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## The acquisition of emotional intelligence by children through African indigenous play

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### Abstract

This paper sought to examine the acquisition of emotional intelligence in children through the lens of African indigenous play. Indigenous play, characterized by traditional games, storytelling, and communal activities, serves as a vital medium for socialization and emotional development in many African cultures. This study highlights how these playful interactions facilitate the understanding and expression of emotions, empathy, and interpersonal skills among children. Through participation in indigenous play, children learn to navigate complex social dynamics, recognize emotional cues, and develop resilience in the face of challenges. The communal nature of these activities fosters a sense of belonging and encourages cooperative behaviour, allowing children to practice conflict resolution and emotional regulation in a supportive environment. Furthermore, the integration of cultural narratives and moral lessons within play enhances children's ability to connect their experiences to broader social values. The findings suggest that African indigenous play is not only a source of entertainment but also a crucial framework for nurturing emotional intelligence, thereby contributing to the holistic development of children. This research advocates for the recognition and incorporation of indigenous play practices in educational settings to promote emotional and social competence in diverse cultural contexts..

### Keywords:

Acquisition, Emotional Intelligence, Children, African, Indigenous Play.

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## Introduction

Socio-emotional skills are considered to be expressive components of the EI construct developing from early childhood. Denham et al. (2003), describe these skills as comprising three key elements including: emotion regulation (ER); emotion expression (EX); and emotion knowledge/understanding (EK). According to Denham (2007), ER assists a child to balance their emotions when they are aversive or distressing or, positive but overwhelming and also assists a child to amplify their emotions if they are too repressed. EX involves the sending of affective messages in keeping with a child's goals and social context. EK involves the complex skills of initially appraising another person, interpreting a message, understanding the message and applying the necessary information to a social situation.

The importance of play in the development of emotional intelligence has been emphasized in developmental psychology. Play is more than what children do to pass the time. Instead, play serves an important purpose, helping children to develop socially, cognitively and physically (Power, 2000). According to Piaget (1962) play is derived from the child's working out of two fundamental characteristics of his mode of experience and development. These are accommodation and assimilation- the attempts to integrate new experiences into the relatively limited number of motor and cognitive skills available at each age. In **Accommodation**, the child attempts to imitate and interact physically with the environment. In **Assimilation**, the child attempts to integrate externally derived precepts or motor actions in a limited amount of schemata. For Piaget children especially at the preoperational and concrete operational stages grow cognitively by observing sequences of play. Piaget considered that children primarily learn through imitation and play as they build up symbolic images through internalized activity.

The pioneering social constructivist developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) thought that, in the preschool years, play is the leading source of development. Through play children learn and practice many basic social skills. They develop a sense of self, learn to interact with other children, how to make friends, how to lie and how to role-play. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides an important framework for considering play as part of a child's development in the midst of various social systems, with the family occupying a central role. Between the ages of 4 and 11 the child engages in physical play like being able to walk and run, to jump, kick, catch, and skip. Large-muscle skills take over and lay the foundation for even more sophisticated activities, including bicycle riding, roller-skating, wrestling, swinging, swimming, and other sports. Physical play gives a child the chance to practice previously learned motor skills and to develop new ones as he repeatedly challenges himself or herself and gradually pushes back the limits of the ability and endurance.

In African cultures, as the child grows, his/her social world is not as limited as the child's from the western culture. His/her general learning is beyond the immediate family circle. At this age period too, particularly if weaning has been instituted, the environment of a child is much less mother-centered. He is brought into the group in the area of play. By the time he is fully weaned, somewhere between two and two and a half years, the African child spends a

great deal more time with his or her siblings and/or other children in the total family compound. In this way he is exposed to areas of socialization and complex social interaction at an early age. During this age period, social gains begin to come into the foreground (Elam, 1968).

Nyota and Mapara (2008) highlight two important ways by which the African child interacts with peers and siblings. This is done through African traditional games and play songs. Berger (2000) has remarked: If a child's learning is not aroused by his or her parents, it may be aroused – and powerfully – when the child begins to compare his or her skills with those of other children of the same age. Berger (2000) emphasizes the fact that older African elder children who have mastered the skill or graduated from apprenticeship so to speak normally give the apprentice child guidance. The critical element of these games is guided participation. The older child who has mastered the skill and the learner child interact in order to accomplish a task. As they do so, the mentor is both sensitive and responsive to the needs of the learner. Through these indigenous games and play songs, children learn how to handle interpersonal relationships and develop more social and emotional competences.

## **Conceptual Considerations**

### **Emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI), as defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990), refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the ability to recognize and empathize with the emotions of others. It involves the capacity to regulate emotions effectively and utilize emotional information to guide thinking and behavior (Goleman, 1995). EI is the ability to recognize and express emotions adaptively towards self and others (Sunaryo et al., 2017). It has been referred to as a type of social intelligence characterized by the capacity to pay close attention to personal emotions and that of others, to differentiate between them, and apply this information to direct one's thoughts and actions (Misra & Biswal, 2016).

Emotional intelligence is the ability both to know one's own emotions and also identify that of other people (Zandel, 2008). Emotional intelligence has three key models namely: The ability model, developed by Peter Salovey and John Mayer (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004), which focuses on the individual's ability to process emotional information and use it to navigate the social environment. The second, the trait model was developed by Petrides and Furnham, (2001). This covers behavioral dispositions of the individual and personal perception of his or her abilities. The third and final, the mixed model is a combination of both ability and trait models in measuring emotional intelligence. Gardner and Qualter (2010) pointed out that people with high emotional intelligence have greater mental health, exemplary job performance and more potent leadership skills.

### **Cultural variations in Emotional Intelligence**

Markus and Kitayama (1991) examined different people across cultures and proposed interdependent-self and independent-self in expressing emotions, each of whose attributes

differ among cultures. The independent self, being the American and western European notion of self, is seen as an entity that contains important characteristic attributes and as that which is separate from context. There is a belief that people are inherently detached and distinct in American and many western European cultures where the cultural norm is internal control of reinforcement to become independent from others and to express one's uniqueness. Although people with independent self must be responsive to surrounding social circumstances, their social responsiveness arises relative to their need to determine the best way to display the deductive and inner attributes of the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

In contrast, the interdependent self, common amongst African cultures, is viewed as connected to the surrounding social contexts where the self and others are concretely situated. Experience of interdependence with others makes people see themselves not as detached from the social context but as part of an encompassing social context with its concomitant personal relations. Hence, research on groups of people requires naturalistic and participant observations that follow an inductive process. People here are required to watch and listen to others with great carefulness and to reflect upon their observations in their minds. They tend to spend time reflecting on subtle observations before acting and expressing themselves to others. According to Idang (2015), Africans often go along with the greater group and try to conform to that communal or collective goal of their respective societies in order to avoid curses or misfortunes. That is once you are a member of a community, you grow and mature, participating more actively in the ceremonial rites and festivals of the community which include singing, drumming and dancing. Umoh (2005) points out that African communal life is also bound together with religion which is not primarily for the individual, but for the entire community. He further explained that to be born into a human community is to be born into a religious community and that one needs to abide by the tenets of the society

While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being in African cultures is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world (Kaunda, 2007). The underpinning policies and orientations towards equality and equity as indigenous Africentric ontology and epistemologies gave little or no room for social, economic, and political inequalities in precolonial Africa. The communal lifestyle of indigenous people was defined as the collective philosophy of living together, working together, and sharing each other's joys and sorrows. It is the nucleus of the African thought system (Wirdze et al, 2011). To commune is the way of life of the Africans, an expression of African solidarity. Harmony existed in each society as everyone respected his or her position and role in society. Living and working for the common good, advanced equality and minimising all forms of inequality which perhaps did not exclude practices in the uneven distribution of resources.

### **The concept of play**

Play can be categorized into two. Functional play that involves simple, repetitive activities typical of early childhood and constructive play in which children manipulate objects to

produce or build something typical of middle childhood (Feldman, 2003). Furthermore, the social aspects of play reveal that children engage in parallel play in which children at early childhood play with similar toys, in a similar manner, but do not interact with each other. At this stage children also engage in onlooker play where they simply watch others play by looking silently or making comments of encouragement, but do not actually participate themselves. As children grow older into middle childhood, they engage into more sophisticated associative play where two or more children actually interact with one another by sharing or borrowing toys or material, although they do not do the same thing. Later on in life children engage in cooperative play in which children genuinely interact with one another, taking turns, playing games, or devising contests (Feldman 2003).

By participation in social games and play the child is able to develop intellectual behaviours that are both cognitive (numbering, imagination, problem solving, language, understanding, comprehension, attention etc.) and social (child's ability to; give and receive help from peers, keep friends and playmates, manage conflict, learn future gender roles, manage success and failure, live and work together with others, participate in community tasks, celebrate with others and feel for others in times of worry and distress).

### **Theoretical Considerations of Emotional Intelligence**

The paper is guided by the Trait Emotional Intelligence Theory, the Bar-On model of EI, and the Goleman model of EI.

#### **Trait Emotional Intelligence Theory**

The trait-approach model by Goleman uses self-report measurement tools like the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) to assess the components of EI. The original version of the EQi comprises 133 items, that is, short sentences, and uses a 5-point response scale that comprises a textual response format that ranges from "very seldom or not true of me" (1) to "very often true of me or true of me" (5). It is appropriate for people aged 17 years and above and it takes approximately 40 minutes to undertake the test. Bar-On (1997) argued that emotionally intelligent people are normally flexible, optimistic, effective in solving problems, realistic, and coping with stress, without losing their control.

#### **Bar-On Model of Emotional Intelligence**

Bar-On's (2006) model as a trait model of EI assesses the EI using five components, namely: Stress management, intrapersonal skills, adaptability, general mood, and interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills comprise the relationship management whereas intrapersonal skills focus on personal concentration and contribution and the capacity to organize and conduct independent initiatives. Stress management skills entail the ability to remain cool, use good coping mechanisms, and create stronger support systems. Adaptability skills comprise strong skills for solving problems, flexibility, and the capacity to reframe problems as well as solutions. Lastly, General Mood is an indicator of resilience and optimism.

## **Goleman's model of Emotional Intelligence**

Goleman's (1995) model is a competence model of EI. Goleman brought to light the term EI in his book in which he noted that EI entails five essential elements which are: motivating oneself, being aware of personal emotions, managing emotions, handling relationships, and recognizing other's emotions. Later, Goleman (2001) refined this model and developed a four dimensions competency model. Each of these four dimensions serves as the foundation for the development of other learned abilities or competencies required in the organizational sphere. According to Boyatzis et al., (2000) four dimensions are further grouped into 20 competencies which are: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management.

## **Relationship between African indigenous play and emotional intelligence (Evidence from some studies carried out in African cultures)**

### **Nyota and Mapara (2008) Amongst the Shona people of Zimbabwe**

In a qualitative study carried out by Nyota and Mapara (2008) amongst the Shona people of Zimbabwe, it was discovered that Shona traditional children's games and songs lead to and provide a rich environment or social context that sustains the flowering of children's curiosity and exploration of their immediate world as they play. The children explore the social context of games and play songs through guided apprenticeship that is greatly rewarding and motivational. The virtues and values learnt are varied and practical. Some of them are good behaviour, hard work, competition, handling success and failure and leadership. It was observed that the young Shona child learns to play games through guided participation in a mentor-mentee relationship with more experienced peers. The steps observed during the teaching of a game may include the following:

- Arousing the learner's interest in a new task
- The mentor simplifies the task so that the child thinks of best strategies.
- The mentor scaffolds the particular tasks so that they are within the learner's ability, for instance by doing some steps jointly.
- The mentor interprets the activity so that cognitive understanding will facilitate mastery.
- Solving the problem – anticipating mistakes and guiding the learner to minimise or correct them.
- The mentor instils in the learner enthusiasm by encouraging the desire to achieve and by reducing boredom and self-doubt.

The researchers observed that many social skills can be learnt through Shona traditional children's games. For example, the children learn to share tools used for the games such as *nhodo* (a game similar to Jacks) and *ndondowhere* necessary. They learn to manage conflict such as to respond to a playmate's accusation, for example, when a playmate says, "*Wabira*" (You have cheated), especially when the accuser has been beaten in a competitive game. They can also learn to keep friends and playmates. They can learn to manage and deal with those playmates who are not always understanding and self-sacrificing, for instance one who is always quick to denounce friendship, "*Hausishamwariyangufuti*" (You are after all not my

friend). These skills have consequences that teach the children about social interaction from youth to their adult years.

### **Wirdze (2012) amongst the Nso of the North West Region of Cameroon**

Wirdze (2012) highlighted some indigenous games commonly played by children and some emotional skills acquired by children as summarise in table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Children's games and emotional skills**

<b>Games</b>	<b>Emotional skills</b>
<b><i>Mbang</i></b>	That I should be honest to myself and that cheating is not good. It helps me to know that I must resolve conflicts with my friends by first examining my own self. It helps me to learn how to keep my friends by playing the game in an honest manner because when you cheat your friends will not like to play with you.
<b><i>Shigue</i></b>	It teaches me how to be honest and accept defeat. It teaches me how to solve problems with my friends since there is always disagreement. It teaches me that one cannot live alone, you need friends in order to play.
<b><i>Quakilar (touch and run)</i></b>	We play this game not to win but just to be able to look after ourselves as friends. It helps me to sustain my friends. It teaches me responsibility, that is one is responsible for something until one hands it over to another person. I have been able to maintain my friends because we often play together.
<b><i>Yaya Woni (mother and children pretend play)</i></b>	I learn how to cook food. I learn how to take care of my family. how to live together as a family and how to receive visitors by being generous and kind to them. I learn how to interact with my friends. I learn how to feed a child and how to share with others.
<b><i>Quang (Stone throw and catch)</i></b>	I learn how to be together with my friends and how to cooperate with them.
<b><i>Kuse (robe skip and manipulation game)</i></b>	From it we know the various body parts, perseverance and acceptance of defeat.

From the findings, Nso children are involved in games like *mbang*, *shique*, *quakilar*, *quang*, *kuse*, and *yaya woni*. Following the quotations of children from the table above, the following emotional skills can be highlighted:

- Conflict resolution through self-examination
- Sustenance of Friendship through honesty in play
- Honesty and acceptance of defeat
- Responsibility and compassion towards one another
- Performance of future roles like cooking and care for younger ones (see appendix 15 for future roles that children learn from games)

- Cooperation and interaction with friends

## Conclusion

The paper concludes that children have a high level of EI concerning intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability, and general mood acquired from participating in indigenous play. Therefore, children should enhance their interpersonal and intrapersonal communication skills, stress management ability, be flexible in dealing with the inevitable daily challenges, and have a positive general mood to help them remain optimistic about life. This will be fundamental in coping with the life stressors encountered by children, which include and not limited to financial stressors, academic demands, test anxiety, and relationships. Further, other stressors that are related to the changes in lifestyle and new responsibilities should be identified and strategies to resolve them established.

Culture plays an important role in determining how an individual recognizes, organizes and applies emotional intelligence. The concept is very relevant in regulating people's behavior as well as their ability at performing different tasks. Emotional intelligence can be learnt through both formal educational system and cultural practices. Interesting finding is that both negative and positive aspects of emotional intelligence can be learned through the process of social and cultural transformation. These social skills need to be consciously developed in the students in order to excel on different tasks assigned them and become much more independent minded with entrepreneurial ability.

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