



# SIX (6) TO (13) YEARS OLD CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT IN ERRANDS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SENSE OF INITIATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the high demand for persons with creative skills in every sector of society, the need to nurture such skills in African children is still underemphasized. Advancement in technology and globalization has kept children in our modern world more occupied with electronic gadgets. Most of them thus hardly have time to engage in house chores or run errands for their parents and seniors. Also, the rapid involvement of Women who are considered primary child caregivers in white collar jobs and businesses keeps them very busy with limited time to engage the children in chores or errands. The tendency has been to higher maids or other caregivers who perform every chore at home living the children with very little or no opportunity to partake in task. The relevance of the skills that children develop in the course of running errands has been overlooked. This paper thus aims to highlight the degree to which children develop initiative as they engage in running errands. Secondly, it aims to compare the degree to which children in rural and urban areas develop initiative as they engage in running errands. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted to obtain questionnaire data from a sample of 40 6-13 years old rural and urban Meta children and 120 members of their social setting. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. It was realised that; Meta children exhibit creative dispositions (71%) in running errands and rural children tend to exhibit more creative dispositions ( $X^2$  cal (18.549) >  $X^2$  crit value (9.488) in errands than the urban ones. It is thus necessary for parents and care givers to engage children in running errands.

## KEYWORDS

Errands, 6 to 13 Years old children, Initiative and Creativity.



## INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that every child has the right to a cultural identity as upheld by the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child, much still needs to be done to bring out the Africentric perspective of child development. Creativity as an aspect of child development has been mostly looked at from the Euro-American point of view where the child rearing practices and cultural values are different from those of the African context. European children tend to be surprised at the idea of performing chores at home (Klien & Goodwin, 2013). When they attempt to participate in house chores, it is usually limited to very personal things like making up their beds (Goodnow, Bowes, Warton, Dawes & Taylor, 1991). Europeans from middle class communities see children's household work as a developmental liability (Allais and Hagemann 2008). Contrarily, children in indigenous heritage communities of the Americas where children learn by observing, take initiative as integrated responsible contributors in the family and community voluntarily (Paradise and Rogoff, 2009)

Children's creativity to Richard & Clyde (2010) is concerned with how children take risk and make connections. It involves children initiating their own learning, making choices and decisions. Being creative enables children to explore many processes, media and materials and to make new things emerge as a result. Similarly, Lopes (1995) argued that creativity shows one's uniqueness. Creativity to him is the ability to see things in a new and unusual light, to see problems that no one else may even realize exist, and then come up with new, unusual, and effective solutions to these problems. Every child is born with creative potential, but this potential may be stifled if care is not taken to nurture and stimulate creativity. Running of errands is one of the creative activities that children engage in.

An errand is a short journey made in order to get or do something especially for someone else. A child's initiative in running errands in this work is looked at in terms of their ability to; get other necessary things done when sent to do another, identify and get things done without being told, substitute absence of one thing for another, ability to get or do the right thing and present good and smart feed back. To inculcate responsibility, caregivers allocate their children household duties and send them on errands; these include (but are not limited to) fetching objects and purchasing items. Such errands foster the acquisition of cognitive, social, and economic competencies. Oluyomi (2006) reveals that Yoruba children who engage in purchasing items and retrieving specific objects for the caregiver had a significantly higher performance on the Yoruba Mental Subscale compared to children who did not engage in such errands. Similarly, Ogunnaike (2002) holds that responsibility training is an essential component of child-rearing practices in several African societies. To inculcate responsibility, caregivers allocate their children household duties and send them on errands. Children in the context of this study are limited within 6 to 13 years old.

6 to 13 years old children fall within middle and late childhood where sexual energy from the phallic stage to Freud is repressed and diverted to other activities that leads to skill development. To Erickson (1963), such children experience a crises of Industry versus Inferiority. The industry that characterizes them at this stage

gives some of them the leverage to take initiative when engaged in chores or sent on an errand. Children who do well and are recognized for their achievements develop a sense of success (industry) and master the basic skills required in society while the reverse is a general feeling of inferiority, uselessness and futility (Erickson, 1963). To Piaget (1962), 6 to 13 years old children are at the level of concrete and formal operational thought. They are able to take another's point of view and take into account more than one perspective simultaneously. Such ability makes them able to think divergently thus can take initiative when sent on errands. Similarly Nsamenang (2005) argues that children of this age group fall within the social ontogenic stage of social apprentice (childhood) with the developmental task to recognize, cognize social roles, acknowledge self in connectedness as well as engage in peer group interaction and work and social entrée (puberty) with the developmental task to recognize and adjust to changes, perform domestic chores and do participate in rites of passage if there is any (Nsamenang, 2005). The developmental task to recognize, cognize social roles vary for different cultures. This task for Meta children is based on children mastering craft in making things like baskets, chairs, brooms; being able to work on the farm, care for younger siblings and do house hold chores. In the course their engagement in the above processes, children exhibit the creative dispositions in them. Parents often appreciate and accept children who initiate ideas and perform developmental task well which motivates them to exhibit more skills.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This paper has been examined within the framework of the Developmental Niche Theory by Super and Harkness (1986). The theory is conceptualised as a way to relate the systematic organization of human environments provided by cultures to the daily micro-environments which influence early development (Super and Harkness, 1986). The Developmental Niche has three major but interconnected components each of which is directly related to where and with whom parents or care takers live, what they believe about children and how they practice or implement their beliefs.

In terms of the physical and social settings in which the child lives, it is centered on the kind of company a child keeps (for example in rural Kenya, families usually consist of eight or more children who serve as readymade playmates and caretakers); the size and shape of one's living space; eating and sleeping schedule (Super and Harkness, 1986). As Bandura (1989) upheld in his social learning theory, children learn by observing and imitating what others around them do and would perform better in skills learned if motivated. In this regard, when people in a child's social setting such as the parents, elder siblings and peers perform well in house chores as well as give them the leverage to engage in chores and run errands, there is a tendency that they will learn and exhibit initiative in the process.

According to Supper & Harkness (1986), the physical and social setting in which a child lives is not only important in shaping the child's behaviour through the kinds of activities available, but also through the defining activities of other people present. The identity and relationship of the others are, of course, part of the

setting itself. Similarly, the identity and activities of the caretakers are influential; for they determine the degree of playful interaction (Supper & Harkness 1986). The commonly practiced activities of parents and others around children's environment determine the kinds of errands the children will engage in and the degree to which they will develop initiative in the process. Most Meta parents in the rural area for example often send their children to go get or do things at the farm while those in the urban setting (mostly clerical workers) send their children to get things from the shop or pass across a message to friends or neighbours. This implies the creative disposition children exhibit in running errands can be influenced by the activities or occupations their parents.

One social setting in which children live might comprise small, inner-city apartments and rainforest environments, while another includes farming homesteads and suburban developments with yards and parks. Objects in these settings differentially induce appropriate activities. Televisions and computers are less likely to lead to high energy needs than are soccer fields and gardens that require hoeing. Similarly, a high concentration of peers may lead to more physically active games than a setting with primarily adults (Super and Harkness, 1986).

### **The culturally regulated customs of child care and child rearing**

This component of the developmental niche focuses on culturally regulated customs and child rearing practices. Customs, as used here, refer to techniques of protecting, teaching, and socializing that are so commonly used by members of the community and so thoroughly integrated into the larger culture that individual caretakers do not need to rationalize them or even give them conscious consideration. They are likely to be regarded by members of a culture as the obvious, reasonable, and natural way to do things (Supper & Harkness, 1986). Customs include the routines of daily care such as age-appropriate activities that give practice or preparation for adult life (such as child tending and homework), and more complex, institutional mechanisms (such as formal schooling and rites of passage) (Supper & Harkness, 1986). Similarly, the kinds of errands or task assigned to Meta children by members of their social setting is a function of their age. Task considered to be more tedious and complicated is assigned to older children.

### **The psychology of the caretakers**

The third component addresses the psychological characteristics of the child's caretakers, who include parents, teachers and many elder siblings in the African culture (Super and Harkness, 1986). The psychology of caretakers - their beliefs, values, and affective orientation - organizes not only their immediate behaviour towards children but also many larger decisions, such as which settings are most appropriate for children of a certain age or sex (Super and Harkness, 1986). When the beliefs and values of the caretakers of children about their creative dispositions in running errands is positive, they would definitely encourage and provide opportunities for children to engage in task and run errands for adults in the community. On the other hand, if such beliefs and customs of a people concerning creative dispositions children exhibit in running errands is

negative, the children might not be given the opportunity to engage in task and develop initiative in the course as well. Another dimension of the psychology of the caretakers is parental ethno theories about the needs of children, the nature of development, and the appropriateness of certain child-rearing techniques for specific goals. There are, to be sure, specific cultural beliefs concerning the value, or danger, of physical exertion; probably more pervasive are beliefs concerning what activities children 'ought' to be involved in which, incidentally, may vary in their energetic requirements (Super and Harkness, 1986). The 'ought to do' and 'ought not to do' behaviours defined by parents for children do influence their engagement in task or errands and thus the degree to which they can develop initiative in the process. However, children are not merely active accommodators but are also creative social producers of their own worlds (Nsamenang, 2005). This implies, children's creativity does not only end at their observation and reproduction of adult behaviour but also their sense of originality.

### **Empirical Perspective**

#### **Children's exhibition of initiative in errands in rural and urban settings**

In Cohen's (2001) cross-cultural study where he explored the extent and nature of children's participation in household labour in three social settings: a Southern-Indian fishing village, a Norwegian town and a Canadian large urban centre, found out that children's housework is an important feature of family life in all three social settings but the amount of their labour and the level of gender segregation vary. The results of this study proved that the children of the rural area of Southern India contribute more to their families' domestic work than the Norwegian town children and far more than the Canadian city children. These differences to Cohen (2001) may be explained in terms of degrees of industrialization and urbanization. Children's Labour Roles in Rural Families in Southern India as in many developing countries are crucial to the production of peasants' families and the peasants' economy. It is not uncommon for five years olds to babysit younger children, fetch water or look after the necessary errands. These chores, undertaken under parental supervision, are conceived of as both part of household economy and an essential aspect of socialization.

In one of the few studies examining cultural differences in children's initiative in doing household work, mothers from an Indigenous-heritage community in Mexico often reported that their 6- to 8-year-old children took initiative to contribute to a wide range of complex family household work activities and sibling care. They did so more than children in a cosmopolitan Mexican community with a long history of extensive Western schooling and related practices, where children were reported to engage in a narrower range of simpler chores, and more often under parental pressure and contractual arrangements (Mejia-Arauz, 2009).

Dembele (1999) in his article on "the cumulative group of early childhood and development" case of Bambara children, Bugula of Southern Mali identified some creative activities in rural children's performance of household chores such as care for the youngest and running of errands. Young Bambara children participate actively in daily activities as children, without any gender implication. These activities are part of the training

necessary for social integration. Such activities help children develop a sense of responsibility, confidence, and authority (Dembele 1999). Boys and girls, from three years and above, are able to assist in house hold work in various ways. Boys and girls alike look after the youngest when there are no adults around. When adults are present, older boys and girls must help watch over the youngest. Adults do not interfere until the situation is considered too serious for the children to manage.

Obedience is tested at an early age through running of errands. Fetching drinking water for adults and older children is the most common activity assigned by the Bambara society to children. Household chores, asserted as domestic tasks fall in the domain and obligations of girls. Boys do not and are not allowed to performing such tasks (Dembele 1999). As children participate in these activities, they exhibit their creative dispositions.

### Contextual Issues

It is commonplace to see children engaged in activities in which one can identify their creativity such as running of errands among the Meta people of Cameroon. The kinds of errands children engage in vary by sex. This observation is in line with Nsamenang (1999) when he says boys are trained to act “father” from an early age and girls socialized earlier to be gentle and caring as priming in home craft. Additionally, children in the Meta culture interact with and run errands for adults. In the latter regard, children assume the role of message bearers or porters. When one carefully observes children in these activities, it is easy to see the creative dispositions in them. A sense of initiative is exhibited in what they do. The socio-cultural environment of the Meta child in Cameroon as in other African cultures seems to have an effect on their creativity. For this reason, and by way of providing some background to this study, the next section discusses the socio-cultural nature of the Meta society.

Meta is a clan consisting of a conglomeration of 29 contiguous villages that share one language and ancestry. It is located in the North West Region of Cameroon at about 35km to the North West of Bamenda, the regional headquarters. The clan is situated on the Western highlands of Cameroon towering up to 21,000 meters above sea level. The main agricultural products of Meta people include palm oil, palm wine, palm kernel, kola nuts, coffee, goats, sheep and pigs. These products are mostly under the charge of men while the women are involved in the production of food crops, such as cocoyam, cassava, plantains, sweet potatoes, yellow yams, beans, corn, egusi, garri and a variety of vegetables. Meta people are also involved in the production of handicrafts, particularly raffia bags (produced by men), baskets (produced by women) and brooms (produced by children). These products and agricultural surpluses are traded at Tad Market, the main weekly market located in a village, called Nyen. Other small village markets such as Mbon, Tang, Ejeh and so on, scattered throughout Meta, serve as secondary venues for trading local goods and agricultural products. Occasionally, some of the surpluses are taken as far away as Bamenda town for sale. Porridge cocoyam known as “*nang tari*” is the traditional dish of the people.

When a child is weaned off breast milk, the mother might leave the child at home with an older child or aged woman when going out. At the age of 5 or 6 the child is assigned minor tasks such as fetching water and wood or sweeping the compound. From this age the girl child is more under the influence of the mother. She follows the mother to the farm, joins her in cooking and takes care of the young ones. The boy child begins to perform task for his father. These tasks may include, tending goats and carrying the fathers' bag when he is going out on meetings. This rich socio-cultural environment of the Meta child leaves them with the opportunity to take initiative when given the opportunity to engage in chores or run errands. Developing such skill is vital in enhancing children's creativity and the development of problem solving skills. This aspect of child development has been however been overlooked and is yet to be adequately explored. The few works dedicated to this subject have examined child development mainly through Western lenses. The Meta society with its natural and rich socio-cultural background serves as an ideal to boost up the Africentric perspective of creativity as an aspect of child development. In this light, more information would be added on the few works that have been dedicated to this subject.

### **The Problem**

Whether Meta children demonstrate initiative in the course of running errands is an empirical question. It is a suspicion that Meta children, like children elsewhere, do exhibit and develop a sense of initiative as they engage in performing African childhood roles specifically with regards running errands. The general tendency is that Africans in general and Meta people in particular overlook the creative skills children develop as they engage in chores and run errands. They seem not to recognise the value of such skills to the growth and development of children. The above concerns prompted this study to explore the degree to which children exhibit initiative as they engage in running errands. It also aimed to examining whether locality influences the degree to which children exhibit initiative as they engage in errands. The study therefore seeks to answer the questions:

- 1) To what extent does children engagement in running errands lead to the development of initiative?
- 2) Is there a significant difference in rural and urban children's development of initiative as they engage in running errands?

### **Research Methods**

A cross-sectional research design was used to obtain qualitative and quantitative data from a cross-section of Meta children aged 6 to 13 years in ancestral Meta land and the town of Bamenda. Data was collected from the children, their parents, siblings and neighbours. Recent estimates place the population of Meta at about 80,000 (MECUDA, 2007). A sample of 40 Meta children and 120 adults in their social setting were recruited for the study. Out of the 40 children, 20 were drawn from the town of Bamenda and the other 20 from three selected Meta villages. This sampling schema was necessary to compare rural and urban Meta children on focal variables of the study. For each child studied, a sample of three persons (a parent, sibling and one person around the neighborhood) was drawn to seek their opinion about their perception on the degree to which

children exhibited initiative in the course of running errands. The samples were drawn through purposive and snowball techniques. Based on the fact that the study focused on 6 to 13 years old Meta children who were skilful in running errands and on information from the president of MECUDA (Meta Cultural and Development Association) Bamenda branch as well as other Meta indigenes, the 3 villages; Mbemi, Nyen and Guneku and 3 neighborhoods; Mbengwi road, Meta Quarter, and Travellers in an urban area had the kind of children sought for. Through snowball, some of the children were identified and their caregivers or people who engage them in errands were identified. Questionnaire with structured and open-ended items was interviewer administered. After the respondent characteristics, they were asked questions such as: do you often send the concerned child to go and bring or give things or to go and pass across a message to someone? Does the said child use the initiative when sent? What actually does the child do? A few cases were observed running errands. The instrument was tested for validity and reliability and ethical issues respected. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. Thematic and content analysis was used to analyse the open-ended responses.

## Findings

**Table 1: Frequency distribution of initiative skills children exhibit in running errands**

Initiatives involved in running errands						
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
F	40	47	30	15	10	142

### KEY:

A = Get other necessary things done when sent to do another

B = Identifies and get things done without being told

C = Substitutes absence of one thing for another

D = Ability to get or do the right thing

E = Présents good and smart feed back

Total frequency for initiative involved in running errands = 142

Number of children observed = 40

Number of classifications for initiatives involved in running errands observed = 5

Mean creativity in running errands =  $142 \div 40 = 3.55$

% creativity for errands =  $3.35 \div 5 \times 100 = 71\%$

Most (71%) children exhibit creative dispositions in running errands. This implies above 70% of children are able to use their initiative to get other necessary things done though sent to do another, identifies and get things done without being told, substitute absence of one thing for another, do things rightly and presents good and smart feed back when sent.

Meta children, aged 6-13 years highly exhibited (71%) creative skills in running errands.



### Creative Dispositions Exhibited in Running Errands



**Figure 1: Meta children’s use of initiative in running errands\**

Figure 1. Illustrate some of the creative skills children exhibit in running errands. Most of the children are able to use their initiative when sent or assigned task. The child to the left of figure 1 is just 9 years old but she performs almost all the duties of the mother in her absence. She is the eldest of the 4 kids in the house. When the mother leaves for the farm, she bathes, clothes, heats food and feeds the young ones even when not asked to. When it’s getting late, she makes up the fire and heats bathing water for the mother. The child to the right of figure 1 is just 7 years old but she takes the initiative to cook for herself and the twin brother when hungry and left at home all by themselves.

### Rural and Urban Children’s exhibition of initiative in Running Errands

**Table 2: Frequency distribution and Cal and Crit X<sup>2</sup> value for initiative exhibited in rural and urban children’s engagement in running errands**

Initiatives involved in running errands								X <sup>2</sup> Cal	X <sup>2</sup> Crit	df
Status	f	A	B	C	D	E	Total	18.549>	9.488	4
Rural	f	34	34	12	8	8	96			
Urban	f	6	13	18	7	2	64			
Total	f	40	47	30	15	18	142			

**KEY:**

- A = Get other necessary things done when sent to do another
- B = Identifies and get things done without being told
- C = Substitutes absence of one thing for another
- D = Ability to get or do the right thing

There exist a significant difference ( $X^2$  cal (18.549) >  $X^2$  crit value (9.488)) in the degree to which rural and urban children exhibit initiative as they engage in errands. Rural children exhibit more initiative in errands than the urban ones.

### Discussion

Meta children's high use of initiative in running errands implies most of them are able to get other necessary things done when sent to do another, identifies and get things done without being told, substitutes absence of one thing for another and gets or do the right thing when sent. Running of errands by children is a cultural custom of child care (Supper and Harkness, 1986). Children are often sent by their care takers and people around their environment to do things like buy items from shop, pass across a message, fetch water or food, harvest or work on the farm as well as do house hold chores. It is a cultural norm among the Meta people for children to be submissive, respectful obedient and be readily available and willing to run errands for their parents and elderly members of their social setting. This finding also falls in line with Erickson's (1963) views that children in late child hood are industrious and learn to win recognition by producing things and Nsamenang's (2005) opinion that such children have the developmental task to recognize and cognize social roles. This characteristic of children in the said age group keeps them active thus the tendency to exhibit their creative dispositions.

The significant difference in the degree to which the rural and urban Meta children develop initiative in the course of running errands is an indicator that children in the villages are more able to take initiative when sent on errands than those in the urban area. Children in the village are more often sent on errands than those in the urban centers. More still, children in the village are often assigned to do more complicated task or errands like to go and do work on the farm, house hold chores and sell than those in the urban centers. This stimulates and develops the intellect of the rural child. Most of the children in the urban areas were only being sent to nearby shops to buy. This finding is consistent with Cohen's (2001) cross-cultural study where he explored the extent and nature of children's participation in household labour in three social settings: a Southern-Indian fishing village, a Norwegian town and a Canadian large urban centre. The results proved that in all three areas, the amount of participation of children in the rural area of Southern India contributed more to their families' domestic work than the Norwegian town children and far more than the Canadian city children. In the same light, Bambara children, of Southern Mali demonstrate creative skills in their performance of social chores such as care for the youngest and running errands (Dembele 1999).

### Conclusion

Based on the degree to which Africans overlook the value of engaging children in house chores and errands towards the development of creative skills, this paper has been focused on identifying the creative skills children develop as they engage in errands. Specifically, the paper has examined the 6 to 13 years old

children's engagement in running errands and the development of initiative as a creative skill in the process. It also compared the development of initiative amongst rural and urban children. To ensure clarity of the variables concerned, the key concepts such as errands, 6 to 13 years old children, initiative and creativity have been examined from a conceptual and empirical perspective. The study was discussed with the framework of the Developmental Niche Theory by Supper and Harkness. Using a cross sectional survey, and a semi structured questionnaire data was obtained and analysed. The results revealed that Meta children exhibit and develop a sense of initiative as they engage in errands. Also, there exist a significant difference in the degree to which rural and urban Meta children exhibit initiative as they engage in errands. Rural children exhibit more initiative in errands than urban ones. It is therefore necessary for caregivers of Meta children in urban areas to engage the children more in task so as to develop their sense of initiative and creativity. This study was limited to Meta children thus request the need for a similar work to be carried on children from other African cultures.

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