

Lea Kipkorir: Forgotten Pioneer of Early Childhood Education in Kenya

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Abstract

Lea I. Kipkorir is one of the forgotten pioneers of early childhood education, ECE, in Kenya. This paper examines her life, career and contributions to the field. A 1969 graduate of Harvard University, Lea rose through the ranks to the heights of her career as the Director of Kenya Institute of Education, KIE, the institution charged with designing and implementation of the curriculum in Kenya. Her notable contributions to ECE in Kenya are in six areas. 1) Her career in ECE changed a common perception that early childhood education is for 'academic failures in the school system.' 2) Strengthened partnerships with Bernard Van Leer Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation and UNICEF. These partnerships transformed day-care centers into pre-school segments of the education system and initiated early childhood development, ECD, programme which was used to qualify entry to primary school in Kenya. 3) A member of a specialist interest group (SIG) on ECE with partners from Jamaica and India. They developed ECD programme, Kenya Pre-School Education Project and a culturally sensitive curriculum. 4) Head of Kenya Pre-School Education Project at KIE, which developed curriculum modules for nursery schools and day centers, training of teachers, caregivers and supervisors. 5) As director of KIE, Lea played a significant role in the transfer of pre-school education to the Ministry of Education in 1979. 6) As director, she led the establishment of NACECE and DICECE and other policies that resulted in significant growth and expansion of ECE from the national level to grassroots across the country.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Kenya, Pioneer, Women, Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Lea I. Kipkorir is one of the forgotten pioneers of early childhood education in Kenya. In this paper, the life, career and profound contribution of Lea I. Kipkorir to the field of early childhood education in Kenya are examined. Lea Kipkorir was a 1969 graduate of Harvard University who rose through the ranks to the heights of her career as the Director of Kenya Institute of Education (KIE). KIE was established in 1964 and charged with designing and implementation of the curriculum in Kenya (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992). Lea Kipkorir's contribution to early childhood education and policies in Kenya are notable in six main areas. 1) Her choice to pursue a career in early childhood education (ECE) despite her superior academic qualifications changed a common perception that a career in early childhood education is for 'academic failures in the school system.' 2) Lea's successful leadership at KIE justified early childhood education as an important area of child development. Lea's major contribution during her term at KIE was the strengthening of partnerships with Bernard Van Leer Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation and UNICEF. The partnership between KIE and the Van Leer Foundation was one of the most successful because it transformed day-care centers into pre-school segments of the education system in Kenya. Another significant outcome was the development of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme, which was eventually used to qualify entry to primary school in Kenya. 3) Lea was also a member of a specialist interest group (SIG) on ECE with partners from as far as Jamaica and India. Key outcomes of these partnerships were the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme, Kenya Pre-School Education project and development of curriculum that is culturally sensitive. 4) Lea was also the leader of Kenya Pre-School Education Project at KIE. The aim of the project was to develop modules of curricula material for use in nursery schools and day centers and to experiment with training of teachers, caregivers and supervisors. 5) While serving as the director of KIE, Lea played a significant role in the transfer of Pre-school education from the department of Social Services to the Ministry of Education in 1979. 6) During her term as the director of KIE, Lea also led the establishment of NACECE and DICECE and other curriculum policies that resulted in significant growth and expansion of ECE from the national level to

grassroots across the country. In 1982 a team of experts conducted an in-depth evaluation of the work of Van Leer project unit and recommended the curricula, teacher education, supervisor and training practices developed by the unit be adopted (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992).

Lea made significant contributions to early childhood education in Kenya. Educators in Kenya, and particularly those in early childhood education, ought to recognize and give credit to Lea Kipkorir for her crucial role in the development of early childhood education in Kenya.

BEGINNINGS OF LEA KIPKORIR: PARENTS/SIBLINGS/SCHOOLING/MARRIAGE/FAMILY/CAREER¹

What is the justification of the life of Lea Kipkorir in her career path in early childhood?

¹Kipkorir, B.E. *Descent from Cherang'any Hills. Memoirs of a reluctant academic. pp. 343-384. Macmillan, Kenya. 2009*

education? It is likely the interconnections on her life journey triggered her interest and leadership in ECE in Kenya. It is also likely that Lea's early life including her family's supportive role in establishing the first catholic mission (and schools) in Kapnyeberai and Lessos areas in Nandi district opened a door for her to have quality education, graduating to the nearby girls' school of Chepterit girls and later to Loreto Msongari in Nairobi. By reflecting on Lea's life, education and career, it gives any Historian's an opportunity to analyze critical details necessary to understand and access subtle information necessary to appreciate the paper. It also presents an opportunity to appreciate the milestones in her life to give us a better picture of the interconnections that supported her leadership role in ECE in Kenya (Kipkorir, 2009)

Birth and Early Life

Lea Itta Sigei was born on December 25, 1943 to George Kipkutwa arap Terer and Martina Tiongoi. The family lived in Terige Village, Songoliet Location, Lessos area in then Nandi colonial district. Lea was the third born child of the family's eight children. Lea was born to a progressive and Christian Nandi family. Her father was a sub-chief during the colonial years, and a pioneer of western education and modern (western) agricultural practices in the district. Lea's father and others had experienced formal education and Christianity in Kakamega district while receiving primary education at Mukumu Mission School. Upon their return home, they pioneered the first Roman Catholic parish in the Nandi district. Lea's father died when she was eleven years old and Lea and her family were looked after by her uncle, Frederick Taboi, then a driver in the Kenya Police department (Kipkorir, 2009)

Education

Lea followed her father's path in education and attended affluent and high quality Catholic missionary schools at the height of Kenya's independence. She attended Mukumu Girls boarding school for her primary education, Chepterit Girls' for her Junior High School (1959-1963) and Loreto Msongari High School for Senior High School in 1964. Upon graduating from high school, she joined Royal University College in Nairobi (now University of Nairobi) in 1965-68 to pursue her undergraduate studies in History, Government and Political Science. She then proceeded to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA to pursue a Master's degree in Education in 1968-69 (Kipkorir, 2009)

Work Experience

Lea's illustrious career began with a humble beginning as a vacationing teacher in 1965 at Kapkenda Girls' High school, a prestigious Catholic High School in the Kenya highlands. Toward the end of her undergraduate

studies in 1968, she took on a job as a research assistant at the Experimental Child Development project at the University of Nairobi. The project was led by a Harvard-based couple professors, John and Beatrice Whiting and funded by Carnegie Corporation, New York. She continued to work with the couple as a research assistant when the project was moved to the Child Development Research Unit at the University of Nairobi in 1970-72 (Kipkorir, 2009).

Lea started her career at the Kenya Institute of Education, KIE, after obtaining her Master's degree from Harvard University. She later served as the Project leader at KIE and spearheaded a successful long term partnership between Van Leer Foundation Project and Kenya Institute of Education between 1972-85. She was appointed as Acting Deputy Director of Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) in 1985 and served as the Director of Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) in 1986-1994. She retired from KIE in 1994 to join her husband as Kenya's ambassador to the United States of America in 1994-1998. She was awarded a Presidential Silver Star Award for her contribution to ECE in Kenya in 1989 (Kipkorir, 2009).

Family life

Lea was married to Dr. B.E. Kipkorir on the 14th of June 1969 in Cambridge, England. The couple had four children, two boys and twin girls. Dr. B.E. Kipkorir was an alumni of Alliance Boys High School, Makerere University (undergraduate in History) and Cambridge University, United Kingdom (Ph.D. in History). Dr. B.E. Kipkorir worked at Sirikwa County Council Deputy County Clerk (1965-1966), joined Faculty at Department of History, University of Nairobi (1969-83), was the Executive Chairman and Managing Director of Kenya Commercial Bank (1983-91) and was appointed Kenyan Ambassador to the United States of America (1994-97) (Kipkorir, 2009).

Death

Lea was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995 while serving as an ambassador's spouse in Washington, DC. After a hard-fought battle for close to four years, Lea lost her battle and died of breast cancer on March 3rd, 1999, in Nairobi, Kenya. She was buried on March 13th, 1999 at her Kapachelang'a home in Kenya (Kipkorir, 2009).

LEA I. KIPKORIR'S CONTRIBUTION TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN KENYA

Contribution to perceptions of ECE in Kenya

Lea's choice to pursue a career in early childhood education changed a common perception that a career in early childhood education is for 'academic failures in the school system.' Lea's early formal education at Catholic mission schools (then considered the best schools in Kenya) may have given her a competitive advantage to obtain admission at the Royal University College (now university of Nairobi). It was during her time as an undergraduate student at the history department that Lea worked as a research assistant on the Experimental Child Development project housed at the university of Nairobi. The project was led by a Harvard-based couple professors, John and Beatrice Whiting and funded by Carnegie Corporation, New York. It was through this project that Lea obtained a scholarship to pursue a master's degree in early childhood education at Cambridge University in Boston, Massachusetts (Kipkorir, 2009; Kipkorir and Njenga, 1993)

Lea's admission to an Ivy League school is likely to have played a major role in her contribution to early childhood education in Kenya. Historically, a career in nursery school (pre-school) education in Kenya was associated with "failures in the school system." Thus Lea's admission to an Ivy League school to pursue a graduate degree in education and later her pursuit of a career in early childhood education for the rest of her life greatly changed this perception.

Exemplary Leadership at KIE

Lea's contribution to ECE in Kenya was through her exemplary leadership at KIE. Her leadership at KIE was her justification for ECE as an important area of child development. Almost Lea's entire career life was at KIE. Lea returned to the University of Nairobi with her husband in 1969 and rejoined the remnants of the Whiting's project. Thereafter she started her career at KIE as a leader of the partnership project with Van Leer Foundation in 1972-1985. She was appointed the acting deputy director and promoted to acting director of KIE in 1985. She was confirmed Director of KIE in 1986, a position she held until 1994 when she retired to join her husband as Kenyan ambassador to the United States of America (Kipkorir, 2009; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992).

Lea's major contribution during her term at KIE was the strengthening of partnerships with Bernard Van Leer Foundation, Aga Khan and UNICEF. Lea was also a member of a specialist interest group (SIG) on ECE with partners from as far as Jamaica and India. Major outcomes of these partnerships included: i) The Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme; ii) Kenya Pre-School Education Project, KPSEP and development of a curriculum that is culturally sensitive; iii) Transfer of Pre-school education from the Ministry of Social Services to the Ministry of Education; and iv) Establishment of NACECE and DICECE and other policies that led to significant growth and expansion of ECE in Kenya (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992).

I) Early Childhood Development Programme.

The partnership between KIE and the Van Leer Foundation is considered one of the most successful. Starting in 1972, Lea pieced together a partnership between Bernard van Leer Foundation and KIE. The aim of the partnership was to develop an idea to transform day-care centers into pre-school segments of the education system in Kenya. A significant outcome was the development of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme, which was eventually used to qualify entry to primary school in Kenya (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992).

II) Kenya Pre-school Education Project and ECE curriculum with an emphasis on cultural sensitivity.

Lea was also named head of Kenya Pre-School Education Project at KIE. The project was funded by Van Leer Foundation. The aim of the project was to develop modules of curricula material for use in nursery schools and day centers and to experiment with the training of teachers, caregivers and supervisors. The project was conducted in Nairobi City Council day-centers, Mathare Slums in Nairobi, and expanded to Murang'a Kiambu, Keiyo Marakwet and Kilifi districts. The Van Leer funded project became a fully-fledged unit at KIE in 1976 (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992).

III) Transfer of pre-school education policy to the Department of Education.

In 1979, the Van Leer Project unit at KIE was evaluated by experts in early childhood education. In 1979, The Gachathi Commission's report recommended for all pre-school education policy functions to be moved from the Department of Social Services to Department of Education. The policy was published in Presidential Circular No. 1 in 1980 (Kipkorir, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993).

IV) Establishment of NACECE and DICECE.

It was during Lea's term as the director of KIE that there was an expansive growth of the ECE movement in Kenya, including the establishments of NACECE and DICECE. NACECE and DICECE are signature programs that led to the grass-root expansion of ECE across the country. In 1982 a team of experts conducted an in-depth evaluation of the work of Van Leer project unit and recommended the curricula, teacher education, supervisor and training practices developed by the unit be adopted. The Ministry of Education (MOE) responded to this recommendation by establishing the National Centre for Early Childhood Education (NACECE) in 1984 Lea was appointed the first head of NACECE. The first District Centers for Early Childhood Education (DICECE) was established in 1985 to expand ECE to the grassroots (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir, 1993; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1992).

NACECE was assigned the following functions:

- 1) Training of personnel for ECCE.
- 2) Development and dissemination of the curriculum for ECCE programmes,
- 3) Identifying, designing, undertaking and coordinating research in ECCE,

- 4) Offering services and facilitating interaction between agencies and sponsors, and
- 5) Coordinating and liaising with external partners and also informing the public on the needs and developments of the ECCE programme (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997).

The establishment of the DICECE facilitated the decentralization of the ECCE programme to the district level. The functions of the DICECE are:

- 1) Training of the pre-school teachers and other personnel at the district level,
- 2) Supervision and inspection of the pre-school programme at district level,
- 3) Mobilization of local communities in the pre-school programme so as to improve the care, health, nutrition and education of young children,
- 4) Development of pre-school curriculum, and
- 5) Participation in the evaluation of pre-school programmes and carrying out basic research on the status of pre-school children in and out of school (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997).

LEA I. KIPKORIR'S INFLUENCE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICY IN KENYA

Perhaps Lea's greatest contribution to early childhood education in Kenya was her role as the Director of KIE, the institution tasked with the development, implementation and assessments of ECE in Kenya. Assessing the conceptual framework of where Lea found ECE in Kenya begins with a short historical synopsis. A brief background of ECE in Kenya paints a picture of privilege for the first urban preschools established for the children under age five in the 1940s (Harris, 2012, p.15). The first schools in Kenya were established in urban areas for children below the age of five in the 1940s exclusively for the European colonialists and Asian communities. On the contrary, in 1952, the colonial government introduced pioneer preschools in rural areas, mainly for custodial care and security for the forced farm indigenous laborers. Later after independence in 1963, with the then President Kenyatta's popularized notion of "Harambee" (meaning 'let's all pull together'), more preschools were built out of the communities pulling together resources in the spirit of community-resource mobilization rallied by the leadership of the time for the sake of self-reliance (Harris, 2012, p. 15). Clearly, these initial preschools developed out of a desire for self-reliance, especially considering that it was soon after independence.

Of particular significance was the notion of the concept of 'nursery,' which to many locals, it was the place of play as children waited for a proper schooling in the primary school. Within this conceptual framework, the nursery schools were very elementary and peripheral to be of any educational value. This might have engendered the negative attitudes which, in some respects, prevail about early childhood being of a lesser value than any other level of education. We think that this notion that has persisted over time relegate(s/ed) the value of ECE, in all respects. For Lea to have graduated from Cambridge University and returned home to head one of the institutions charged with developing a policy and curriculum framework for ECE in the country, was a milestone to not only in rebranding 'nursery' education but also in supporting the attraction of highly educated.

Prior to Kipkorir's leadership at the helm of KIE, the field of early childhood education in Kenya existed as a peripheral approach to childcare so that parents (women) could get engaged with farm-related economic activities. In addition, prior to the establishment of NACECE and the subsequent interests that led to the profound developments of ECE in Kenya, it was nearly unimaginable that one would seek a degree qualification in early childhood education because of the prevailing folk attitude towards early childhood, as a period requiring less educated people, to mind children. Although this attitude still prevails, the progress made in early childhood education since Lea's time has persuaded folks toward a positive attitude of childcare in general, and better qualification for teachers of early childhood (Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993).

Although numerous efforts have shaped the progress of ECE in Kenya, from policy to curriculum, to enhanced capacity building through training and inter-agency collaborations, the negative notions about the significance of ECE still prevail. Nevertheless, while at the helm of KIE (now Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development), Lea upgraded the overall view of ECE, as many teachers in ECE have continued to seek higher qualifications.

We think that Lea led by her own example, through an active interest in ECE (Kammerman, 2006; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1997; Kipkorir & Njenga, 1993; Kipkorir, 1993).

Nonetheless, Kipkorir (1993) stressed three reasons for the relatively rapid growth of preschools in Kenya: the value Kenyans place on education and their conviction that preschool would enhance their children's performance in school; the opportunity for safety and security in the preschools; and the opportunity for socialization (Kammerman, 2006; Kipkorir, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Lea I. Kipkorir was indeed a pioneer of early childhood education in Kenya. Lea was a trailblazer and a stellar woman in her own right. She was a hardworking woman whose tenacity met with opportunities that shaped her destiny, beginning with a head start in one of the best mission schools in the country, through her undergraduate studies at the University of Nairobi and to graduate school at Cambridge University and later her marriage to Dr. Kipkorir who served as the Kenyan Ambassador in the United States (1994-98). Lea got into the leadership of KIE when there was no framework for early learning in Kenya. She laid the foundation for a strong policy and curriculum framework in KIE during her tenure. She set the expectations for the kind of leadership that was necessary for a thriving ECE framework. Lea was awarded the Presidential Silver Star Award in 1989 to recognize her contribution to Early Childhood Education in Kenya. An award, this forgotten pioneer of early childhood education in Kenya was most deserving.

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