

Parents' Views of the Education of Their Three to Six Year Old Children Not in Preschool in MBEERE, Kenya

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Abstract

Background: The Mbeere population has had socio-cultural changes but at the same time retains some traditional customs like cherishing large family sizes. Geographically, Mbeere experiences dry weather conditions which make subsistence farming at times difficult. The inhabitants also struggle to make their financial ends meet (Republic of Kenya, 1997). **Methods:** Parents ($n=287$) of different socio-economic backgrounds were assessed on their views on the right to education of their three to five year old children who are not enrolled in preschool. The parents were purposively selected from the four administrative divisions of Mbeere district through a link by local government administrators who knew of their homesteads' locations. **Results:** The majority (97%) expressed that they cherished their children's education and indicated reasons for these children not being enrolled in preschool: Children were too young and not ready for school; inaccessible preschools due to long distances of more than one kilometer from the homesteads; lack of fees to pay the preschool teacher and resources; insecurity that led to frequent rape incidents of girls and lack of facilities for children with disabilities. **Discussion:** Their responses showed that they viewed children's education as merely going to school and moving from one level to the next. The parents did not seem to understand the essence of early childhood education to the child and the society. These results imply the need for community mobilization by the government, non-governmental organisations and religious groups to lobby for children's preschool education.

1.1 Nature of the Problem

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Kenya Children Act 2002, the Kenya Constitution 2010 and Kenya Basic Education Bill 2012 present parents as key collaborators with the government in the promotion of children's right to education. This places parents in a central legal position in terms of how this education right of a child is realized. Thus, how parents view the education of their children who were not going to school is of concern for policy regarding facilitating the 'being' and 'becoming' of these children as they have lives to live here, now and in the future (Haddad, 2001)

The early childhood period forms the foundation stage for the child's future learning (Uwezo, 2010). Research has shown that children who attend preschool education, become better performers in later schooling when compared with those children who do not attend (Colletta, Balachander & Liang, 1996).

The Government of Kenya document published in 2005 (Educational Sessional Paper 1, 2005) indicated that there are only about 900000 (35%) children who are accessing preschool education (Republic of Kenya, 2005). One may assume that the other 65% not in preschools are receiving their education through alternative approaches (Saitoti, 2002). Most of these children are involved in day to day chores at their homes (Gatumu, 2008).

According to Mbeere district education office, in 2007, about 68% of Mbeere district children were not enrolled in the available preschools. Mbeere district falls within the semi-arid zones of Kenya. Geographically, Mbeere experiences dry weather conditions which make subsistence farming (main economic activity) difficult and inhabitants struggle to make their financial ends meet (Republic of Kenya, 1997). The livelihood conditions of the district render the delivery of preschool services for preschool age children rather wanting. Under such conditions, we wondered how parents as key actors in their children's growth, development and survival viewed their children's education. Hence, the purpose of this investigation was to establish how Mbeere parents view their 3-6 year old children's right to education particularly those children not in school.

Research Methodology

The investigation employed a descriptive survey in terms of addressing how 287 parents perceived their children's education. It was a here and now investigation directed to answer the question: 'What are their views about their children's education?' The descriptive design allowed us to derive the pattern of their views across their gender, age, educational level and occupation characteristics.

Administratively, Mbeere is divided into four administrative strata (Siakago, Gachoka, Ivurori and Mwea). From each stratum, purposive sampling was used to identify parents/guardians with children aged between three to six years of age not in school. The local chiefs helped to identify 287 homesteads with such children. It was the parent/guardian who lived with the child and spent most time with him/her who was interviewed using an open-ended interview schedule.

The parent/guardian was interviewed at his/her homestead. This provided an opportunity to interact with these parents as they carried out their daily chores. We had three interviewees (trained to ensure they all focus on the same issue) who assisted in the administration of the interviews. Each interview took 30 minutes to one hour depending on what the parent was occupied in. At the end of each day, we would meet with the three interviewees to address any area of concern which might have arisen.

From the parents' responses, we were able to identify a pattern of emerging themes to form the threshold of parental views about children's education in Mbeere.

3.1 Results and Discussion

The characteristics of the 287 parents who participated in the investigation are displayed on Table 2.

Table 2: Characteristics of the parents

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	53	19
Female	234	81
Age		
< 19	2	1
20-29	117	41
30-39	116	40
>40	54	18
Educational level		
Primary	200	70
Secondary	52	18
University	6	2
No formal education	15	10
Occupation		
Farmers	198	69
Market attendants	42	15
Others	47	16
Distance to the nearest preschool		
< 1 km	186	65
2-3 km	93	32
>3 km	8	3

3.1.1 Children not in preschool because they are not ready

In general, all the respondents, regardless their gender, age, academic qualification, kind of occupation and their different distances from the preschool, expressed that their children were not in school because they were not ready and mature enough. In fact, Case 008 talking about her six year old child expressed it this way:

Going to school is not for such a child. She will just be crying and asking for her mother. She will be a bother to the teacher and soon she will come back here. Let us give her time. I can see her when she cries.

Case 008 was a peasant and had received her education up to primary seven. When Case 008 was probed to indicate when the child would be ready, the parent gave an example of her older child in primary three whom she said that she had enrolled when she was eight years old (and did not attend nursery school) and that she was happy with her academic performance.

A similar view of readiness is expressed by Case 023, a university graduate when he argued:

You are talking about taking a three year old child to school. Surely this child is not ready for reading and writing. I went to school when I was more than nine years and I made it without nursery school. Those teachers are not trained and do not do much. Children are just there singing until they come back home.



Figure 1. **Two pictures of a preschool classroom in Mbeere district.** The top picture shows the children at their desks, which for some, are of an inappropriate height and therefore requiring the child to stand to make use of them. The lower picture is of the same class as above but shows the teacher standing at her desk in front of the class.

What readiness are Cases 008 and 023 talking about?

Figure 1 depicts what goes in a normal public preschool in Mbeere. Is this the image Case 008 and Case 023 have of a school? It is an image of children handled like adults. The displayed classroom environment fits an adult better as the setting is very formal and the sitting desks are made for adults. They have minimal instructional resources to capture their attention. The activity they are engaged in is rather too academic. Due to this scenario, the two parents may be justified to say that their children are not ready.

From these two parents (Cases 008 and 023), readiness is about the role nursery education plays for the child's future schooling. To these two parents, preschool education is not necessary and should not be seen as a preparation for primary education as is the case in Kenya's education structure. Their perspective of preschool education is that it has not been made to be attractive to let parents crave for it as they crave for primary education which officially begins at age six and above.

The point of concern here is about a child's readiness to be enrolled at preschool. For parents to assume that their children are not ready for education is incorrect. Preschool teachers as principal actors in the development of skills, knowledge and behaviours have a duty in the realisation of children's educational rights. Research shows that, critical period of brain development occurs during early childhood period and the experiences a child receives during early childhood is instrumental in the development and function of the brain (Colletta, *et al.*, 1996). In fact, by age two, all thinking structures needed for a child to learn are ready. To this extent, a home environment in which children grow up matters most for their development and readiness for schooling (Miller, 1997; Ngaruiya, 2013).

Of course, having children not enrolled in preschool is a denial of their right to participate in life as social actors with freedoms and thus becoming social agents. According to their parents, these children may seem to lack the formal language to express themselves, but through emotions, drawings, paintings, singing and drama, situations can be created for them to participate and communicate. These communication devices may not be possible at home, because of home environment limitations to be a platform for expression and critical thinking (Miller, 1997). Also, at home parents may not be professionally grounded on how children learn (Ngaruiya, 2013).

The respondents also viewed readiness in terms of the distance these children had to walk daily as most of the preschools were far from their homesteads. The long distance was viewed as compromising children's security. Parents wanted their children to be a little older to manage the walking from home to the school and back. Thus, environmental security settings formed criteria when deciding whether a child was enrolled at a preschool or not (Epstein, Mavis, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn & Van Voorhis, 2002 ; Mugo, 2005).

There were 90% of the parents who referred to their social and physical environment as insecure for their children when let to walk to school alone. In terms of the distance from home to the preschool, most of the respondents appeared to reside at a distance equal to one km (65%) followed by two to three km (35%). These are long walking distances for children three to six years old. For instance, three parents (Case 039, Case 071 and Case 190) stated that they feared that their children would be victims of rape if they let them walk a far distance from home. Case 039 was concerned with security of her child whom she felt that she had to protect until she was ready to walk on her own.

What are you asking me? You want me to let this child walk and come back alone. You do not seem to know Mbeere. ...our men have become animals...our children are not safe on the way. You want me to stop what I am doing and escort them every day. Let her grow.... those in primary wake up very early as they are required to be in school by 6.30 am. This one who should be in nursery wakes up later.

The situation seemed worse for parents whose children had some form of disability (Case 015, Case 059 and Case 097). These three parents had children with some form of physical and mental disability. Certainly, long distances for children with disability is a matter of concern. And it is true that children need to be protected. At the same time they must be given education at whatever circumstance (Republic of Kenya, 2012). Keeping a child to add a few years does not make him/ her safe in a scenario where security is a national concern and demands a national consolidated effort.

3.1.2 Children not in school because their parents could not afford

The majority ((87%) of the parents/guardians indicated that their children were not in school because they could not afford school fees for all of their children and they had to wait for them to reach primary education age level. These were the parents whose occupation was subsistence farming, families were large and they had other children in school. Anything earlier than six was not in their planning and budgeting on account of low economic status. This has to be understood in the context that parents and local communities are expected to manage and maintain their preschools and pay the preschool teachers (Republic of Kenya, 1999; Abagi, 1997). To a community like Mbeere with limited resources, this may not be functional.

3.1.3 They wished their children to go to school

Majority (97%, n= 278) of the parents indicated that it was their intention to give their children education and that it was a major concern to most of them. They expressed that they wanted their children be enrolled in school and be educated to reach university. It emerged from them that without going to a formal school there is no education. To these parents, education is tied to going to a formal school and achieving different levels (Uwezo, 2010). They did not seem to have a possibility of providing education at their homes. One parent stated how she did not know how to read and write and thus she had no education to give her child at home. Case 078 talked of having no time to give to her child's education as she was always busy at her business. These parents are actually referring to academic education attained through reading and writing.

4.1 Implications from the Findings

The key implication from the findings is that parents tended to tie education to schooling. They seem to think that education can only be given in schools. This may be the reason they do not invest on children's play activities as shown in the study of the same group when their children's activities were investigated (Gatumu, 2008). They do not seem to see a possibility of an education which can take place informally and invest on it. In fact, no single parent indicated how education can be provided at home where they would act as the first teachers and the natural minders of children.

All these parents do not seem to realize that at whatever age the child will start schooling there will be a transition period. It means that a child accessing primary school without preschool education may face a crisis in that he/she may miss the safety nets needed to adapt to the new environment (Gatumu and Origa, 2001).

5.1 Recommendations

The discussed findings may inform the government and the families on how to understand their responsibility of providing education to all children at all circumstances. Also, both parents and the government would need to evaluate their priorities in terms of investing on their present and future human resource: the children. There is need to advocate for parental education programmes which would empower parents to be committed and responsible towards their children's education. These programmes would focus on basic issues pertaining to child growth and development, play and initiative skills. The programmes would be alternatives to preschool education. The programmes would add value to their autonomy, dignity and traditional responsibilities. It is the essence of early child's education in the child's life now and tomorrow that would feature (Uwezo, 2010). The concern would be about nurturing and empowering parents so that they can provide their children's basic education for their lives to be lived to the full now and in the future.

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