Journal of Community Positive Practices, XVII(1) **2017**, *33-42*
ISSN Print: 1582-8344; Electronic: 2247-6571

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND LIVING WITH DISABILITY AMONG THE LUO OF KENYA: A COMPLEX VIEW, A TROUBLING RESPONSE

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to find out: (1) What stories do Luo elders construct around children living with disability? (2) What problems, causes, and solutions are presented in these stories? (3) What implications (if any) do these stories have on policy interventions to promote access to education for children living with disability? In-depth interviews were used to collect primary data from key informants in Kenya. In addition, secondary data was collected from journals, research reports, books, as well as oral sources such as local songs on disability and the Luo society. The findings of this study show that lack of the ethic of care in society is a major cultural and value barrier to promoting access to education for people living with disability since the negative values embedded in the culture of the people contradict the positive values underlying the education policies seeking to promote access to education for children living with disability. Lack of infrastructure makes it difficult for schools and parents to assist people living with disability. Government policies to educate society for value change, and to provide infrastructure for learners living with disability is essential to promoting access to education for learners with disability.*

Introduction

Local elders play an important role in community development. Among the Luo of western Kenya, local elders are believed to hold the social fabric of society (Obure et al., 2011). They are considered opinion leaders, who serve as a frame of reference when members of the community want to make moral, political, or economic decisions at local level. Local elders are custodians of culture (Abong'o, 2014). They share cultural knowledge through proverbs, stories and conversations (Ogola-Ayayo, 1980). They interpret development interventions from the state and non-governmental organizations through cultural lens. By doing so, they give meaning to development by influencing the way people perceive and respond to development interventions.

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The way local elders interpret development interventions has far reaching implications to development process and outcomes for instance, social acceptability of development programs or compliance with policy directives. During the British colonial period, formal education was largely a reserve of the elite (Cunningham M., 2006). It was associated with the right to govern or lead. Local elders interpreted this, by meaning that boys rather than girls should be given access to advanced education, since boys reserve the right to govern society. Luo community is a Patriarchal society. For decades, even after independence, households tend to spend more resources on boys' higher education compared to girls. This indicates that the influence of local elders' interpretation of development intervention leaves behind a legacy that outlives generations. During 1980s to 1990s for instance, Western Kenya was severely affected by HIV/AIDS. It was a new phenomenon in region. The government policy at the time was to encourage voluntary HIV/AIDS testing after which, those affected would be given medical care. However, local elders thought HIV/AIDS was not what government said it was, but rather a curse. In local villages, they were taught that this was a curse that befalls a man when he had sex with a widow (Miruka et al., 2015). Therefore, to prevent this curse, men should avoid having sex with widows. This view was widely shared in the community. Local artists made songs out of it. The view was strongly held in society. It took more than two decades to demystify the origin of the disease.

The above experience points to the idea of contemporary stories as a theory. Bagele Chilisa (2012) on contemporary stories as a theory observes that when a society is confronted with social, economic or political challenges, members of that society construct stories to explain a problem. Contemporary stories as theories have three common characteristics, namely: (1) they identify/name problem (for instance HIV/AIDS is a curse); (2) they describe what caused the problem (for instance HIV/AIDS is acquired when a man has sex with a widow); and (3) they prescribe the solution (for instance, to avoid HIV/AIDS, men should avoid having sex with widows).

Contemporary story as a theory is a qualitative technique that can be very useful in understanding social problems from the perspective of the community. It brings into development a constructed social reality of the community, which is often different from science or facts-based reality upon which policy and development interventions are based. The difference between these two realities can lead to policy implementation failure. If the reality of the community is not compatible with the reality that underlies policy design and implementation, communities can resist or refuse to comply with policy and development interventions. Despite of this, studies give little attention to the social reality constructed around social problems in community. Considering these, the purpose of this study is to explore stories Luo elders in Western Kenya construct around children with disability and access to education. The study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What stories do Luo elders construct around children living with disability? (2) What problems, causes, and solutions are presented in these stories? (3) What implications (if any) do these stories have on policy interventions to promote access to education for children living with disability?

My motivation to examine this phenomenon was influenced by two factors: (1) As stated earlier, historical experiences show that the Luo community tends to resist policy interventions that do not resonate with social reality constructed in community. (2) The UN Sustainable Development Goals include a strategy on inclusivity. This strategy called "Leaving no one behind" is aimed at empowering the most poor or vulnerable in society in order to ensure everyone is included in development and benefits, in ways that realize equity at larger, by the year 2030.

Methodology

This case study is an excerpt from a PhD dissertation research on access to education and children living with disability in Kenya. In-depth interviews were used to collect primary data from key informants in Kenya. In addition, secondary data was collected from journals, research reports, books, as well as oral sources such as local songs on disability and the Luo society. In this article, three local songs on people living with disability and two cases of parents with children living with disability are presented.

Findings

The Luo of Kenya

The Luo are the fourth largest ethnic group in Kenya with an estimated population of over four million people (KNPC, 2009). Majority of the Luo live in western part of Kenya particularly Siaya, Kisumu, Homa Bay and Migori counties. For centuries, the Luo have practiced farming and fishing. It is this economic pursuit that informed early Luo settlements around Lake Victoria.

The Luo hold on traditional communal life, a place where socio-cultural values are shared through informal systemic social interactions. Traditional ideas are passed on to the new generation through lived experiences. Belief systems are reinforced and encouraged through admonition, appraisal, songs, conversations and storytelling (Oloo, 2013). Cultural education is respected in community. It is taught and shared under the oversight and custody of *siwinde* (local elders). Formal or informal gatherings are used to discuss the status of the community, local news, and to reflect on matters of mutual importance to the community. Scenes of elders sitting under round grass thatched houses, sharing lessons of life with the younger generation are common in the region. Here elders find identity and status, while the younger generation gains insights into life (Wenje P et al., 2015).

Community among the Luo is not only a place, but also an experience. It is a convergence of mutual interests, needs, concerns, and sense of oneself amongst others. Here, traditional teachings and customs are transmitted to the next generation. Continuous devotion to these beliefs signifies a cultural transformation process one has to go through in order to legitimately acquire Luo adulthood. The younger is cultured not just to understand the traditional beliefs and customs, but also to acquire the traditional perspectives to life. Through this lens, they interpret situations, events, ideas and make sense of the world around them.

The following three dominant perspectives characterize the Luo traditional view of people living with disability:

(1) *The victim oriented perspective*: This is the view that people with disability deserve sympathy because disability results from a misfortune. This view informs the way society is expected to understand and interact with people living with disability.

(2) *The fate oriented perspective*: This is the view that people living with disability are so, because of fate. Therefore, there is little the society can do, hence society is expected to accept the situation as it is.

(3) *Disability as a consequence of witchcraft:* Among the Luo community, disability is also believed to be a result of witchcraft. The community also believes that witchcraft is always attached to anything wrong among their members to the act of unseen powers. (Perry et al. 2014). In Luo custom, disability was seen as something caused, rather than a normal biological phenomenon. This belief is however changing with the introduction of education for different types of disabilities and development of rehabilitation centers.

A Luo song-mourning people living with disability

In Luo	In English
Ngat moran ma dende otwenyore. Raracha x2 Rangol iluongo ni ling lius, To muofu onegne taya. Nyang dhi gi momo x2	The disable ones are so ugly body wise x 2 The lame, the limping one. The blind has been denied light. The crocodile is leaving with the mute one x 2

The song is sung to a Luo audience, a community living near the lake. It is a song that mourns disability. The crocodile is an imminent threat posing constant danger to the community. Everyone is expected to be watchful to alert others when the crocodile comes. Everyone is expected to save themselves when the crocodile strikes. The disabled can't do so. The limping can't run. The blind can't see. The mute can't raise an alarm. They are a liability. This song degrades people with disability instead of appreciating their special conditions. The social acceptability of the song in the Luo society implies the attitudes towards people living with disability.

Luo song demeaning people living with disability

Luo song	Translation in English
❖ Rakuom ringi koth biro goyi koth ochopo x2	❖ Person with hump at the back runs, rain is coming, it will fall on you, it is about to fall x 2
❖ Puth, otiende ringi koth biro goyi koth ochopo x2	❖ Person without legs runs, rain is coming, it will fall on you, it is about to fall x2
❖ Raneko dimbri koth biro goyi koth ochopo...x2	❖ Mentally impaired person be patient, rain is coming, it will fall on you, it is about to fall x2
❖ Muofu ting wangi malo koth biro goyi koth ochopo…x2	❖ Blind person looks up, rain is coming, it will fall on you, it is about to fall x2

With a characteristic tone of irony and sarcasm, the above song demeans people with disability as helpless and as a liability to the society. A Person with a hump is seen as one unable to run when rain is coming. It will fall on him or her; likewise a person without legs. A mentally impaired person won't even recognize that it will be raining. The person is rained on as if he/she was waiting for it. Blind person can't see the rain is coming.

A Luo song expressing the burden of a mother with a disabled child

Luo song	Translation in English
❖ Riwa wanyiero kondong e dala kamin mare kone ni yathina konya..	❖ We laugh when a mental disable child remains at home and the mother asks for help
❖ Puth wanyiero kondong e dala kamin mare kone ni yathina konya..	❖ We laugh when a handicapped child remains at home and the mother asks for help
❖ Muofu wanyiero kondong e dala kamin mare kone ni yathina konya..	❖ We laugh when a bleeding child remains at home and the mother asks for help
❖ Rangoal wanyiero kondong e dala kamin mare kone ni yathina konya..	❖ We laugh when a disable child remains at home and the mother asks for help

The above song suggests that a disabled child is a burden to the mother. She becomes a laughing stock when she seeks help. The child remains at home while others go to school, grow up to become self-reliant. The one living with disability remains at home under the care of the mother. This song expresses a sense of mockery and contempt with which society treats the mother of a child living with disability. It implies that people living with disability do not receive compassion, love and acceptance from the society.

The Case of Oduchi: The Parent-Magician with Children Living with Disability

During data collection, I visited one of the schools in Siaya County. I intended to meet one or two learners living with disability. I wanted to learn directly about their experiences regarding access to education. At arrival at the school, I was directed to seat on the bench and wait for guidance from the school administration.

An argument raged in the office next door. A parent spoke with a loud voice. He was complaining over severe conditions his child was undergoing in the school. The office was the Deputy Principal's office. For hours, they argued while I kept waiting. Finally, the person at the Deputy Principal's office walked out. He came and greeted all of us who were seated on the bench waiting to be served. Do you have children living with disability learning in this school? A woman seated next to me said yes. I kept silent. Why did he ask the question? I wondered.

The man passed by, went straight to the lady who sat next to me and requested her mobile phone number. He took note and left. After the man's departure, I asked the lady who the gentleman is. She told me that he is one of the feared men around this village. In the school, he was the Parent Teachers Association chairman. The man had two children learning in the same school, all of them living with disability. One was severely physically impaired and another one is dumb. I asked the lady to introduce me to the man, known in the village as Jamoko (rich man) but his real name is Oduchi.

When my time came I entered the deputy principal's office, introduced myself and made my request. The deputy was very positive to assist me, but feared that such interaction with disabled learners requires principal's authority not him, he even hinted that the principal had gone for one week at an annual meeting. I thanked him then left while promising visit again after one week.

Immediately, I stepped outside his office I thought of Jamoko (Oduchi) and the lady's informal stories about him and his two disabled children learning in that school. When I reached the school gate on my way out, I called Jamoko. He responded back by asking who I was. I told him that I was a teacher in one of the schools in the neighborhood county. I requested to know where he was and he directed me not far from the school gate.

I found him at the local business center, nearby the school gate. He owned a big shop, where he worked with his third wife. He had no other employees in the shop. The man was very welcoming. I requested to interview him. He was scared at first. He then asked where I came from, my family name, and why I wanted to interview him. Here, my family name was important. It would determine the level of access to the information I wanted, especially on such a sensitive topic. Talking about experiences of living with people with special condition comes with fear and stigma. After I answered his questions, the man accepted my request to interview him the following Sunday. I would meet him in his home in the morning, about 10:00 am.

On that Sunday, I reached his home. I found Jamoko ready for me. He had prepared porridge (nyuka) for our breakfast. For three hours, we took the porridge as we spoke. The interview was not yet over. I sought to ask more questions. He agreed for another interview the following Sunday.

Oduchi is 66 years but still very strong. You may think he is in his late forties. With such strength, he has managed to maintain and increase the wealth he inherited from his father. Oduchi's father was a magician. He thrived upon the legacy of his father, a man who had a lot of influence on the village. During our conversations, I heard him tell stories of politicians and other eminent people in the county, who visited him or invited him to their homes or working place.. He foretold their future and provided counsel over affairs that concerned them.

Oduchi is not well schooled. He reached standard six primary level because his late father preferred him over all siblings. He was always in the company of his father. By doing so, he mastered the art of magic. This later became his career, working with invisible powers. He was rich, but had the highest number of children living with disability. Each of his three wives had a child living with disability.

Two of his disabled children had retarded brains (mental problem). They could not think or talk well. Regarding the other two, one was seriously physically challenged while another, because he was dumb and had a hump at the back. Oduchi saw this normal. It was not strange to him since many people have children with varied forms of disability ranging from mental problems to deaf, blind, dumb or mute and even physically challenged. When I asked how he was dealing with the experience of children living with disability, he indicated that as a family, they were used to it even though people said a lot of bad things behind their back, while other people abused his children directly, especially when he is not there. He recalled times when people, drunk, shouted bad things about his family while passing by.

When I asked what he heard people say about his children living with disability, Oduchi was not at peace to explain but he only asked me; "Are you also a Luo? When I said "yes sir," he told me to better understand our custom and culture. He further told me to learn more about inheritance. Though, he failed to expand on the issue, but he remarked that in this world, children can bring a lot of fortunes or misfortunes. "My father left me with a lot of fortunes and more knowledge on how to deal with different issues." He said his father had powers and could do anything to anybody. He died at the age of 87.

Through our conversation, I came to learn that Oduchi believed in superstition and even he didn't take his children to hospital. He believed he could treat these children himself, through those powers. He viewed the condition of his children as mysterious, rather than a medical one. Rich and feared, even by his wives, Oduchi sought to solve the problem of his children himself.

Even though Oduchi was a magician, he believed in formal education. He had taken two of his children living with disability to school. One with physical impairment and another dumb. While he had never sought to take the other children to school, he argued that there was no school for them. Instead, he kept them at home, where he used them as instruments that mediated magical power. In this case, these children were not victims, but rather their disability was an asset in the world of magic.

As a parent, however, Oduchi had concerns about access to education and children living with disability. He cited lack of conforming chairs for the physically disabled and lack of teachers for the dumb child. He said the blind children are sometimes ignored. As a PTA chairman, Oduchi recalled how he had been consistently advocating for proper support for disabled learners, but that had been misunderstood by some other committee members and school administrators. In some circumstance Oduchi was vilified that he was just after supporting his disabled children. He confirmed that school life was not proper for disabled learners as teachers didn't take care or understood them. Other children also abused them and sang derogatory songs scorning them.

Oduchi feels children living with disability should remain at home rather than endure the agony at school, while comparing conditions for students without disability and for the ones living with disability. He observed that able bodied learners are always understood by teachers since they can explain themselves; the government also had well designed facilities and program for able learners. Children living with disability on the other hand not only lack teachers but also facilities. School conditions are not friendly to them. Oduchi sought to use his wealth and power to mobilize all parents with disabled children to withdraw their children from school, until conditions are improved by administration.

As we talked, at some point, he stated that as much as he had other children who were not disabled; they really felt for the disabled ones. At some point, he thought it was better for one to be poor, but with successful and able children. He saw so many poor people of his age, including his own brothers, planning and enjoying together with all their children. Oduchi viewed the problem of disability among his children as untreatable. He thought it was caused by his ancestors and was connected to his magical power and wealth.

In summary, Oduchi found a complex of experiences with children living with disability. Firstly, he found sorrow in the scorn he received from the community. Secondly, he found it difficult to explain his experiences with these children. Guilt and stigma characterized the rhetorical questions he posed in response to questions. Thirdly, he desired to educate some and he was aware of lack of support government had failed to provide for children living with disability. Fifthly, as a parent, he was an activist, who pursued the welfare of his children and initiated thoughts and ideas about protesting in favour of children living with disability. Finally, Oduchi was a magician, who drew benefits from children living with disability. He drew his justification from the cultural view, that disability is fate to be accepted, rather than seeking medical response. He thought that his wealth and loyalty to his ancestors was connected to the continuity of the condition of living with disability.

The Case of Onuang: A Curse or a Special Condition?

As I walked down a small market center in Siaya, I saw people gathered around a young man who appeared disturbed. Nearby, it was a newspaper vendor; a man bought a newspaper from every Sunday after church service. I moved near the crowd. There, an old man was struggling with the young man, mentally challenged, I thought. People stood by and watched the old man struggle. Step by step, strength was failing him. The young man wailed aggrievedly, opened his mouth and gasped. The old man was calling for assistance. I offered to help. We carried the young man to the house, a few minutes' walk from the market center.

We sat down for a little while, taking a short rest. A brief conversation went along. "My name is Onuang", hee said. "This is my home. You are most welcome and thank you for your assistance." He sighed. Onuang was 59 years old. He had six children, one of them was living with disability. We had just carried him home. He was the first one I knew in this family, unfortunately during a crisis. His condition however, was related to my study. I sought to know more about his condition. Therefore, I requested Onuang whether he would accept an interview sometime in the days that followed. He agreed and invited me the following Tuesday.

The following Tuesday, I met Onuang and his wife. Onuang's first born worked in Nairobi as engineer. His second and third born were studying at a local university. His wife spoke proudly of them. The fifth and the sixth born were in secondary schools nearby.

His fourth born was not in school. He was the young man I had helped Onuang take home the other time. A few years ago, he was taken to school but he was forced to drop out. Teachers found that he had difficulties concentrating in class. He could not make or keep friends. On several occasions, he shouted in class or talked to himself. Teachers did not know how to handle his situation. At first, they thought he was rude. On many occasions, they called Onuang to warn him. However, over time, they learned that his condition was complicated.

Fellow students did not understand him either. Some ganged up and beat him when he offended them. He would come home at times and report that his belonging had been stolen. Soon, he became the center of attention at school. Finally, the head teacher, frustrated with the situation, decided to terminate his studies at the school. Onuang sought further assistance from the nearby Education Office. An officer advised him to consult a witch doctor first. Another suggested that Onuang should give up on the efforts to educate the boy, since the condition appeared to be a curse. One officer, however, helped Onuang find a special school for mentally impaired children. A few months later, Onuang observed that his son had grown weaker. He thought his condition was worsening, hence he withdrew him from the school. At the time of the interview, one consultant had advised him to take the son abroad for special education. However, he did not have resources for that.

Onuang's wife believed that this disability was a result of witchcraft. She observed that while she was pregnant, Onuang's family had a land dispute. As a result, a man in dispute with Onuang's family used magical powers to inflict disability on their son after birth. While Onuang's family kept on seeking medical assistance as well as special education for their son, the belief that their son was living with disability because of witchcraft lingered in their minds.

In summary, this is typically a case of lack of awareness. It is an example of teachers not able to detect signs of children living with certain types of disability. It is an example of parents and education officers who still cling to the view that disability is caused by curses or witchcraft. It is an example of children struggling to understand others with special conditions. Finally, the case highlights lack of infrastructure in the wider educations sector.

Conclusion

Stories that Luo elders construct around children living with disability especially, as demonstrated in the songs presented in this article, show that narratives around people living with disability reflect contempt and mockery rather than compassion, kindness and love. This view regarding people living with disability blinds the society from seeing the talents, potential, resources and opportunities for development which people living with disability may bring to society. Lack of the ethic of care in society is a major cultural and value barrier to promoting access to education for people living with disability, since the negative values embedded in the culture of the people contradict the positive values underlying the education policies. Policy fails in part when the values underlying the policy conflict with the values of the communities, where the policy is implemented. In such cases, policy compliance is often weak. People resist or fail to provide adequate support for the policy. In this case, promoting access to education for children living with disability among the Luo will require strategies to promote education for value and world view change.

Mentalities of parents, with children living with disability, also indicate that cultural traditions largely influence the way people living with disability are viewed. Consequently, negative views discourage a positive response, which can enable children living with disability access better and adequate help. Lack of infrastructure makes it difficult for schools and parents to assist people living with disability. Government policies to provide infrastructure are the core of promoting access to education for learners with disability.

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