they could use the materials. These teachers’ concerns echoed those of educators in other studies who worried that utilizing learner-centered pedagogies would prevent them from “finishing” the syllabus and thereby jeopardize their students’ potential success on exams (Mtika & Gates, 2010; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012).

It is possible that these various points of confusion led teachers to avoid using materials at all or to use them in formalistic ways. It is also possible that they deliberately chose to use the materials in ways that they believed constituted good teaching, or in ways they believed were best for their schools and students. Some educators may have also been concerned about pushback from other teachers. For example, participants at the Abuja Caregiver Training raised concerns that their colleagues (whom they were to train in step-down trainings) might not be open to using the Sesame materials. One explained that she worked with teachers in a military school who were very “strict and rigid” and probably would not want to do the activities. Another said that the teachers at his school were older and would not want to use new materials. These concerns echo observations in other studies that teachers may hesitate to use learner-centered pedagogies when the school system has a “deep-seated pedagogical orientation” that favors teacher-centered approaches (Mtika & Gates, 2010, p. 400). Teachers who attempt unconventional approaches may be seen to lack competency or authority (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012).

Conclusion

While some scholars raise concerns about a global educational reform movement that advocates more accountability-based, standardized education reforms (Sahlberg, 2014), this article demonstrates how international organizations are also disseminating and promoting constructivist, play-based pedagogical approaches. Sesame Workshop, via its Nigerian staff members, trained caregivers and distributed materials that supported play-based learning in early childhood settings. However, in the vast majority of cases, Nigerian caregivers did not use the materials in their classrooms in the ways that Sesame intended. Structural factors, such as large class sizes, limited space, and rigid school timetables made it logistically difficult for caregivers to use the materials in interactive ways. Teachers' limited training in play-based early childhood pedagogies, as well as their prior experiences and beliefs about how children learn, sometimes led them to use Sesame materials in formalistic, rote-based ways. Their activities aligned more closely to a "skilling" approach to early childhood education than to a "liberal humanist" approach that Sesame may have intended (Fuller, 2007). These findings echo those of other scholars who explore how global pedagogical trends are "taken up" (or not) in local classrooms (Brodie, Lelliott, & Davis, 2002; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012).

On one hand, the disconnect between Sesame Workshop's intention and the way materials were used could be interpreted as a failure to introduce more play-based approaches. On the other hand, the fact that teachers used the materials in ways that made sense in their local settings can be seen as evidence of teachers' resourcefulness and their capacity to recognize the logistical limitations of constructivist approaches—and to adjust accordingly. While most teachers did not use the materials in the ways that Sesame Workshop intended, they did use them in ways that were

somewhat more interactive and learner-centered than common pedagogical approaches in Nigeria. For instance, the Story Tree and alphabet flashcards provided bright pictures of dozens of objects that students would not have seen otherwise, offering more visual cues for children learning vocabulary. When teachers invited individual children to come up to the Story Tree and say sentences or short stories, this fostered student participation and creativity (albeit only for a few children). These could be seen as examples of "contingent constructivism" (Vavrus, 2009) or perhaps "context-appropriate play-based approaches"—wherein teachers utilized *somewhat* more interactive pedagogies that worked within the constraints of their classrooms. On a continuum of learner-centered approaches (Schweisfurth, 2015), teachers' actions were slightly more learner-centered than typical classroom activities, even if they were not as interactive and play-based as Sesame Workshop intended.

The question of what kinds of pedagogies are culturally appropriate—as compared to questions about which pedagogies are logistically possible—is a more difficult one to answer. Current pedagogical practices in Nigeria are heavily influenced by British educational policies during colonial rule (Hardman et al., 2008), and while some scholars advocate reintroducing "traditional African modes" of education (Omolewa, 2007), there is limited consensus on what those would look like. Moreover, there is a history in Nigeria and other countries of people *resisting* "traditional" education approaches because they believe "Western" education is necessary for their children's economic prospects (Omolewa, 2006; Zimmerman, 2006).

The question of cultural sensitivity connects to questions about what, exactly, is being imported by international organizations. Current initiatives to promote play-based pedagogical approaches could be seen as a Western imposition, *or* as an attempted

corrective to earlier colonial (rote-based) impositions. The fact that some Nigerians (i.e. those who worked for Sesame Workshop) were proponents of play-based pedagogical approaches complicates questions of what is imported—although their elite status and previous experience working for international organizations may distance them from the majority of Nigerian educators. Amidst these questions, scholars must continue to examine what agency local educators have in adapting or resisting global educational reforms to be relevant in their own contexts. When teachers resist pedagogical reforms such as learner-centered approaches, they reveal the limitations of applying policy and practice from one context into another, even when attempts are made to address cultural considerations.

What do the challenges and debates around learner-centered pedagogy mean for early childhood education settings? Many scholars and educators believe that learner-centered pedagogy and play-based approaches are *particularly* important for young children (Bodrova, 2008; Fuller, 2007; Lobman & Ryan, 2007). In studies about secondary teachers hesitating to adopt learner-centered approaches, one concern that such teachers raise is that their students are not comfortable with learner-centered approaches (Mtika & Gates, 2010; Vavrus, 2009). Indeed, if such students have been educated in classrooms since preschool where formalistic, teacher-centered approaches pervade, learner-centered pedagogies will seem unfamiliar and discomfiting. This provides a possible rationale for including more play-based, exploratory approaches at the early childhood level, if students are to become accustomed to classroom participation and knowledge production that are more learner-centered.

Some researchers recommend major reforms that will make learner-centered pedagogy more likely to take root in sub-Saharan African countries, such as changing examinations to be more focused on problem

solving than on rote memorization, increasing teacher training, reducing class sizes, reducing the number of subjects required in the national curriculum, and so on (Mtika & Gates, 2010). These suggestions, while promising, will require significant cultural changes and will take time. In the meantime, working to make early childhood education settings more learner-centered may be a way to start changing teachers' and children's orientations towards learning from the beginning of the educational track.

Scholars who believe that there are universal stages that all children go through, and that educational approaches must be “developmentally appropriate” to these stages, may argue that interactive, play-based pedagogies must be used in early childhood settings—regardless of the cultural context (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2010). Advocates of cross-cultural or reconceptualist approaches to early childhood education deny that there is one developmentally appropriate way to teach young children, but would also likely reject formalistic teaching practices as beneficial for all children (Cannella et al., 2007). Any approach that is brought into a new context needs to be adjusted to reflect local conceptualizations of knowledge production, childhood, and pedagogy. Organizations such as Sesame Workshop may need to explore “context-appropriate play-based approaches” that compromise between global beliefs about the best ways young children learn, yet also take cultural contexts into consideration.

Notes

1. I use the terms “educator,” “teacher,” and “caregiver” synonymously. Sesame Workshop uses the term “caregiver” to be inclusive of parents, NGO workers, and other professionals who work with children. Most of the caregivers I observed were teachers.

2. The (Kibria 2005) and (Kibria 2006) are cited in Cole and Lee's (2016) chapter as "Unpublished manuscripts."
3. Due to security concerns, my time in Kano was cut short; I was only able to visit one school with the Master Trainer.

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