Original Article

Addressing the Challenges of Parenthood in an African Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effect of modern social structure on parenting within an African context. It first looks at the traditional approach to parenting and the circumstances that influenced this, then further moved to discuss how these traditional approaches are being influenced by new approaches and social structure. The aim is to identify the missing gap so that policy, legislation, and practices can be adapted to suite the need. The methodology applied was a semi-systematic literature review where the researcher reviewed various published articles and analysed their implication on the same. Three elements of parenthood were reviewed which included: disciplining, sex education, and child labour.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of parenthood has gained more strength in the modern discourse of societal studies and engagement among policymakers, academicians, practitioners as well as custodians of traditional knowledge and beliefs (Kovin et al., 1990). Two critical questions normally guide this discussion. The first and probably most important question is what set of values, skills, beliefs, and ethical codes should parents pass on to their children. The second question then should be how these sets of values or beliefs can be passed from the older generation.

Related to these fundamental questions are the questions of when and why? Considering that childhood is a transition from one stage of development to the other. The question of when is very crucial in noting that these sets of values or skills or beliefs are transferred at the right stage of development a child finds him or herself.

To have a clear reflection and understanding of this discourse, it is crucial to first understand what is parenting. Different scholars have tended to understand it in different ways. The most classical definition of parenting is described in The Free Dictionary homepage which understands parenting as the rearing of a child or children, including, the care, love, and guidance given by a parent. It consists of the methods, techniques, and other activities that are used or required in the rearing of children. It involves the process of raising and educating a child from birth until adulthood, which is carried out in a child's family by the mother and father or biological parents (The Free Dictionary, 2007). Relatedly, the new International Webster's Dictionary defines parenting as the act or process of functioning as parents and of raising children (International Webster's Dictionary, 2003).

The term itself is believed to have originated from the Latin verb 'parere'– which means 'to bring forth, develop, or educate'. This word, from its roots, is more concerned with the activity of developing and educating than with the person that does it (Hoghughi, 2004). 'To parent' is an active verb, which denotes the positive activities undertaken by parental figures toward children. It is the function, role, and responsibility of the parent in the family unit that can imply the commitment of an individual or individuals to provide for the physical and psychosocial needs of a child. Parenting means the role performed by a person that possesses parental status to enhance development suitably and positively in every aspect of their child's life (Hamner & Turner, 1996).

In terms of task and function, parenting is the task of parents in bringing up their children. It is the main task of parents that provides care for a child or children and involves responsibility for their wellbeing (Helseth & Ulfsaet, 2005). This task occurs in the everyday parental behaviours with their children based on parents' cognition, emotion, attributions, attitudes, and values (Harden, 2005). Rutter emphasizes that parenting is predominantly seen as a task in relation to the socialization or education of children that includes dimensions of sensitivity to a child's needs, social communication and emotional expressiveness, and disciplinary control (Rutter, 1985). It is one of the most complicated, challenging, and potentially rewarding tasks that a family or an individual can perform. It is also a learned task, whereby an individual provides for the safety and physical and emotional well-being of a child. These parental tasks include sharing customs and traditions, fostering skills for economic survival, promoting interpersonal and communication skills, and helping children become self-regulatory, productive, and self-actualized (Eldridge, 2005).

Drape state that parenting is a positive, purposive, and nurturing activity that is specifically aimed at promoting a child's welfare or ensuring the survival and development of children, neither of which presumes a biological or age relationship. It is the activity of providing support, care, and love (Draper & Draper, 1983). Especially, parenting is the activities of parents that provide care, support, and love in a way that leads to a child's total development (Hildebrand, 1994). Parenting is both a biological and social process involving much more than only a mother and father who provides food, safety, and succour for the infant or child. It is the process of parent-child relationships that aims at raising and socializing a child as it can shape a child's attitude, behaviours, and emotional function (Hildebrand, 1994). It is the process of teaching and training children in which parents engage to encourage the child's growth, such as nourishing, protecting, and guiding a child through the course of his or her development (Bornstein, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

This article was developed following a semi-systematic literature review. The semi-systematic or narrative review approach is designed for topics that have been conceptualized differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines and that hinder a full systematic review process. That is, reviewing every single article that could be relevant to the topic is simply not possible, so a different strategy must be developed. Besides the aim of overviewing a topic, a semi-systematic review often looks at how research within a selected field has progressed over time or how a topic has developed across research traditions. In general, the review seeks to identify and understand all potentially relevant research traditions that have implications for the studied topic and to synthesize these using meta-narratives instead of by measuring effect size. Through this, the researcher was able to read and analyse different research themes and topics regarding the study and develop an analytical frame to understand it.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF PARENTING WITHIN AN INDIGENOUS AFRICAN CONTEXT

With this basic understanding of parenting, it is crucial to delve into the discussions to understand the dynamics of parenting and how it fits within the superstructure of an African context. This discussion will be guided by 4 crucial and interlinked concepts of parenthood.

Child Disciplining in the Context of African Traditional Setting and the Challenges with the Transition to Modernity

A typical traditional setting was defined by a communitarian system characterized by strong bonds and attachments to each member of the community. Critical to this superstructure is the idea of extended families and collective responsibility. Within this extended family structure or community, there was firstly the division of responsibilities among different members of the society including the responsibility to oversee the discipline of children. Secondly, every member has a primary responsibility to address the moral uprightness of members of society including children (Muzingili & Chikoko, 2019). The African traditional methods of disciplining employed both a reward and punishment approach where children who did good were rewarded by the family and community while those who disobeyed the authority of parents would suffer the consequences.

On the reward side, PAN (2014) noted that the Iteso appreciate a morally upright child. To instil discipline, a child would usually be asked by his parent to go over to the neighbour's house and call him to come over. The neighbour would in turn reward the child with an egg. The egg was kept by the grandmother or father in a hatchery; this could be used to multiply the child's investments and as the chicken multiply, they could be exchanged for a goat or sheep and then later exchanged for a female calf. These could eventually build up a stock of livestock which could be later used by the young man as dowry when it was time for him to marry (PAN 2014). Similarly, negative behaviour by a child would attract negative action from the parents or elders in the community. A study carried out by Muzingili and Chikoko (2019) established that African parents used authoritative parenting to instil pain in a child to ensure that bad behaviour does not reoccur in the future. This was also used to send a clear message to other children that gross misbehaviour can result in harsh consequences. For those old children, the punishment involved some excruciating pain. These harsh measures were also applied to gender consciousness as measures applied to girls were a bit lenient compared to those applied to boys.

With changes in legislation and social structure, these positive and negative behaviours do not count. As noted, by PAN (2014), the practice of reward by egg is not now prevalent among the Iteso community due to the loss of traditional economic

systems and the social fabric or extended family system. Similarly, the punitive approaches do not work as these have been criminalized in many legal regimes. As such, African parents/disciplinarians are grappling with new techniques and methods to adopt to enforce discipline among children. Despite the development of many new positive disciplining guidelines, many parents still wonder whether these work as provided for in the guidelines or not. As a result, many parents have left the moral growth and development of children to be determined by fate either due to the lack of knowledge and skills on what nonpunitive measures work or for the fear of reprisal for applying very negative parenting techniques. It is crucial that this knowledge and skill gap is adequately addressed through policy and practice.

Promoting Safe Sex Education

The concept of sex education entails teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being, and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. Sex education was a crucial aspect of indigenous African parenting. Sex education in the African context was structured and purposive. Structured in a way that there were people tasked with the responsibility of passing sex education messages, within a specified time frame for a group of children and carried out within culturally appropriate and recognized methods of delivery (Tamale, 2006).). The purpose of sex education in the African context was two folded; to make children and young people appreciate their sexuality and that of their peers so that (1) they avoid risky behaviours that may bring shame to themselves and their families and (2) to prepare those graduating into adulthood so that they

can attend to their sexual needs and those of their partners.

To address these needs, the messages were well-filtered to avoid overlap. Likewise, the way such messages were delivered was carefully thought about and designed to meet the cognitive ability of a group of children. For extremely young children (below adolescence), most sex education messages were transferred through myths and taboos indicating that if they engaged in certain activities, it would have a repercussion on either their parents or close associates. These myths and false beliefs are then unlocked when a child is transitioning into adulthood so that they understand and satisfy the sex needs of their spouses.

The Swahili of Kenya believe that when a girl is 13, she is ready to be initiated into womanhood, through training. Apart from learning about house chores, she is usually taken to a "Kungwi", an instructor who will train her for about two months on basic womanhood issues and her breaking phase into puberty. This helps shape her into womanhood (PAN, 20114). A "Kungwi" does not need to be an elderly woman, as long she is married and has gone through the same training; she qualifies to train the adolescent girl. Boys are usually trained by their fathers and/or uncles who offer advice through "Barazas"- social meetings - that get organized at the homes. The instructor teaches the girl how to maintain cleanliness and behave as she grows older. Among the Baganda, paternal aunts, known as ssengas, educated their nieces about matters of sexuality and the behaviours and roles expected of them as married women (Tamale, 2006). These ssengas sessions were structured and lasted for a considerable amount of time.

However, the implementation of such an approach to sex education is extremely becoming difficult because of changes in social structure arising from modernity. Firstly, the media (both social media and television) and peers have become more important sources for young people's information on sexuality issues (Darabi et al., 2008; Munthali & Zulu, 2007).

Access to such messages is not usually restricted or structured making it difficult to filter how this message fits in within the perspective of an African parent. Secondly, this media, this information can be valuable, their quality can be inconsistent or poor, and they can provide conflicting messages and problematic representations of sex (Attwood et al., 2015). Thirdly, some of the traditional African knowledge and practices on sexuality and sex education are found to be inconsistent with scientific knowledge and facts. For the educated class, it becomes more complex to comprehend and decide which school of thought they ought to adopt and apply when communicating on sex education (Attwood et al., 2015).

In debates regarding young people's need for sexuality education, a distinction is often made between abstinence-only and comprehensive sexuality education. Whereas abstinence-only programs may omit certain information, such as about contraception. Comprehensive sexuality education adopts a positive and holistic approach to young people's sexual well-being and citizenship. IPPF (2010) stresses that 'a rights-based approach to Comprehensive Sexuality Education seeks to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality – physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships. It views "sexuality" holistically and within the context of emotional and social development.

Francis (2016) indicates how sex education and HIV prevention have become largely synonymous in South Africa. In Uganda, the HIV epidemic since the 1980s has given new meaning to sexuality education, as it triggered public HIV prevention interventions, which were retrospectively interpreted and defined as constituting the ABC strategy: abstain, be faithful, and correct and consistent condom use (Kinsman et al., 2001). Sexuality education has thereby become a public matter populated with competing moral discourses (Parikh, 2015). Tamale (2006) describes how,

beforehand, interactions between Uganda's patriarchal society and colonialism, which brought with it Christianity, had intensified 'the repression and surveillance of African women's sexuality, whereby traditional practices were used 'to introduce new sexual morals, taboos, and stigmas. Now, faced with the HIV epidemic, but also other contributing factors such as urbanization, sexuality education was brought into the public domain, disrupting 'what had been considered appropriate and age-specific social spaces' (Parikh, 2015, p. 30). All this constitutes a moral dilemma and needs to be holistically addressed by strengthening an intersection between an African understanding of sexuality and sex education with modern understanding and reality to strike an achievable balance. Crucial to this is to build the capacity of an African parent to be able to confront the realities of modern sexuality with their children while maintaining the moral standards they would expect from their children.

Balancing Between Appropriate Skill Transfer and Child Labour

In a typical traditional African setting, there was a clear division of roles and responsibilities between different members of society. Children too, had specific roles and responsibilities to perform in society. The goal of engaging children in work was the transfer of knowledge and skills from the older generation to the younger generation. It is considerable to argue that most learning that occurred in Africa was necessitated to meet the exigencies of the whole society through training of its individual members either in groups or on an individual basis. This approach fostered cooperation and collaboration amongst the community members and promoted the perfection of knowledge and skills before being transmitted to posterity. According to Vanqa (1995) essentially training was intended to enable an individual to play a useful role in society. As such, children were engaged in the farms, in the household, in pottery, hunting, and performing other traditional roles and

responsibilities. These were considered normal since they served the educational needs of children. Society had specific standards or regulations of what work and tasks were supported by children. Such work was thus considered un exploitative.

With the interface, with the colonialism, and move toward the industrial revolution, there has been a growing need for labour in both formal and informal settings. During the industrial revolution in Britain, there were images of children being seen in factories and industries and in coal mines working under very exploitative work. Besides, the engagement of parents in formal employment meant the absence of labor at home to undertake the daily household routines. This new dilemma resulted in several children also being engaged in heavy domestic work to fill the vacuum left by the working parents. To the extreme, children were being engaged in activities of armed forces and armed groups (Tuttle, 1998). This form of engagement had a devastating effect on the safety, well-being, and holistic development of children as many were not able to go to school, suffer emotional and psychological effects of working in hazardous situations, risk to their health and inability in engaging to play and socialization which form part of their development needs. UNICEF and ILO observe that Child labour remains a persistent problem in the world today (UNICEF, 2013; ILO, 1973, 2000). The latest global estimates indicate that 160 million children – 63 million girls and 97 million boys – were in child labour globally at the beginning of 2020, accounting for almost 1 in 10 of all children worldwide. 79 million children – nearly half of all those in child labour – were in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety, and moral development.

To regulate the effects of this on children, global attention gradually grew over the years to address the effects of child labour on children. This has been addressed through legislation, policy formulation, and practical actions aimed at addressing the issue of child labour. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of every child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing work that is hazardous or harmful to their health and development or that interferes with their education. It also requires governments to set a minimum age for employment and to provide for appropriate hours and conditions of employment (Article 32.1.). The most concrete international agreements on combating child labour are the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) concerning the minimum age for admission to employment and the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour. These international conventions have been domesticated by many countries to form part of their national legislation on children including criminalizing acts of engagement of children in harsh and exploitative work conditions (ILO, 1973, 2000).

While the aim and content of these legal provisions are clear, this has been misconstrued in theory and practice regarding the extent to which children can be engaged in doing some work that may not be hazardous and which promotes the development of specific skills and abilities. This confusion has been reflected from the angle of practitioners, parents, and the children. The result has been disassociating children from what is considered physical work, thereby producing a generation of children without the required skills for survival when they transition into adulthood.

The bigger question to ask then is whether children are or should be allowed to do work and whether every work done by a child constitutes child labour. The answer to this question is provided in the UNICEF definition of child labour. Accordingly, child labour is defined as Children who are engaged in work unsuitable for their capacities as children or in work that may jeopardize their health, education, or moral development (UNICEF, 2013). The guiding principles in identifying child labourers are the ILO Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment and work, ILO

Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Resolution concerning statistics of child labour (UNICEF, 2013).

To clarify what work is unsuitable for their capacities as children or what work may jeopardize their health, education, and moral development, UNICEF, and ILO categorise child labour into two: Worst forms of child labour, a Person below the age of 18 who is engaged in the worst forms of child labour, which include all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery (such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict); the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children (ILO, 1973, 2000, UNICEF 2013)

Other forms of child labour "Person below the age of 18 who is engaged in forms of child labour other than the worst forms, such as work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with his/her education, or to be harmful to his/her health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development. UNICEF defines child labour as work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work. Such work is considered harmful to the child: ages 5-11: at least one hour of economic labour or 28 hours of domestic labour per week; ages 12-14: at least 14 hours of economic labour or 28 hours of domestic labour per week; ages 15-17: at least 43 hours of economic or domestic work per week (ILO, 1973, 2000, UNICEF, 2013).

With that definition, it is apparent that every work undertaken by a child does not constitute child labour. As such, communication on behaviour change addressing child labour should clearly define the ingredients of what constitutes child labour to clean ambiguity and avert any dissenting views on the same.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that new socio-economic, political, and legal dimensions of society have redefined how a typical traditional or indigenous African community operates. This particularly raises questions about the way African societies raised and guided children into adulthood. Considering the ever-growing need to adapt to the new methods, standards, and approaches, it is crucial to bring the traditional African to speed. While there is an apparent will to adapt to change, most parents lack the skills and knowledge of engaging in the new dimensions. Resultantly, there is a need to fill this knowledge and skill gap. There is also a need to have continued dialogue to address divergencies in beliefs and practices between traditional and modern to address any conflicts in the approaches.

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