

School Knowledge and Its Relevance to Everyday Life in Rural Western Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relevance of school knowledge in the context of everyday life using ethnographic data collected among primary schoolchildren and adults in rural western Kenya. Using the concept of the educated person as an analytical construct, it is shown how children in rural western Kenya aspire to become educated and to acquire school knowledge to increase their chances of success in everyday life. Adults acknowledge the importance of school knowledge in everyday life and take pride in their children attending school. School knowledge is believed to transform and change children and the status of the educated person draws its importance from the relevance of education in everyday life. The extent to which school knowledge is relevant or not, including the relevant aspects are discussed. It is concluded that education programmes should strive to meet both cognitive and immediate functional needs of the learners in everyday life.

Keywords: Education, schoolchildren, school knowledge, Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and radical critics of education have long recognised the important role schools play in creating and reproducing the social order (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992: 10; see also Bourdieu 1986). Schools are significant public institutions which groom the younger generation for their participation in the dynamic life of the society. Schools are viewed as gatekeepers for access to economic development and political leadership; socializers of attitudes and values, and modelling ways for their students (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992).

The dominant position occupied by schooling in the society as well as in the life of individual learners has in most cases provided the justification for children to go to school. Schooling is perceived as a major investment and an obligatory activity for all children. This noble role played by schooling is no doubt the impetus behind the advocacy for universal free primary as one of the millennium development goals (MDGs). However, in fulfilling its objectives, schooling may carry a variety of meanings in the lives of different individuals and contribute in various strikingly different ways in their lives, thereafter (Serpell 1993: 187).

School knowledge is usually transmitted to the learners through formal curriculum containing subject matter taught at specific stages during the school calendar. It is generally assumed that learners by mastering the subject contents of the formal curriculum acquire knowledge, which can be of relevance in everyday life. The rationale for formalising education through schooling arose from the need to focus and the desire to “transmit an accumulation of knowledge” (Serpell 1993: 82). While formal curriculum is key to gaining school knowledge, it is not the only way through which school knowledge can be acquired. Learners can also gain knowledge from the experience of being in school – what has been referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Masemann 1974: 480).

Education programmes are designed to assist learners to grow intellectually and morally thereby increasing their ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and chances of economic success which are important attributes of the “the educated person” (Levinson and Holland 1996: 2). As learning institutions, schools provide access to the status of educated person in the formal sense and both adults and children construct schools as sites for the production of such persons in the society.

The literature on education and schooling show the benefits of school knowledge including acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (Serpell 1993; Cook-Gumperz 1986), development of a modern identity (Rival 1996; Luttrell 1996) and acquisition of character traits such as “taste and intelligence” (Levinson and Holland 1992: 2). Other studies show that maternal education increases child survival (Caldwell 1979; Bicego and Boerman 1991; Hobcraft 1993; Katahoire et al, 2004). Children born to unschooled mothers are at a significantly higher risk of dying before their fifth birthday than those born to mothers with some schooling. A study in eastern Uganda (Katahoire 1998) showed that school knowledge enabled women to plan their daily activities better than those with no schooling who tended to be unstructured. Women’s schooling is often a better predictor of health and reproductive outcomes including reduced child mortality and fertility than other household-level variables such as family income and husband’s occupation (LeVine et al. 1994: 304). School knowledge and experience changes women’s health and child care outcomes.

While the general perception is that school knowledge has potential benefits and is of relevance to everyday life, in some cases it has failed to meet the expectations of learners due to the irrelevancy of the formal curriculum. Willis (1993) described how a group of students with working class background (lads) developed a counter school culture from which they derived fun instead of paying attention to the formal curriculum, which offered them a false promise of better jobs. The students saw their status as given by their working class background and the formal curriculum did not make sense to them.

In discussing classroom (school) knowledge, Keddie (1971) argues that teachers who transmit knowledge prefer students who accept their definition. However, students’ willingness to take over the teacher’s definition of what is to

constitute the problem and what is to count as knowledge may require students to regard as irrelevant or inappropriate what they might see as problems in a context of everyday meaning (Keddie 1971: 151). Other studies (Wolcott 1967; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992) describe situations where school knowledge was found to be inadequate.

By going to school “children are engaged in the creation of a new form of symbolic capital – the capital associated with formal education – and in the process produce the ‘other’ of the educated world – the uneducated person” (Skinner and Holland 1996: 291). This article focuses on the relevance of school knowledge in everyday life in a rural community in western Kenya.

2. STUDY AREA AND POPULATION

The study was conducted in two primary schools and surrounding villages among the Luo people living in Nyang’oma sub-location, Bondo district, western Kenya. Subsistence agriculture and fishing are the main occupations while labour migration to urban centres is common. The kinship system is traditionally patrilineal and virilocal and polygyny makes extended families common (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976; Parkin 1978). Children in the community are introduced to work tasks at a tender age and engage in productive tasks (e.g. fetching water and herding animals) and self-care activities such as bathing and washing their own clothes (Ominde 1952; Blount 1979). Customary education and learning among the Luo occurs in practical situations of everyday life and is embedded in social relations (Prince et al. 2001). The everyday settings of activity are sites of learning where communication and learning take place in social relationships (Onyango-Ouma 2000).

Data was collected from 40 primary schoolchildren and 34 adults (parents and guardians of the schoolchildren). Another 15 adults were interviewed as key informants. The study population were selected on the basis of purposive sampling. The schoolchildren were aged between 9–15 years while adults were aged between 24–68 years. About 57 percent of the adults had completed primary education, 17 percent had completed secondary education while 26 percent had no formal education.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews. I lived in the study area for about fifteen months observing and participating in some of the everyday activities of the study population. The participant observation method made it possible to observe daily routines in schools and everyday life activities in the village. I participated

in local discourses about school knowledge and its relevance to everyday life among children and adults.

In-depth interviews were conducted with individual children and adults on the perceived and experienced benefits of schooling and school knowledge. While children talked mainly about what they thought they would gain by going to school, adults talked about their experiences and what they aspired their children to gain by going to school. Key informant interviews were held with opinion leaders including village elders, retired teachers and religious leaders on the historical dimension of schooling in the community and their views and experiences about the impact of education in everyday life of an individual. Interviews were conducted in the local language (*Dholuo*).

Data from in-depth interviews and key informant interviews were translated into English. For purposes of analysis, data from the three sources – in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and participant observation – were organised into themes and triangulated to provide an understanding of the relevance of school knowledge in everyday life.

4. FORMAL EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING IN KENYA

The education system in Kenya is a three-tier system (8-4-4) comprising of 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and 4 years of university education. Since independence in 1963 the government has recognised primary education as the minimum basic education that should be made available to all Kenyans. Consequently efforts have been made to provide universal free primary education. The Government abolished direct payment of primary school fees from Standards (grades) I to IV in 1974, thereafter in Standards V to VII by 1980 and to Standard VIII in 1985, and again in all other levels in 2003. On average, children start formal education at the age of 6 years. There is an estimated 7.2 million children in primary schools in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2003). Bondo District is well served by both primary and secondary schools and 85 percent of the population live within 2 kilometres of the nearest primary school. Most children of school going age attend school and the enrolment rate is relatively high compared to other districts although the drop out rate is high especially for girls.

Reasons for drop-outs include orphanhood, teenage pregnancy and increasing poverty, which forces students to look for menial jobs to sustain the often large families. Due to low income levels of parents in the district most schools lack facilities. Bondo is one of the poorest districts in Kenya and the majority of its population live below the poverty line. By 1999, about 15 million people in Kenya (about half the total national population) were living in poverty below the absolute poverty line now set at less than 3, 000 Kenya Shillings per month (about 40 US\$) (Republic of Kenya 2001: 8). As a result, most parents cannot afford to provide the facilities required for proper learning in schools. In

some schools students lack textbooks, desks and quite a number of classrooms are not favourable for learning, as they have no windows and door shutters.

Formal education in the study area has increased in the last 30 years or so with a strong influence from the Catholic Church. Historical accounts by key informants indicated that while the first primary school was established in the area in 1947, it was not until after the 1970s that most of the current schools were built. The Catholic Church came to the area in 1960 and was later to build the Mission Complex incorporating five schools. During this period the number of primary schools have increased tremendously.

5. SCHOOL LIFE IN THE STUDY SCHOOLS

The two study schools had big compounds planted with trees to provide shade and to contain surface run off during the rain season complete with well-trimmed fences of euphorbia bush. Inside the school, one is struck by the way space is used, things appear in order and specific places are reserved for specific things. The most conspicuous is the assembly ground outside the headteacher's office demarcated by stones and flowers with a flagpole at the centre.

The school day starts at 7.00 a.m. for students in the upper classes who are expected to have arrived in school by then. While students in Standards VII and VIII are expected to report to their respective classrooms for either teaching or private studies, other students engage in manual work of various kinds until 8.00a.m – time for the morning assembly. Children (6–10 years) in the lower classes of Standards I and II often report after 7.30 a.m.

Manual work in the schools is more demanding and intensive during the rain season than the dry season. During the rain season the fast growing grass has to be cut and digging and planting done at the school garden in addition to the routine tasks of cleaning classrooms and latrines, mending the fence and picking up litter in the compound. After the assembly at 8.15 a.m. students proceed to classrooms for lessons until 10:35 a.m. when they go out for a twenty-five minute break. Lunch break is between 12:45 and 2.00 p.m. while afternoon lessons run until 3.45 p.m. when students go for games until 4.30 p.m.

The school compound is a space for modern civilised values and a well-trimmed euphorbia fence with one main entrance marks its boundary with the 'other' world of the village. It is within this bounded space replete with buildings larger than others in the village that school knowledge is acquired. The school is a highly structured and closed social environment with rules and regulations. According to Simpson (1999: 11) "the buildings, the organisation of space within them and the disciplinary demands that each space requires of the students work upon them, transforming their perceptions both of themselves and of the world around them".

6. SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The benefit of school education and learning was often equated to being brought out of darkness into light, which resonates with the teleological view of learning¹. This view focuses on learning outcomes in terms of knowledge gained. Simply put going to school enables a child to ‘read and write’ which are important things in everyday life.

Okeyo (12 years) had the following to say about school knowledge:

“If my grandmother has been written a letter, it is me who reads it for her. It helps me to know about money and the change I should get back”.

Literacy, one of the most tangible products of schooling, is considered as highly relevant in everyday life. This aspect of school knowledge valued by adults is what children also aspire to achieve by being in school. Parents recalled how their school going children assisted them in communication with relatives in urban areas through writing and reading letters on their behalf. Children on their part aspired to gain the literacy skills for their own use in everyday life and ostensibly to assist their parents in communication. Numeracy skills acquired through schooling enable children to do simple arithmetic calculations and even keep records. In local discourses non-school going children are often teased that *‘they should have gone to school just to know that one plus one is equal to two’*.

Literacy is considered a significant aspect of school knowledge and an inherent quality of the educated person. As Serpell (1993: 106) noted literacy leads to new possibilities for accumulation and sharing of knowledge. Individuals who amass literacy skills in reading and writing use it in practical matters such as reading and writing letters, as well as reading other material like the Bible and newspapers. Similarly literacy in numeracy skills enables one to do simple arithmetic calculations and even keep records. Such skills are relevant for individual and societal functional needs in everyday life and are highly cherished.

School knowledge is believed to equip children with credentials necessary for entry in the job market. Ayoo (11 years) explains:

“I come to school to learn so that when I finish in a good way then I can go and get a good job”.

Schools are the gateway to the job market since they prescribe who is educated and who is not. Schools engage in the production of educated persons by equipping students with knowledge taught through the formal curriculum. In Kenya schools follow a national curriculum tailored in many respects to meet local needs. It is generally assumed that learners by mastering the subject contents of the curriculum acquire knowledge, which is of relevance in everyday life. Through learning students acquire a series of competencies (Levinson and

¹ The idea that learning is for a purpose and is geared towards achieving that purpose.

Holland 1996: 2) and thereby increase their chances of success in everyday life, for example, getting a good job.

Modernity is the dominant discourse in the production of educated persons in the study schools. An educated person is also a modern person distinct from others in the community. Through their formal classroom lessons teachers espouse ideas that link school education to modernity. “*Students should behave like people who have gone to school and not like fishermen at the beach*” are the words that students are confronted with in the event of any strange behaviour. The school transforms children and distinguishes them from the “unschooled villagers”. In constructing their sense of a schooled identity children distance themselves from an image of backwardness.

Oluoch (13 years) stated:

“You do not just grow very big or carry a club like people who do not go to school. Your hair is clean and not shaggy” .

School knowledge is considered to introduce children to modern values and improve their chances of success in everyday life. In the public sphere schoolchildren are expected to behave differently – dress nicely and maintain proper hygiene. The practices and values surrounding schooling have found their way into the fabric of community life where styles of living of the educated persons are admired. A striking example in the study area is the glittering home of a US based professor which is seen by the villagers as the epitome of the educated person. School going children admire his success and even teachers use his example in class to cultivate an image of the educated person while encouraging children to work hard towards becoming ‘a somebody’ (*ng’ama idewo* in the local language). Parents, too, are caught up in the modernity discourse at school and when they visit the school they try to look modern – dress nicely to appear presentable – different from what you see when you meet them in the village for ‘*a school is not where you just go like that*’.

The school presents students with an opportunity to acquire a modern identity through formal learning and social practices at school. Students ‘learn to become a somebody’ – a modern person. As Rival (1996: 157) pointed out “to learn new skills is to learn a new identity so one becomes at once educated, modern and civilised”. Luttrell (1996: 94) suggests that schools as sites of cultural production are engaged in the formation of the self by encouraging certain styles of the self while discouraging others. Students ‘try to become somebody’ – a real and presentable self, anchored in the verifying eyes of friends. Children are aided in this process by drawing upon a shared understanding of success and how success works to form a valued and legitimate self. This opportunity to express self and develop autonomy is offered and supported at school.

The formal educational experience of learners was also found to contain a wide variety of informal experiences of relevance in everyday life. This experience has often been referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ – lessons taught unknowingly by the teachers and school personnel – and not part of formally

designed syllabus or curriculum (Masemann 1974: 480). The experience of being in school transforms an individual's worldview and consequent experience of every day life. The concept of time was specifically pointed out as something that tremendously changes with the experience of being in school. Adults pointed out that by experiencing school life students learn many aspects of daily life including marital, parental and occupational roles. Students experience from the way the school days are structured that time is a resource that can 'be put to best use or wasted'. This aspect of school knowledge was said to be useful in planning or arranging one's daily activities in a way that ensured efficiency. Individuals with little or no level of schooling were said to report late at church, health centres and school meetings. This view of school knowledge concurs with studies (e.g. Caldwell 1979; Katahoire et al, 2004), which show that maternal schooling increases child survival. Women with some level of schooling have been found to plan their lives better, take care of children appropriately and seek health care promptly.

7. LIMITATIONS OF SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

While both children and adults value school knowledge in everyday life, school-based ethnography shows that schools are not just simple and straightforward sites for "the cultural production of the educated persons" (Levinson and Holland, 1996: 14) but are complex and heterogeneous. Students, the objects of school doctrine, are social agents and in their daily interactions produce different cultural forms. In the study schools, I observed that students formed alliances through which they hid their deeds that could displease teachers including making noise in class or feigning illness when they did not do assignments thus increasingly developing a cultural form of lying. The alliances formed by children in the study schools and the lads' behaviour (Willis 1993) are children's adaptive strategies, which run parallel to, and counter, the official school discourse. Levinson and Holland (1996: 23) have argued that "different models of the 'educated person' are historically produced and contested in schools, as both dominant and subordinate groups carry forth distinctive modalities of cultural production". Schools are thus sites of struggle among the various groups and in some cases the knowledge acquired may be harmful to the learner in everyday life.

In the competitive and evaluative system of formal education in Kenya some students who find the going tough end up dropping out of school. In the study area students expressed the desire to struggle and pass their exams so that they do not drop out of school and become fishermen and *boda boda* (bicycle taxi) operators like some in the village. When students drop out they are constructed as failures of the school's project of producing them as educated persons. In this way, schools are responsible for the production of the 'uneducable person' through their discourses and practices of specifying the properly 'educated

person'. Such people are perceived as not suitable to perform certain tasks and responsibilities simply because they failed in school.

For school knowledge to be of relevance to its learners, proper ways of imparting the subject matter must be considered. The teaching of the formal curriculum in the study schools takes place in a classroom environment and students spend most of their time within classrooms. However, the teaching methods are mostly didactic with students on the receiving end and the knowledge hierarchy is quite clear. Students view teachers as possessors of knowledge, which they are then supposed to get, and because of a crowded curriculum there is often a lot to be done within a short time. Teachers are, thus, less concerned with other needs of students apart from the main task of delivering the curriculum. Students whose concerns are not met may develop a conformist approach to learning and decide 'to play it cool'. Such students are made to put aside their experiences since academic knowledge is structured in such a way that makes it remote from everyday experience (Keddie 1971: 154). In the absence of concrete experiential learning students may easily construe classroom (school) knowledge as of relevance only in the school but irrelevant outside the school.

As a result education programmes though ambitiously designed, have fallen short of meeting their expectations – to equip the learners with skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for their social and economic progress. This has partly been a question of the amount of schooling one needs before reaping the benefits. Related to this is a general tendency to view the benefits of schooling as being in the distant future which makes some students despair and drop out for more practical things of immediate benefit such as fishing.

In most cases the problem has been due to the irrelevancy of the curriculum to some of the immediate functional needs of the learners. Successful mastery of curriculum does not always confer all rewards of personal fulfilment. In Zambia, for example, it was observed that primary schooling was not relevant to jobs like tailoring and electrical repairs which school graduates were involved in (Serpell 1993: 174). The irrelevancy of the curriculum to the needs of the learners may arouse opposition among the learners (Willis 1993) and apathy among adults who are the custodians of children's education.

Even where education has been taken as the panacea for those with no schooling as in the study area, school knowledge is still not regarded as the ultimate requirement for living in the society. In the study area one does not need school knowledge to be a good fisherman, herdsman or *boda boda* operator. Similarly in an Indian Village in Canada it was reported that on occasions formal education was used to rebuke school graduates due to their limited knowledge in community life survival skills like fishing yet they had 'all that education' (Wolcott 1967: 80). In the Solomon Islands formal school curriculum was found to be shallower than traditional education (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992: 19). Formal teaching was reportedly decontextualised in many respects; hence studying and learning in school was 'symbolic' yet less 'meaningful in everyday life'. Schooling removes people from the mainstream

of village life and yet one requires the two sets of knowledge – formal and informal – to meet the challenges of everyday life.

It has also been argued that literacy, a key aspect of school knowledge, cannot be solely the product of schooling for it is possible to have literacy without schooling (Cook-Gumperz, 1986: 41). A broader view of literacy shows that there are some pluralistic set of skills and understandings that are often described as school literacy but are part of societal common sociohistorical heritage. The purpose of schooling is to transform such “commonplace literacy” (Cook-Gumperz, 1986: 43) into a set of technical skills. Hence there is a possibility that school gained literacy may not always be relevant in everyday situations, which require commonplace literacy. In such circumstances experience gained literacy takes precedence over school gained literacy.

Although non-schoolgoers are considered uneducated in the formal sense, in reality they are knowledgeable in areas that do not require school knowledge. Through experience they learn techniques of survival in the community and end up becoming successful individuals in everyday life.

In view of the foregoing, the concept of ‘the educated person’ as an analytical construct is not limited to the school but goes beyond a solely school-based angle on the cultural production of the educated person. Thus outside the school in the diverse spaces of the community other kinds of ‘educated persons’ are culturally produced. The school competes with other spaces in the production of educated persons and whilst the school is geared towards producing the formally educated persons, other spaces produce culturally educated persons. Individuals who for one reason or another do not go through formal schooling can be considered as culturally educated and not necessarily primitive or backward. Such individuals are useful to the community in the sense that they can perform culturally appropriate tasks and roles that do not require school knowledge.

8. CONCLUSION

The school is an important institution in the community and generally taken as the gateway to modern practices and success in life. School knowledge is appreciated and school going children acquire a schooled identity. Drawing on the image of the educated person children see themselves as different from the villagers, and try to keep certain expectations of a schooled person. In families schoolchildren are accorded a social status as people who have seen the light, they acquire a social age disproportionate to their biological age. In the face of others they appear as knowledgeable and this allows them to participate in different activities that require school knowledge.

It has also been argued that in certain respects school knowledge may be of little relevance in everyday life outside school. As such education programmes while aiming to equip learners with basic skills to develop their cognitive

abilities should also strive to meet the immediate functional needs of the learner and community in general. As we strive to achieve universal primary education the relevance of school knowledge in everyday life becomes more important because it raises questions of form and content of the education in question.

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