

Understanding the Indegenous Child in a Kenyan Context: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The way of life of the indigenous child has changed tremendously due to change in lifestyle, technology, education and general understanding of the developmental needs of the child during the formative years. While the indigenous child was faced with various challenges in his/her upbringing due to perhaps lack of resources, these challenges presented unique opportunities for learning, behavior modeling and resiliency. This paper reflects on the opportunities and challenges of the indigenous child in Kenya that are diminishing due to modern child rearing practices, modern parenting styles, modern education that embraces advocacy and perhaps improved resources. Using cultural-historical perspective, this paper argues that neglecting indigenous ways of bringing up children in our society merely because such practices are seen as “traditional” or “outdated” while embracing in totality the “modern” child rearing methods has perhaps brought erosion of social values, laziness in our children and unemployment among our youths due to lack of creativity and inability to devise strategies for survival. Taking conversational and dialogic style and through individual interview and focus group discussion of twenty early childhood education educators during their in-service training of early childhood teachers in Siaya County, Kenya, this paper might inform parents, teachers, teacher educators and indeed policy makers of the need to embrace some form of indigenous child rearing and education practices aimed at “bringing back” the modern child to hard work, social responsibility and communality rather than individuality.

Key words: Indegenous Child, Siaya County, Child rearing practices, opportunities, challenges

Introduction:

This qualitative (Narrative analysis) study was conceptualized as a concern on the diminishing indigenous child rearing practices in Kenya from the cultural-historical perspectives. The fundamental question raised by Swadener et al (2000) in the book “Does the village still raise the child?” formed the premise for this study. The study which was a collaborative study of changing child-rearing and early education in Kenya brought a number of hints on how “the child then” was raised that could be compared to how today's child is raised. Wolf (2009) brought in some dynamics that are important for this study by noting that “when we theorize learning, it might help not to think about students in the world today but about the first time ever that a human being spoke or about the first time ever someone did geometry” p. 32. Perhaps in this study's context, Wolf would suggest that some of the indigenous child rearing practices must be maintained, that indigenous child rearing practices should not be theorized but must remain relevant and be made practical to be handed over from one generation to another. Edmund Husserl (1939) described the crisis of the European Sciences by suggesting that a true science can only be founded when the original concepts are fixed in writing such that it can be reflected upon and its idealities reproduced indefinitely into the future.

Indigenous Child rearing Practices

It was the responsibility of the parents and the entire community to bring up a child in an upright manner. In the African traditional family set up, the care of children was provided by extended family, (KIE, 2009). Accounts of strong kinship and tribal bonds of early African families suggests that adults showed a high degree of concern and caring towards children, as they did towards members of their families and communities (Hale & Franklin, 2001; Hale Benson, 1986; Nsamenang, 1995, 2004). The study by KIE (2009) found that religion, modernization, land scarcity and declining economy have a tremendous effect on families. Today's families are affected by low quality of life in terms of provision of basic needs and education. In addition, emerging issues such as child abuse, child labor, poverty, HIV/AIDS and technology have influence on child rearing styles and extended family support is diminishing. The individual families must deal with issues arising on their own. In terms of education, the family, clan, community and peers used to educate children through a variety of methods such as storytelling, through playing games, through participation in work, through observation, lullabies, through riddles and songs. Through such variety of methods, children learnt responsibility, values and virtues, resiliency and moral lessons. Alexander (2009) reflects on the three primordial values as individualism, community and collectivism. While Alexander's study considers individualism in the context of putting self above others and personal rights before collective responsibility, it emphasizes unconstrained freedom of action and thought. Alexander's community context major on human interdependence, caring for others, sharing and collaborating while collectivism emphasizes on human interdependence but only in so far as it serves the largest needs of society or state. These virtues were dominant in the child upbringing process in Kenya and as embraced in the Chinese proverb: “When we all contribute wood, the fire is the biggest”, Kenyan people survived through “Harambee Philosophy” which translates into collectivism-pulling resources together for a common goal. That is to say, and as Phillips (2008) would put it, the Kenyan common notion supports the view that Asian cultures tend to be collectivistic rather than individualistic. Like Asian, Kenyan ethnic identity then was often based on the relationship of the group rather than independence, individualism and competition we see in our children today. Perhaps the latter features would be seen more in the western worlds like America. Triandis (1990) associates collectivist cultures with cardinal values such as reciprocity, obligation, duty, security, tradition, dependence, harmony, obedience to authority and equilibrium. As Phillips (2008), pointed out that “Maoist ideology emphasizes the needs of

society takes precedence over the individual needs, individualistic cultures seem to embrace creativity, bravery, self-reliance and solitude” p 90. A study by Stevenson and Lee (1990) found that in individualistic cultures, the individual is responsible for his or her accomplishment and difficulties while in the collectivist cultures, members of the family, teachers or a larger group are expected to hold some responsibility for the success or failure of the individual. Perhaps the child today takes pride in individual accomplishment rather than social responsibility as opposed to the child then that survived with the Confucian philosophy. The Confucian Philosophy as pointed out by Bond (1986) encourages restraint over one’s desires and equal distribution of the limited resources among members of a group. Phillips (2008) further noted that the Confucian ideals which takes communist ideology, involves respect for elders, delayed gratification and discipline. This philosophy followed the natural order of the Universe on hierarchy, that children respected their parents, students respected their teachers, and people obeyed the benevolent, authoritarian emperor. This natural order of the Universe embraces the intergenerational obligations as paramount to those of nuclear family. For example, the natural order of the Universe states that “children have the duty to support and assist their parents; their parents have a right to demand that their children pay for their support”. (Bond 1991, p.6).

According to the present study, children are taught to respect their elders and care for grandparents. The education of the past came with authoritarianism on the part of the parents and teachers. Children were believed to have been born “bad” and it was the role of adults to train them in the teachings of the church and to “beat the devils out of them” when they strayed (King, 2007). Teachers in African traditional society were directors of learning rather than facilitators of it. Children were not allowed to pursue what they desired in a non-threatening climate but instead teachers ‘forced’ knowledge into the children through authoritarianism and use of corporal punishment. Polakow, (1982) presents an example of the rules in one of the Montessori schools

No running in the classroom,

No talking until you raise your hands when in the circle,

All work must be replaced on the shelf after pushing in your chair

Taking turns on the line, helps to develop an awareness of the other... p.103

Concept for the study

No hypothesis was postulated a priori; rather the study was envisioned as a narrative analysis study. Twenty (20) in service early childhood education students were asked to respond to the open ended question “describe your own childhood stage through the lens of general child rearing practices, education, games, play, music, drama, literature, media and technology citing challenges and opportunities. The responses provided pointed directly to the African way of bringing up a child and contrary to the modern trends. These responses were further interrogated through individual interviews and a focus group discussion to find a common ground concerning these practices.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How was the indigenous child raised in Kenya?
2. Why was the traditional African education important?
3. What were the challenges of the indigenous child?
4. What were the opportunities of the indigenous child?
5. Which lessons can we learn from the indigenous child rearing practices?

Methodology and Technique

Over a period of 3 months, the respondent students reflected on their upbringing and told stories of their encounter with life experiences. These narrations were documented through write-ups, interviews and focus group discussions which were later on transcribed verbatim. Methodological triangulation was then used to illuminate, confirm, or dispute the transcribed findings. The data analysis was done through coded themes and presented into three categories as results from written question, results from interview and results from focus group.

Results from Written response

The respondents were asked a question “Describe your own childhood stage through the lens of education, games, play, music, drama, literature, media and technology”. Although this question was specific, respondents gave their whole life history and experiences. From the results, it was evident that each of the twenty respondents was raised differently, in different atmosphere under different parental guidance. While this question elicited thick, rich expression of events from the respondents’ perspectives, it was interesting to note that some common agenda/themes crisscrossed their explanation of childhood experiences. For example one respondent reported that *“my childhood education was coupled by both informal and the formal type of education. The informal part was marked by a semicircular lessons which were conducted by my late grandfather who was spending most of his evening times narrating to us some historical scenes he underwent during his growing up and were very educative since they had lessons to be taken from them, between me and my siblings. The major message in his stories were related to respect for authority, being orderly when relating with others, being responsible, self regulation, control of emotions and cooperating with others in completing a task. These stories also prepared me for later adulthood life”*

Some of the challenges the respondents cited were that roads were bad and full of potholes and incase it rained that was the end of the journey. The other common challenge cited was the fact that in the past children belong to the community and that any member of the community had authority over them. A child could be punished by any member if found doing contrary to the norms of the society. The environments were also hostile for children then as parents were more strict and authoritative. Any mistake on the part of the child was met by physical canning, without cautioning or advance warning as today. This authoritarianism lifestyle made the children to behave well. For example, a common statement from the respondents was:

“It was our duty as children to behave well and to obey not only our parents but any elderly person since any adult could subject you to any punishment. This made us face life with a lot of reality, perseverance, responsibility and resiliency”.

Some respondents painfully narrated their experiences at the start of their school. Most of these sad experiences surrounded being canned, being abused, instant physical punishment from teachers and prefects as reported below

“These acts of brutality made me resist going to school and not enjoying being associated with school culture But later with time, I became hardened and accepted that culture because it trained me to be resilient”

Another respondent narrated how the abuse from the teacher turned to be a blessing in disguise because he had to work hard to prove that he is not stupid.

“..... I decided to go back to Kakamega and did class two and three there. When I came back to the former school in class four, I wanted to prove to

the teacher that I was not stupid as she had abused me. I made sure that I came top in my class until I did CPE. This, I would say helped me to work harder and made me to excel.”

The limited resources also played a part in the lifestyles of the respondents. Many respondents were categorical about their upbringing that was characterized by some level of poverty. For example, a common statement that stood out was:

“ During my childhood, radios and TVs were only found in well to do homes, I can remember my father had a Philips radio that during weekend when Gor and AFC were playing, the whole village would come to our home to listen to the match. At home, sometimes we would be denied access to the radio because there was no money to buy the batteries. TV was in the neighborhood and we would go to watch matches at a fee. The limited resources enabled me to work even harder in school and today, I can have as many radios and TVs as I want”

The lack of information and ordinary letter writing in an envelope taken manually or through the post office to the intended person also characterized the life style in the past. Chiefs and their assistants also had a duty to ensure their residents are informed about policy issues through barazas.

In terms of games, the respondents alluded to the fact that there was freedom in interaction and in the choice of the games and activities. One interesting commonality in the games was that some of the games were extremely dangerous as they involved either fighting or the use of weapons. Games such as football, throwing sticks in place of spears, hunting birds, putting and enjoying bull fights, throwing pangas on the ground, wrestling, hide and seek provided opportunities for the participants to enjoy their games. There was a lot of playing field and children had a free choice to play anywhere. Parents did not have to worry about the safety of their children at that time.

The respondents reported that music was more meaningful and had moral lessons to learn from. For example, a song such as “ Kongoninatimnadi, KongoeKongo” translated in English as “Alcohol, Alcohol, what shall I do to alcohol”. Such a song would pass a message of a person who was drunk always and could not perform any kind of job. Because drinking is not encouraged and made people lazy, such a song had a moral lesson of restraining children from drinking. Even drama was more meaningful and had a moral lesson, for example, the story of a giant trying to kill the disobedient child who did not take the advice of the elders or who refused to be sent.

Despite the challenges in the past, opportunities were also available. For example, since we belong to the community, meals were not a problem; any adult had the obligation to ensure that a child is fed when hungry.

Results from Interview

To further confirm the written submissions, the respondents were interviewed on their childhood upbringing process. The results from interview revealed some commonalities in the interviewees childhood experiences. For example, they talked of the way they were taught to behave well by not talking where adults were busy talking, greeting adults and any elderly person with supported hands. The respondents narrated how they used to stand up for adults/teachers saluting them when they (adults) were passing around. In the bus and any public place including in the house, the children would surrender seats to adults. It was common to hear a statement such as:

“ when I was growing up with my sisters, my mother used to cook with them in the kitchen as they told girl’s stories while my grandmother would teach them how to grow up to become a respectable wife in the future. My father also taught me how to work hard and be a responsible husband. All these offered me opportunity of becoming a role model”

The interview revealed that there was more gender specific roles than today. This was because girls were taught their duties as girls mostly to do with housekeeping while boys were taught their duties as boys mostly to do with herding, ploughing and being a providing, caring husband. The interview result also shows that working was communal. The interviewees used the word “saga” to refer to people pulling their energies together to perform tasks like weeding. All these were done for free and were meant to help the needy in the society as it brought people together. The results from interview further reported that work was more difficult than it is today. Children had to work before going to school and after school. Even in school, children were expected to carry items from home to help them work in school such as grass, hoe, water and so on. Children had to walk long distances barefooted going to school. There was no lunch provided at school, sometimes even at home there was no lunch, but you have to perform. Parenting styles were more authoritarian than democratic. All these brought some level of responsibility, perseverance and resiliency.

In terms of education, the results from interview indicated that education was a communal affair, as everyone was involved in the process. Parents had their part to play, community had their part to play, and teachers had their part to play as well as the society. There was a common decorum for everyone. Parents whose children do not go to school would be threatened by arrests. Teachers’ acts were not to be questioned by parents as it is today. A common statement was that

“As you go to school, everybody was watching your steps, should you not reach school, anyone would either cane you or chase you to school and report you to the teachers that you were just playing on the way”

The interview reported that feeding was a communal ground bringing people together. Sharing of meals was a common phenomenon and no one goes hungry. People shared the same food, same plate, same soup, same mug, same clothes and same shoes. When they were asked whether there were health concerns by sharing, a common statement was:

“We shared food, water in the same utensils, there was no diseases as it would be today. Even the speed at which one eats was monitored, the size of your ugali was also monitored and other children would tease you if your eating habit is bad”.

The interview results revealed that sleeping was also shared as people would sleep on the same mattresses, or same mat. Sometimes children would walk to another homestead to sleep over there if there are no houses within the same homestead. This taught them the spirit of sharing.

The interview results further confirmed that very few homes had radios and people used to go to market places to listen to the news. The child had to learn to appreciate any little help.

The results also revealed that parents and community used certain myths to control children’s behavior. For example some myths were meant to protect the animals. A common statement would be :

“If you kill a frog, your mothers’ breast will be cut and because you like your mother and wouldn’t want to see her breast being cut, you refrain from killing a frog”

Results from Focus Group Discussion

The focus group was meant to make some clarifications on how children were brought up and some of the challenges and opportunities that arose. The focus group discussion revealed that child rearing practice was the duty of close members of the family and the relatives alongside biological parents. Socialization in many settings occurs as children interact with people organized into groupings each exerting some effects on the child in preparing him/her for social life. The focus group discussion delved in the control of behavior such as “not putting legs on the chair”, “not standing on the table.” Such behaviors were meant to develop in the child “respect for authority, respect for property, and self-restraint in disposing one’s body, neatness or any other socially desirable behavior. The results from focus group discussion pointed to the fact that participation in work taught children specific skills such as responsibility, perseverance and other moral values needed for adulthood. The work done was for children to become useful members of the society. Children were also taught through storytelling, playing games, singing songs, observation, riddles recitation, singing lullabies and so on.

The focus group discussion noted that although lack of resources brought some level of poverty, the experiences brought some richness in behavior and uprightness.

Discussion of Results

The results from the written response, interview and focus group discussions revealed that participants were more or less brought up in the same style. This study underscored the relationship of participants in terms of childhood experiences, challenges and opportunities. The results revealed thick and rich expressions of events characterized by some level of poverty in the upbringing process of the indigenous child. The study revealed that grandparents or parents played an important role in molding the character of the child. The parent and grandparents narrated stories with educative themes such as respect for authority, being orderly while relating with others, being responsible, self-regulation and control of emotions in completing tasks. These stories prepared the indigenous child for adult life.

The results pointed out some challenges like roads and the fact that the indigenous child belong to the whole community and that any member of the community had authority over him or her. The strictness in child rearing process was reported. This strictness however, brought some opportunities for uprightness. For example, a common statement from the respondents was:

“It was our duty as children to behave well and to obey not only our parents but any elderly person since any adult could subject you to any punishment. This made us face life with a lot of reality, perseverance, responsibility and resiliency”.

The study results cited some challenges especially on learning. This touched on the authoritative nature of teaching, bullying by teachers and prefects. Much as the first day of school is always a challenge to any child, this study revealed that the indigenous child faced rather tougher challenges such as being canned, being abused, instant physical punishment from teachers and prefects. An outstanding statement cited was that:

“These acts of brutality made me resist going to school and not enjoying being associated with school culture But later with time, I became hardened and accepted that culture because it trained me to be resilient”

This study revealed that despite these challenges, some of their sad experiences motivated them to work harder to achieve more in life, as they reflect it today. For example, some of the indigenous children had to work before going to school and after school. Even in school, children were expected to carry items from home to help them work in school such as grass, hoe, and water. The study revealed that children had to walk long distances barefooted going to school. There was no lunch provided at school, sometimes even at home there was no lunch, but you have to perform. Parenting styles were more authoritarian than democratic. All these brought some level of responsibility, perseverance and resiliency. An excerpt brought some reality “..... I made sure that I came top in my class until I did CPE. This, I would say helped me to work harder and made me to excel.”

This study results pointed to the fact that many respondents faced challenges related to poverty. For example, apart from walking long distances barefooted going to school, many of the respondents mentioned limited access to radios and TVs. An outstanding statement was that:

“ During my childhood, radios and TVs were only found in well to do homes, I can remember my father had a Philips radio that during weekend when Gor and AFC were playing, the whole village would come to our home to listen to the match. At home, sometimes we would be denied access to the radio because there was no money to buy the batteries. TV was in the neighborhood and we would go to watch matches at a fee. The limited resources enabled me to work even harder in school and today, I can have as many radios and TVs as I want”

It is worth noting that limited resources encouraged sharing among families and provided an opportunity for communal living. The results indicated that the area of communication technology has improved a lot from word of mouth to ordinary letter writing to telegram and finally to mobile phones today. Perhaps this was seen as a challenge then, but now technology has come with its own challenges.

One of the notable challenges and opportunities for an indigenous child was in games. The study results indicated that while there was freedom in interaction and in the choice of the games and activities, some games were extremely dangerous as they involved either fighting or the use of weapons such as pangas, spears and so on.

For example, a statement such as

“We used to enjoy games like football, throwing sticks in place of spears, hunting birds, putting and enjoying bull fights, throwing pangas on the ground, wrestling, hide and seek provided opportunities for the participants to enjoy their games. There was a lot of playing field and children had a free choice to play anywhere. Parents did not have to worry about the safety of their children at that time”.

It is interesting to note that an indigenous child was more free and safe than today's child that has to be monitored from being hijacked or stolen. The study also cited that music provided an opportunity for moral lessons. For example, a song about alcohol “Kongoninatimnadi, KongoeKongo” translated in English as “Alcohol, Alcohol, what shall I do to alcohol” discouraged young men from drinking.

The study also revealed the communalism type of life in which meals were shared, work was shared and roles were more gender specific than today. For example, a statement like

“when I was growing up with my sisters, my mother used to cook with them in the kitchen as they told girl’s stories while my grandmother would teach them how to grow up to become a respectable wife in the future. My father also taught me how to work hard and be a responsible husband. All these offered me opportunity of becoming a role model”

Although roles are now shared today, gender specific roles provided an opportunity for an indigenous child to be more responsible and more specific in carrying out activities. These activities also enabled children to be hard working since they know it is either a girl or boy related work.

The study revealed that the gender specific roles also dictated the kind of stories or education each of them receive and from whom. For example, girls were mostly taught by grandmothers while boys were mostly taught by grandfathers. These teachings in general were geared towards molding the behavior of the child. For example, an indigenous child was taught how to behave in public by not talking where adults were busy talking, by greeting adults and any elderly person with supported hands, saluting adults or teachers when they are passing around including surrendering seats to adults when traveling using public transport. This study revealed that surrendering of seats was not just in the bus but also in life in general. The communal way of life “saga” perhaps instilled in the indigenous child, the spirit of togetherness and supportive to the needy.

As has been noted above that life was more of a communal affair, this was the case even in education. This study reported that parent, teachers, grandparents, uncles, aunties and the whole community each had a part to play in the life of an indigenous child. An example of a statement read:

“As you go to school, everybody was watching your steps, should you not reach school, anyone would either cane you or chase you to school and report you to the teachers that you were just playing on the way”

This close monitoring by almost every member of the society had a lot of opportunities in terms of character building. Perhaps the biggest question one would ask, “Where did we go wrong?” For example an indigenous child learnt to share almost everything including clothes, shoes, food, plates to mention a few. An outstanding statement was that:

“We shared food, water in the same utensils, there was no diseases as it would be today. Even the speed at which one eats was monitored, the size of your ugali was also monitored and other children would tease you if your eating habit is bad”.

The study results revealed that sleeping was also shared as people would sleep on the same mattresses, or same mat. Sometimes children would walk to another homestead to sleep over there if there are no houses within the same homestead. This taught them the spirit of sharing.

One of the points of interest in this study was the fact that certain myths were used to control children’s behavior especially in protecting the animals. For example children were discouraged from killing animals by narrating the consequences of doing so. A common statement would be:

“If you kill a frog, your mothers’ breast will be cut and because you like your mother and wouldn’t want to see her breast being cut, you refrain from killing a frog”

The protection was not on the side of animals only but also on furniture as well. This study pointed out that control of behavior such as “not putting legs on the chair”, “not standing on the table.” were meant to develop in the child “respect for authority, respect for property, and self-restraint in disposing one’s body, neatness or any other socially desirable behavior.

Conclusions:

- The raising of a child today has become more of a conquering.... Than of training
- Despite the many challenges of the indigenous child, the child rearing practices brought more opportunities in terms of character training, hardwork, communal living, caring for the needy, responsibility, perseverance and resilience.
- Looking at the indigenous child and the rearing practices is like looking at a river full of pebbles. The river drops the pebbles as it flows and finally clean water remains in the river source. The indigenous child just like a river with clean water has many opportunities.
- There is likelihood to demonize the indigenous child rearing practices and to romanticize or Orientalize the modern trends.
- For indigenous peoples, the critique of history is not unfamiliar. The idea of contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities, is closely linked to the politics of everyday contemporary indigenous life (Linda Smith, 1999)

Recommendations

- The finding of this study challenges the individualistic nature of our society today and brings breath to communalism way of life.
- Despite the many challenges of the indigenous child rearing practices, the society should be ‘alert’ in identifying the opportunities that exist in order to tap on the behavior model so desired today.
- The society should look at specific perceived challenges and take deliberate steps in eliminating the ‘evil’ practices while leaving the ‘good’ practices
- Another study comparing the indigenous child and the modern child would be very useful in teasing out the challenges and opportunities.
- Perhaps young parents should visit old parents and learn more on child rearing practices that can bring back the forgotten decorum.
- The findings of this study points to the fact that there is need for the government to empower parents of today with necessary ‘skills of survival’

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