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## Kenya : a closer look at culture and early childhood education

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NOTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Kenya: A closer look at culture and early childhood education

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By

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

This project is a study of the culture of South Eastern Kenya and its effects on the education system in those regions. Cultural issues such as religion, gender perceptions, and community are covered. The research for this project was compiled from magazines, journals, and books written by professionals who have experienced life in Kenya. Informational also came from personal contact with a native of Kenya. In this paper it can be seen that early childhood education has changed greatly and gained higher importance recently. It shows that Kenyan's are working very hard, in cooperation with several United States groups, to improve educational opportunities for all children, both urban and rural.. The research illustrated the strong connection between culture and education. In Kenya, they are nearly inseparable.

### Kenya: A closer look at culture and education

Some of the earliest verifications of humankind's existence have been discovered in Kenya. Because of this, it is sometimes referred to as "the cradle of humanity." Today, Kenya is known for its humanitarian efforts. It has one of East Africa's most developed economies, but still struggles due to corruption of government and business. (African Action., 2004).

Current research on the link between economic development and educational success among children has led to an increase in attention to early childhood education in many developing countries, including areas of Kenya. Although early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a new trend in Kenya, the country has made great gains in this area recently. Kenya's interest in ECCE is based on its philosophical beliefs about children (Mbugua., 2004). Kenyan's views on education are closely related to their cultural beliefs.

### Geographic Information

Kenya is a country on the eastern coast of Africa. It was originally under British colonial rule, but gained its independence in 1963. Education is at an increasing level of importance because nearly fifty percent of its 30 million people are below age 15. Kenya has a relatively high infant mortality rate, recorded at 67.99 per 1000 births (Mbugua., 2004). As a comparison, the United States has an infant mortality rate of around 6.63 deaths per 1000 births (United States). The high infant mortality rate in Kenya is largely due to the ever-increasing AIDS epidemic in the area. According to the World Factbook,, there are nearly 1.2 million people currently living with HIV/AIDS in Kenya.

The official language is English and that is also the main language used in teaching starting in preschool. Ki-Swahili is the national language of Kenya and is also taught from preschool through high school. Most Kenyan children are fluent in both languages in addition to any other tongue spoke at home. This knowledge of other languages gives Kenyan's an increased awareness of other cultures.

Mwai Kibaki, a member of the National Coalition party took power in 2002 after leading an anti-corruption campaign (Mbugua,, 2004). He received a huge electoral victory over the previous party's candidate. The Kibaki party faces many challenges due to the long rule of the previous president. There is much work going on now to improve the lives of all Kenyans (Africa Action, 2004). Kibaki has a new set of priorities for Kenya now that he has taken power. He wants to eliminate corruption, trim the civil service, delegate more power to the regions, make primary education free, and lower the costs of health care. He feels that with these changes and a new Constitution, Kenya can turn its economy around (United Nations).

#### Economics

Economics is everything in a country where parents pay for their children's education. In Kenya, if a family can't afford to pay the required fees, their children have to stay home. It is hard to encourage learning when socio-economic status determines which children will get an education. There is no financial aid for schools in Kenya. The cheaper the school, the poorer the quality of education, therefore many people of the Machakos region have little to no education at all. The greatest reason for the growing educational gap between the rural and urban areas is economics (personal communication, Dr. Moses Mutuku, April 6, 2005). A big problem caused by the

financial struggle in Kenya is that the illiteracy rates have increased as the school enrolment rates have gone down (United Nations).

Because of Mwai Kibaki's dedication to free primary education in Kenya,, enrollment rates have already gradually started to increase in some areas of the country. A United Nations team has, with the help of UNICEF, already contributed \$2.5 million to the cause. Of course, with every new change to education, there are also some challenges. More children are able to attend primary school, but now there is a shortage of classrooms, supplies, and teachers. The UN is working very hard to combat these struggles (United Nations).

One of the biggest reasons for the economic disparities in the Kenyan villages is the debt to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. It was very easy to take on debt in the 1970's and very hard to pay money back when the interest levels were as high as 20 percent (Dunn and Woods, 2005). Money for education, health care, and school related items has been cut because of it. This is where the communities come in. They are expected to make up the monetary differences. A frustrated Kenyan mother reported, "Books, uniforms, building fund, admission fees are all required, and if you do not have them, children are sent home" (Mbugua,, p.195, 2004)!

In 2004 a Consultative Group met for the first time in six years in Nairobi.. From this meeting over 4.1 Billion US dollars were pledged for the improvement of Kenya over the next three years. A few days before this meeting, the International Monetary Fund decided to continue its aid program to Kenya. This association was to contribute 253 million US dollars over the same three-year period (United Nations). The recovery of Kenya's economy is not based solely on Kenya; it also has a lot to do with the progress

in Tanzania and Uganda, Kenya's neighbors. Kenya is working towards economic cooperation in the nations and is trying hard to create foreign policies that will resolve civil wars in Sudan and Somalia (Mbugua, 2004, p 195).

The United Nations has also taken steps to improve economic conditions in Kenya. They have developed eight Millennium Development Goals that they would like to have accomplished by 2015. These goals are aimed to, "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and create a global partnership for development" (Dunn and Woods, 2005, slide 1).

#### Gender Perceptions

Boys and girls are viewed very differently in Kenyan culture. Many Kenyan teachers mentioned that they have more boys than girls in their classes. Many times girls are seen as good for childcare not for getting an education. Because children are sent home if parents cannot pay the fees, sometimes only one child is sent to school. This child is usually a boy because Kenyans believe that girls can be more productive at home. When male children were interviewed about what they wanted their sisters to be in the future, many answered teacher. In one instance, a young boy said that he wanted his sister to be married (Swadener, 2000). Recently these views have begun to change with more women needing to work to support families.

#### Community

Dr. Mutuku of Northern Illinois University, believes that the community must have a central role in educating young children of Kenya. He states that some of the most



effective programs are built around families and the community, such as Head Start. In Kenya, the community members finance the preschools, but unfortunately they have no input in what is taught to the children (personal communication, April 6, 2005).

As Kenyan women became more dominant in the workforce, the number of female heads of household also grew. With this change in society, it was seen that the community could no longer support the education and care of young children on its own. They were still however responsible for meals, materials, and school fees. As another way to stay involved, the community members help to keep the children aware of each other's cultures by providing stories, poems, and games in various dialects. In addition to this, sometimes land is donated for schools and playgrounds. The care of these areas is also taken on as a responsibility of the community (Mbugua, 2004).

For a long time, the families and communities of school children in Kenya played the most important role in early socialization and education. With all of the economic and cultural changes brought about by the new government, most communities needed to make structural changes as well. Family structures and lifestyles changed, and a need for help with early childhood care and education grew. Although parents were interested in this additional care for custodial reasons, they wanted much more from it. They value education very highly and wanted their children to have the social and academic skills to enter primary school. In Kenya, where education is very competitive and exam driven, these skills are very important from an early age (Kabiru, 2003).

### Religion

The people of Kenya are generally religious, and unlike the United States, the government encourages religious teaching. Dr. Mutuku says that it is hard to say how

much religion affects early childhood education, but children do say prayers in school, and religion is a designated subject (personal communication, April 6, 2005). Religion is an intricate part of all aspects of a Kenyan child's life.

### Early Childhood Education

Recently, early childhood education has been thought of with higher importance with the idea that it lays the groundwork for future learning and development. This increase in popularity is due to a number of social and economic issues. These issues include: an increase in the number of young women working, both parents going to work, an increase in the number of single parents, and a change in the traditional systems of child care (Mbugua, 2004). Kenyans now see education as a key to success in life, both socially and personally.

The Church Missionary Societies founded the first school for the young in 1886. In the 1940's, the first early care centers were set up by the British for European and Asian children. Around this same time, the government set up care centers for the children of Kenyans who worked on the plantations. Although this was a benefit to Kenyan families, the centers were nonacademic and provided only an eye to watch the children (Mbugua, 2004).

Early childhood centers exploded in Kenya in 1963 when the nation gained its independence from Britain. The new Kenya saw educational goals as part of the nation's development. The president at the time, Jomo Kenyatta, called for Harambee, which means, "Let's pull together." This was a strategy to get the community to work together to further early education. This was important because early care was seen as a community concern (Mbugua, 2004). This Harambee motto can be seen in many

development projects such as community funded and built preschools. The new schools in Kenya varied in curriculum, instruction, and organization. In actuality, around 80 percent of the Kenyan preschools are community funded and run (Kabiru, 2003).

Women, mothers, and grandmothers, became essential parts of the early childhood system. They organized the income to build the schools necessary to educate the children and even worked on establishing programs for adult literacy education. While the women were working to find the income for the schools, classes were sometimes held in homes, sheds, and outdoors. With all of the hard work, the Kenyan early childhood care and education program quickly flourished (Mbugua, 2004).

In 1972, the Kenya Institute of Education started a ten-year Preschool Education Program run by the Ministry of Education and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The three main goals for this project were to provide proper training for teachers, develop a strong curriculum, and develop materials for students, as well as teachers (Mbugua, 2004). Between 1990 and 1998 the number of students enrolled in early childhood care and education centers rose by over 230,000 students.

Singing is very important to early childhood classrooms in Kenya. Teachers and community members are responsible for bringing this into the curriculum. Music is a large part of the Kenyan culture and it is nearly impossible to travel to a school in Kenya without them blessing the visitors with a song or two. School is one of the only times the children have for cooperative play. They play a lot of games, act things out, tell stories, sing, and have independent playtime.

The urban/rural divide can be seen clearly when looking at the classrooms. In rural areas, all of the children have their heads shaved due to lack of running water to

wash hair. Some of the preschool classrooms have benches that were built by the parents, but others have none at all. All of the materials are hand made, and most classrooms do not have blackboards. In urban schools, the children are very well dressed. They have solid buildings to go to everyday, and it is a very comfortable setting. Both areas have healthy children and both areas also do not have cafeterias. The children are responsible for bringing food and water to school with them (Dunn & Woods, 2005).

Another difference in the rural and urban schools is the language policy. In urban schools, the subjects through third grade are taught in both English, and Kiswahili. The first three years of a rural child's schooling are taught in the child's tribal language. These two policies play an important role in the high school entrance exam. This test is written mostly in English, so the urban children who have had almost 10 years of English training, score overwhelmingly better than the rural students who don't start learning it until fourth grade (Dunn, Mutuku, & Wolfe, 2004). Without learning the language of the test, rural students are put at a major disadvantage. They cannot pass the test, and therefore they may not go on in school.

### Challenges

The gap between the rural and urban communities started as far back as the first early education/care centers. The Kenyans received separate and unequal education from the Europeans. The government at the time thought that each race needed a different educational set up that was appropriate to their place in the colony. Luckily, in 1954, UNICEF decided to make some changes and help early childhood development in Kenya. Their main goal in the beginning was to support the health of mothers and children, quickly followed by help with education (Mbugua, 2004).

The rate of participation in preschool programs is much higher in urban areas than in rural. There has been much migration from rural to urban areas caused by poverty and diminishing profits from farming. As a result, there is unequal education all over Kenya. This is not only costly to the children, but also to the future of Kenya itself. These issues have also been seen in the United States. One American teacher described the negative effects on children as "a bunch of flowers growing in a garbage can" (Mbugua, 2004, p. 195).

"Less than sufficient teacher training, regional disparities, lack of harmonized curricula, and the availability of quality preschools are continuing challenges" (Mbugua, 2004, p. 196). The only way that all of these challenges can be met successfully is for Kenya to reform their constitution, work hard on economic development, and make progress in the fight against *HIV/AIDS* (Africa Action, 2004).

Another challenge that Kenya faces is based on Americans and the Bush administration. Bush is giving attention to Kenya based on terrorism, and not even noticing the work the Kenyans are doing to recreate Kenya. Kenyan's feel like Bush's visions are disconnected from the realities of East em Africa. The current travel warnings put in place by the U.S. and U.K. have drastically affect Kenya's tourism, which is a large source of income for Kenya (Africa Action, 2004). These warnings also have a huge effect on volunteer project travel as schools, even colleges, still feel it is too dangerous to send students.

#### Teachers

In Kenya, the women took a step forward to campaign for early childhood education. They formed self-help groups and worked together to identify knowledgeable

partners in the community, to be preschool teachers (Mbugua, 2004). Preschool teachers are not chosen by the government as primary teachers are. Their training, however, is run by a government-supported center (Kabiru, 2003).

The teachers' training was made possible by the Ministry of Culture and Social Services. That organization is also partially responsible for paying the teachers' salaries. The training was also in part the responsibility of both the Kenya Institute of Education and the Kenya Institute of Special Education. These organizations offer various types of training from short courses all the way up to masters degrees. The Kenyatta University offers both a bachelors and a masters degree in early childhood education. They are hoping with the help of the World Bank, they will be able to offer a doctoral program as well.

The education of teachers in Kenya revolves around theories of child development and an understanding of young children's needs. Another important topic for Kenyan educators to be taught is how to be aware and respectful of all the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children they will have in class. Through the Kenya Institute of Special Education, the teachers are given all the information and skills they will need to work with children with special needs. Due to a lack of funding of most of the preschools, the teachers are also taught to make many of their own materials (Mbugua, 2004).

#### The Kenya Literacy Project

Dr. Moses Mutuku, an early childhood professor at Northern Illinois University, laid the framework for the Kenya Literacy Project back in 1998. This included fundraising and mobilizing the community. In 2001 the actual work began. The work of

this project is being done in the Machakos district in the eastern part of Kenya. It is about an hour's drive from Nairobi. Dr. Mutuku chose Kenya for his work because that is where he grew up. This fact helped him to gain support faster. He felt and still feels that he understands the needs of the community. In addition to this, he believes that part of the country is very neglected, with low education rates.

There were several original goals of the Kenya Literacy Project. These included empowering the members of the community, both children and adults, through education, creating economic independence, and providing water, with a vision for the future as underlined by literacy for the young (personal communication, Dr. Moses Mutuku, April 6, 2005). The goal of providing water is a powerful goal to support the academics of Kenyan children. The area receives only seasonal rainfall, which causes many problems during the dry seasons. Because of the shortage of water, the children in the community are in charge of finding and hauling water for the family. Therefore, instead of attending school, these children are providing for their families (Dunn, et. al, 2004).

With the previous goals in mind, several accomplishments have already been made. They have completed a church building, and constructed 2 earth dams for water. A successful chicken project was completed when the women of the village were given chickens to raise for eggs to sell. These women have also brought themselves together to make over twenty water cisterns. They are currently participating in a water-drilling project; there is a drill rink on the ground and the locals are being trained as operators. The closer the families are to water, the more time the children will be able to spend in school, and the less time they will have to spend traveling to get water. A library has also been built and filled with books given through donations from all over the world. This is

a great accomplishment because it opens the world of books up to those who are not in school. This gives young children the opportunity to see and interact with books before they enter the classroom.

In the future, the goals will continue to be worked on. Finishing touches will be added to the library. Another professor at Northern Illinois University, Dr. Maylan Dunn, is currently working on putting up a new preschool, as the community is in dire need of a more spacious learning environment. In addition, Dr. Mutuku mentioned that he is constantly in contact with people in Kenya. He is always looking for new fundraisers and ideas to organize the people of Kenya so they may feel a sense of ownership over the work they are doing (personal communication, April 6, 2005). The people of the community are already responsible for fundraising, electing local leaders, and encouraging communication. It was their job to decide what was a priority for them (Dunn, et. al, 2004).

Since the beginning of the project in 2001, many trips have been made to Kenya, not only by Dr. Mutuku, but also by other Northern Illinois University faculty. These other faculty members are Dr. Maylan Dunn, Dr. Randi Wolfe, and Dr. Sheldon Woods. At each visit, the volunteers were welcomed with open arms into the community. Together, these four interact, give seminars and do workshops, not only with students, but with parents and teachers as well. They speak about developmentally appropriate practice, share ideas about the future, work out plans for future projects, and even address AIDS awareness and education. The professors from Northern Illinois University have been working hard with the teachers of Kenya to come up with developmentally and culturally appropriate practices for rural Kenyan classrooms.



As far as a change in child rearing practices, Dr. Mutuku says that it is still too soon to know yet. However, with the high interest and turnouts for the seminars offered, it is evident that the community is aware of the importance of what the professors are trying to do. He has however seen some changes in the teachers and students. He feels that they are starting to believe in themselves more and are trying to get higher education. Dr. Mutuku hopes to change the attitude of the youth from that of despair to that of hope.

Dr. Mutuku hopes that his project can be a model for other struggling communities to use as a holistic approach to develop the whole community. He wants the research that is done mostly in western countries to be done locally so that it can respond to the people's needs of Kenya. He wants to see education policies that tap into local resources that students can relate to. Dr. Mutuku states that it is hard to judge what is developmentally appropriate for a Kenyan 4 year old based on western culture research. He says, "What is developmentally appropriate for a Kenyan 3-4 year old, who is responsible for their young sibling, and drawing water from a well 2 miles away when the mother is out looking for food?" This discovery, Dr. Mutuku says, is a huge challenge (personal communication, April 6, 2005). Dr. Mutuku sees The Kenya Literacy Project as a long-term commitment.

#### Mwana Mwende Community Development Project

The Mwana Mwende Project is also known as the Treasured Child Project. This project was started by Beth Swadener and the Mwana Mwende Development Center in the Machakos District in 1997. It was originally developed in response to the rising concerns about early childhood care and an increase in teenage mothers. Earlier studies found that children under 3 were sometimes left at home with no supervision because of

parents working. The funding for this project came from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and the International Child Resource Center.

The focus of this project was teen mothers because their numbers had been rising little by little each year. Previous studies also reported that teenage mothers were shy and had low self-esteem. These factors contributed to the fact that it was also reported that these mothers had little close contact with their babies. They did not communicate to their children or tell them stories, even while breast-feeding. The people involved in this project decided that a support group for teen mothers would be a good place to start. They developed a program that would be easy to copy in other parts of the country. The type of program they designed was to improve the care of the under 3's and improve the self-esteem and education of mothers (Kabiru, 2003).

The project was started in an area about within about 10 kilometers of Machakos. The poverty level is very high here, and at the time families with parents 35 or older had on average, 4 children. With the unemployment rate being so high and the HIV/AIDS rates increasing at a drastic rate, a Mwana Mwende project survey discovered there to be at least 1,000 orphans in this area.

The project had 2 main goals when it was started. They were to "improve young children's cognitive, psychosocial, and physical development, and to build self-esteem of teen mothers and help them develop self-reliance" (Kabiru, 2003, p 359). The objectives included things such as exploring ways to use the community's support to improve self-esteem for teen mothers and care for under 3's, developing ways to expand current support programs for mothers, creating strategies for reducing teenage pregnancy, and being advocates for services for children,

Since there were no self-help groups for young mothers when the program started, this group of women was very isolated and never got a chance to share ideas and reflect. In 1999, the project helped bring community members together to form Child and Youth Development Committees. These committees were created to talk with young mothers and help them to come together to form support groups for each other. To date, these groups now have a membership of over 300 young mothers from 15-26 (Kabiru, 2003). The project wanted to give these women ownership of their learning and power over their future.

Many women have reported that their lives have changed because of the Mwana Mwende groups and workshops. The project evaluations revealed that most mothers are now self-sufficient; some are even self-employed, having started their own businesses. These women reported that they no longer felt ashamed or alone about their pregnancies. All of the children of the mothers in this study had attended preschool and many continued on to primary school, being very successful. One mother was quoted as saying, "I found an identity ... with other young mothers who had experiences like me ... I am now happy as a mother and I am convinced that I have done my best" (Kabiru, 2003).

After the initial part of the project was completed, the objectives changed slightly to meet the continuing needs of the community. Due to the high demand for this type of support, expansion was necessary to reach a larger population. Community leaders needed to be trained in these philosophies to keep the projects going as the Mwana Mwende Project leaders expand to other regions. HIV/AIDS awareness became of increasing importance. Because of this new set of needs, the current phase of the project focuses on community empowerment.

This second phase emphasized the use of community committees to find solutions to the previously listed needs. The project leaders felt that these committees would help the Kenyans to take ownership of the activities and changes. Each community had representatives to run meetings and run local elections. The committee members were usually representative of all elements of the community. All of the committee members were given training sessions by the project members to help them to manage themselves successfully. The goals of some of these committees are: increasing awareness of the needs and rights of children and mothers, and educating members of the community about HIV/AIDS. These committee members are also responsible for the continuance of the self-help/support groups for young mothers.

Because of the large number of orphans in the community, care and education for these children was also addressed. Many families who were taking care of orphans were and are still getting training in discipline, care, and challenges they may face in the future. These groups have started two Community Resource Centers where meetings can be held and health screenings can be completed. The self-help groups for the youths are one of the most important groups right now. There are seven groups that address smoking, drugs, and dropping out of school. These groups want to teach children to be responsible for themselves and be productive adults.

The Mwana Mwendu Project has taught many the importance of training and youth empowerment. With the training of the project leaders, the Kenyan communities were able to make great strides towards accomplishing their goals. Educating the youth has given many young adults the skills necessary to be a part of the committees and change their own futures. This project has also made it evident to many in Kenya that

there is a lot more to early childhood education than just putting a group of children in a classroom (Kabiru, 2003).

#### Connection to United States

Most of the education research done today is done in the western hemisphere. It is hard to compare children's education in Kenya to children's education in the United States because the daily lives of the children are so different. Therefore, what is culturally and developmentally appropriate to each area is very different. Dr. Moses Mutuku states that there are several big differences in education in these areas. Kenya has a national curriculum, high stakes national examinations, and a very centralized administration. In Kenya, if you do not pass an exam, you may not be able to continue in school at all. In addition, due to competition, Kenyan teachers have a tendency to be more authoritarian with lots of drilling. Also, Kenyan teachers have to be more multicultural as they have an excess of forty different languages and distinct cultures in a classroom at one time (personal communication, April 6, 2005).

#### Travel Opportunities

There are several places to look when considering travel abroad. There are many online sources to look into. One reliable source is the United Nations website. Many high schools and colleges are now branching out and offering travel abroad opportunities all over the world. I would recommend a trip to Kenya to anyone who is interested in learning more about other cultures and how their education systems work. Kenya has done so much for itself and has accomplished even more with the help of others.

Reading about all of the growth in education that has occurred in Kenya over the past ten years just isn't enough. So much more learning can be done when you are actually participating in the culture and education system of the country.

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about your work in Kenya ....
  - when did you start
  - what region are you working in
  - are you still working there
  - what are/were your goals
  - what have you accomplished
2. Why did you choose Kenya for your project?
3. What changes have you seen in child rearing since you started working there?
4. How has the education system changed since you started working there?
5. Do you feel that the country's religion has an effect on early childhood education?
6. Do you feel that the Kenyan view of education is different from the American view of education? If yes, please explain.
7. Do you believe that early childhood education is still part of the community's role?
8. What role does economics play in early childhood education in Kenya?
9. What is your dream for the Kenyan's education system and/or community in the future?
10. Please add any additional information that you think might be helpful to my report. (personal stories, fascinating facts, etc.)

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