

# Gifted and talented education: Some social work implications in emerging approaches for children's rights in Kenya

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## Abstract

This article analyses the social work implications in programmes and initiatives that address the rights of children in Kenya. The analysis is drawn from three case studies of organizations that promote child rights in Kenya, namely Compassion International (Kenya), Chosen Children of Promise (CCP) and Equity Group Foundation of the Equity Bank. These agencies are making notable efforts to identify needy children and assist them to access education in appropriate institutions through the provision of scholarships and other forms of assistance. The research notes the lack of clear government policy for gifted and talented children's education

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and the positive role that social workers could play in the promotion of child rights in Kenya. This article makes a contribution to the awareness of policies for gifted and talented children in Kenya.

### **Keywords**

Child rights, gifted children, Kenya

### **Introduction**

Kenya has ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) 1990 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989. The Children's Act 2001 gives legal force to these conventions at the domestic level (Child Rights Information Network, 2010).

Free education has been offered at different levels at different times since Kenya gained independence in 1963. The Kenyan government consolidated this with the enactment of the Children's Act 2001, a legal mechanism that provided penalties that could be imposed on parents who fail to take their children to school. In 2003, the government declared primary education free. In 2008, free tuition was extended to secondary education.

These policies for the education of Kenya's children are very encouraging and demonstrate a commitment to provide education to as many children as possible. The government spends up to 40 percent of the budget on education but there are still major problems such as overcrowding in schools, because the government was not fully prepared to deal with the effects of huge numbers of enrolments after primary education was declared free (Mbugua, 2003; UNDP, 2003). Schools in some areas that previously had low enrolments were overwhelmed with new pupils in 2003 but the immediate increase of new students was not matched with the provision of more teachers, classrooms or materials to cope with the influx (Ford, 2003). While enrolments have increased, the school completion rates are disappointing at 47 percent (Republic of Kenya, 2002). Poverty and other challenges such as high rates of HIV/AIDS make the attainment of intended goals difficult.

The universality of human rights is a discourse with widespread acceptance. Some people have questioned the appropriateness of human rights in a non-Western country like Kenya, arguing that there is Western-bias in the framing of human rights (Aziz, 1999). Although ratifying treaties or enacting human rights legislation is not enough by itself, ratifying the various United Nations human rights treaties does give rights protection

and advocacy using a human rights-based approach a significant moral boost in the ratifying countries. It is in this light that this article makes tentative attempts to make the connection between human rights and talented children, and the role that social workers can play in the realization of such rights.

## **Gifted children in Kenya**

Kenya is yet to develop a comprehensive program to address the issue of gifted and talented children's education. There is a need for the government to develop a policy on education provision for gifted and talented children that would address the issues of curriculum, educational resources and teacher training (Ndirangu et al., 2007). A conference held in 2010 in Kenya on the subject of giftedness made recommendations to the government to establish a council on gifted education (Report for National Conference on Gifted and Talented Persons in Kenya, 2010: 6).

Defining giftedness is problematic and it is not a subject that social work is known for. Weinert (2000) refers to Karl Marx's idea that talented individuals were nature's gift to society because of their potential to make useful contributions. Weinert also notes that there are many studies but no universal consensus on what constitutes special talents and giftedness. Social workers working as counsellors in schools need to be aware of the different needs of gifted students. There are, for example, guidelines for counselling gifted girls who may experience social problems such as teenage pregnancy or drug and alcohol abuse as they try to fit in with their peers in order to downplay their giftedness (Kerr, 2000).

Good quality education for all children is recognized by most countries as a human right. At the same time, each country or region should conceptualize the content, style and delivery of that education in accordance with economic capabilities and its cultural and religious environment (Skegg, 2005). The right to education is clearly enshrined in the United Nation's International Bill of Rights (Australia Human Rights Commission, 2012). It is also recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as in other human rights treaties and declarations that can be used as instrumentalities to argue for the right to education for all. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) recognizes education as a right for all with merit being the principal criteria for post-primary education (UDHR Article 26.1).

In 1988 the Kenyan Minister for Education stated that 'gifted and talented children be identified early and be provided with special programmes that will accelerate the development of their special gifts and talents' (Hansard, 1988, S.7 15.11.88 Paragraph 73a). The proposal then was that

the 15 national secondary schools would become centres for excellence. In May 2011, the government proposed to increase these schools to 45 by upgrading 30 provincial schools (Barasa, 2011). Despite several education commissions recognizing the need for gifted education, what the government seems to recognize so far is special education which revolves entirely around the provision of education for those with severe disabilities (Ndirangu et al., 2007).

Education for gifted and talented children refers to education for children with higher learning abilities than their peers. For meaningful giftedness and talent to emerge, educationists recognize that quality education should be made accessible to all children (Clark, 1997: 86). The American definition of what gifted education is provides a guide for this article:

The term *gifted* is only a label to designate the students who 'require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities'. (Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Definition from Title XIV known as the Javits Act, Title 10, part B)

The capabilities to which the law refers include intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or academic, that are found at high levels. (Clark, 1997: 89)

Kenyan society stands to gain from investing in assisting gifted children to realize their potential. The other issue that should concern social workers is that some studies indicate that gifted children are often reported as having challenging behaviour problems such as being withdrawn, easily provoked, aggressive, irritable, disruptive, involved in petty thefts or boisterous (Ndirangu et al., 2007: 66). As a result of these behaviour problems, gifted children can have difficulties in relating to their peers and can become perpetrators or victims of bullying.

## Methodology

A case study strategy was used to study the three organizations named above and from these case studies, thematic analysis of data was applied. Qualitative data were collected through interviews of key personnel in the three organizations. No children were interviewed. While interviewing children was considered and would have yielded valuable data, ethics clearance would have required more time than was available to the researchers at this stage.

The three cases were purposely selected on the basis of their known involvement in supporting gifted children. As an exploratory qualitative

study such an approach is justified in a situation where there is little knowledge and the research lays a foundation for future research about the issue (Grinnell and Stothers, 1988: 225). Case study strategies are well established in research. It is an approach that is particularly suited to provide an analysis of the context and process and highlight the theoretical issues being studied (Hartley, 2004: 323). Case study as a research strategy is flexible and can be adapted for use in qualitative or quantitative methods or a combination of the two (Hartley, 2004; Keen, 2006). Case studies as applied here are particularly suited to study what is happening in the field and therefore the real-life situation. The case study approach does not provide breadth useful for generalization, but provides depth, which when well done, can generate valuable knowledge:

A purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without an attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in this process and has often helped cut a path toward scientific innovation. (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 227).

The data collected were records of interviews, noted down by one of the authors who conducted the three interviews on the premises of these organizations. The interviews were reviewed by the authors and the emerging themes identified and manually coded. In the analysis of the data obtained from the case studies, a thematic analysis was applied. Thematic analysis is widely used across different types of qualitative research. It offers freedom and flexibility and it is also claimed that ‘through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). For this study, we chose to use thematic analysis as it allowed us the freedom and flexibility to make sense of our data.

## *Interviews*

Key organizations were purposefully selected for their known work with gifted children and children with special needs. The representatives of these organizations were interviewed using a predetermined interview schedule. The questions focused on what other agencies were involved in gifted and talented children’s education, what opinions the agency had on government policy on gifted education, how the agency viewed the needs of gifted education as a human rights issue and finally what role the agency felt social workers could play.

The representatives from these agencies were: Mr Charles Asati of Equity Group Foundation; Ms Jane Mutua of Compassion International

(Kenya); and Ms Susan Were of Chosen Children of Promise (CCP). The names of the participants have been changed. The transcripts from the interviews formed the data corpus from which themes were manually coded and analysed. All the interviews were conducted face to face and in the offices of the participating agencies.

## Results and discussion

### *Agency based interventions for gifted and talented children*

What emerges from the research is that there are a number of agencies that are concerned with the promotion of education and welfare for the gifted children in Kenya. The focus of these agencies is primarily on the top students in the national examinations, orphans and students from extremely poor families, as well as students who show promise in leadership.

The key players are church organizations, the corporate sector including national and international banking and financial institutions (Equity Bank, MasterCard and World Bank/DFID) and charity organizations (World Vision, Lea Toto, Compassion International (Kenya) and Feed the Children Kenya). Organizations like the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) and the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation (a school textbook publishing company) were also mentioned.

Activities undertaken by these agencies in the efforts to enhance child rights are diverse and include:

- Identification and support of high performers nationwide
- Identification of disadvantaged but talented children
- Mentoring programs
- Leadership training
- Providing peer support forums
- Organizing or supporting cultural festivals
- Providing 'after school tuition'
- Sponsoring motivational guest speakers
- Providing scholarships to continue with education
- Placement in leading academic institutions in Kenya and abroad and
- Assistance with acquiring documentation such as birth certificates for orphans.

Agency-based interventions for gifted and talented children in the three case studies focused on different aspects of needs. What they had in common was that they generally supported children who demonstrated potential

and/or were from poor backgrounds. The Equity Group Foundation, for example, seemed to have a special focus on girls, and vulnerable children from poor families who demonstrated potential for leadership:

[We] support girls to join a particular sector through social profiling [which] particularly [target] those in the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) . . . category. . . . Selection is done from the district. Scholarships given cover fees, transport and a stipend of Kshs. 1,500 per term. . . . [Equity Foundation also runs] a leadership and mentorship programme with about 2000 children spread across provincial and national schools. (Charles Asati)

Asati has also discussed how they have recognized that some of the gifted children are very vulnerable and hence their needs go beyond school fees. Some come from traumatic backgrounds including famine, loss of parents and other stressful experiences. On that basis, the organization is considering whether to include counselling in its programmes.

In the absence of giftedness guidelines, the national examinations results tend to be used as the indicators for giftedness. The objective seems to be to select the top performers in these examinations and nurture them as the future community leaders and encourage competition between students:

For the above 18, Equity Foundation . . . [supports gifted children] through education. The children are selected after Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education, irrespective of their socio-economic conditions. Every top boy and girl from every district is selected and taken through an internship programme. Other 25 top students in each subject offered at the national level are taken for this internship where they are mentored in leadership and other important life skills. (Charles Asati)

It would seem therefore that the best performers in the national examinations are regarded as the gifted students and prepared for important roles in the private sector and public service. High academic ability and the potential this has to benefit humanity appear to be the understanding of the value of giftedness in Kenya (Ndirangu et al., 2007). Using national exams is a rather narrow view of giftedness. Giftedness refers to ‘the potential to perform at a level significantly in advance of what might be expected at one’s age’ (Garvis, 2009: 23). Garvis argues that recognition and support is needed for both ‘under’ and ‘over’ achieving students without marginalization or exclusion.

Chosen Children of Promise (CCP) starts work with the gifted children much earlier than Equity Group Foundation by forming partnerships with schools in the Kawangware slum area of Nairobi. In this partnership, they

aim to provide after-school tuition for children who are performing well in government schools. They also provide space for children from poor families to complete homework and they identify bright students in collaboration with heads of schools. Those selected students are recommended to be sponsored by the corporate industry. CCP offers an After School Tuition Program to assist a small number of selected gifted and talented children who might otherwise get lost in the overcrowded classes:

Following the Free Primary Education programme initiated by the NARC [National Rainbow Coalition] government in 2002 . . . [schools] could not adequately take care of children due to the overwhelming class sizes. . . . [We] take about 10 children per class per school from class four to eight. [We] have five schools at the moment. (Susan Were)

In addition to offering tuition, Susan Were indicated that CCP also offers motivational talks for all sponsored children and others who might be interested. They also seek sponsorship for gifted children from their overseas partners.

Compassion International (Kenya) comes closest to the concept of identifying and nurturing gifted and talented children. Their approach is to identify them as early as three years old but they are sponsored when they start high school. In this agency, gifted and talented children are handled through the Bright Students Support Initiative, a mentoring programme that nurtures children who show potential:

Bright Students Support Initiative supports children in the organization's academic programme and mentors them to acquire skills in diverse fields and to encourage them as they grow. The programme runs through support from partner churches. . . . Bright students are sponsored in high school but are identified as early as three years of age. (Jane Mutua)

Since independence the successive governments in Kenya have signed a raft of international proclamations that argue for education for all and for guaranteed access to a basic education (Mukudi, 2004). Mukudi argues that unless the economy was to grow dramatically, the realization of universal access to education is likely to remain an illusion. Bodies like Compassion International play an important role in supplementing the government's efforts, but they can only reach a very small proportion of the children that need support.



## Government policies

There was consensus among the three agencies participating in this research that government policies for gifted children are virtually non-existent or if they exist they are never implemented. The government, however, was said to have good children's rights policies in their books but their realization in practice was the problem.

Compassion International pointed out that the problem was not lack of policies but rather their implementation. The challenge was seen therefore to lie in implementing these policies at all levels:

As a country, we have a lot of child rights and good policies for the gifted and talented, but only on paper. These, however, are not disseminated to the people at the grassroots level. (Jane Mutua)

Compassion International also suggested that improving access to education for all children would be one way of guaranteeing them a bright future. The government has identified the need to achieve education for all children by 2015, which is consistent with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but by current trends this is unlikely to be achieved (Omwami and Omwami, 2010). The limitations remain that passing well in national exams is regarded as the indicator of giftedness and the national schools as the centres of excellence. This pathway overlooks talent that may not be expressed or supported that way.

To develop clear policies on giftedness, Kenya can learn from other countries that have developed or are developing such policies. Charles Asati pointed out that the government had no policies that specifically focus on gifted and talented children and that it could learn from other countries that had such policies:

[The government has] no known policy that specifically takes care of gifted and talented children, besides the general policies that take care of children [in general]. This is unlike what happens in Singapore and the United States of America. (Charles Asati)

The United States of America has clearer policies on gifted children but there are also criticisms that the policies are not comprehensive or focused enough on gifted children but rather on giving opportunities for all children (Jolly and Makel, 2010). Equality is not questioned but the failure to recognize the different needs of learners is the problem associated with No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. Singapore has programs to identify talent and nurture it through extra resources and enrichment activities such as camps and tours in the elite Singapore Art Elective Programme (Ellis,

1989). The Ministry of Education runs the programme and participating students can attend normal school and participate in extra classes on weekends and holidays. Israel is another example of a country with advanced programs and policies for gifted students with a mix of full-time homogenous classes for the gifted as well as mixed classes supplemented with part-time extension programs (Zeidner and Schleyer, 1999). Participants noted that the government in Kenya should allocate more specific resources to nurture talents and establish structures beyond the current formal education system to support gifted children.

### *Children's education and human rights*

All the three interviewed agencies suggested that the human rights of children in general, and the rights of the gifted children in particular, were being violated by lack of adequate provision of resources. It was suggested that there should be more resource allocation especially to meet the needs of those from poor families. It is in the context of inadequate resources in education that the violations of human rights for the gifted and talented were articulated by the participants.

Charles Asati, for example, noted that failure to access education means children, among them gifted ones, would miss out on education and this violates their rights to education. General poverty, ineffective child protection legislation and failure to provide effective support to students from poor families were identified as some of the policy failures amounting to children's human rights violations:

The failure to access education is violation of human rights since they will continue in the cycle of poverty. .... Poor legislation [framework] that fails to protect them is another violation of human rights. The state should ensure it pays [the] fees of needy children. (Charles Asati).

While the government provides free education, it appears that because of poverty there is need for more support if children are to stay in school. Even under current free education, the parents continue to bear 50 percent of the cost of education and some poor parents in the slums have been moving their children from government to non-government schools due to the poor resourcing of government schools (Omwami and Omwami, 2010). There is therefore a duality of quality private education for those who can afford and low quality education for the poor in overcrowded government schools.

An issue not easily resolved is whether the gifted children are best served by being specifically targeted or by improving the overall access

and quality of education. Chosen Children of Promise emphasize that universal support of children would help to realize their potential and hence their rights:

More financial support should be put in the education sector in order for it to assist all children including those from poor families. (Susan Were)

Providing more money alone would leave the issue of gifted and talented children unresolved. Jolly and Makel (2010) argue that universal provision of uniform education would still leave out the gifted or high ability learners. The same argument could be made for low ability learners. A better approach would therefore be to provide universal access but special programs that take into account low and high ability learners.

### *The role of social workers*

Social workers were regarded by the participants as being in a unique position to assess the needs of the children and to be their advocates. Social workers see their role as supporting social change through the realization of human rights and social justice, as articulated by the International Federation of Social workers:

Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW, 2012)

In a country like Kenya social workers then have to be concerned with the issues of poverty among other social justice issues. Poverty is a major issue in Kenyan schools that are characterized by ‘impoverished learning environment, inadequate learning materials, poor lighting and ventilation, the constant threat of physical punishment . . . and teachers who often lack motivation’ (Ackers et al., 2001: 373).

There is a recognized need for counselling and other supportive services especially for students from poor families who may be at risk of dropping out of school. Asati identified counselling, community development and advocacy on behalf of the children as some of the major roles that social workers can play to assist the children:

Responding to the psycho-social needs that such children go through, mobilizing for resources to support infrastructure, facilitating such children to get decent dressing including school uniforms, books, etc. This may prevent the rising cases of deaths amongst youngsters. . . . Lobbying for the rights of the children is another major role for social workers. (Charles Asati)

The problem is that there are no social workers, counsellors or psychologists attached to the government schools where they are needed most. The stress from poverty and expectations to perform well in national examinations with limited resources sometimes explodes into riots, mass rapes of female students by their male counterparts and burning of school property by irate students with fatal consequences (Okech and Kimemia, 2012). There are, however, social workers attached to NGOs such as African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF) that do some outreach work in a limited number schools to assist at-risk children (AMREF, 2012). Counselling alone may also not resolve structural issues such as corruption and lack of resources, but may assist in finding better ways to address the problems.

School social workers have to be prepared for a wide range of challenges. Susan Were suggested that social workers with disadvantaged children could use their skills to help identify gifted children in need and take appropriate measures to have them addressed. In this regard, they must have a passion for children and be prepared to be their role models:

A [gifted children's] social worker must be a person with a passion to reach out to the community, speak for the children, analyse needs of the children [and] advocate [for] those needs with relevant authorities. Social workers must also be role models particularly [committed to] empowering the needy children with good positive morals. (Susan Were)

To advocate for the gifted or special need children, social workers would be more effective if they are based in schools. Experience of social work in schools indicates how complex this role can be since schools are primarily teaching institutions. Anand (2010) found that in Delhi social workers had to be the link between students, teachers, parents and the community:

There is a need to work in partnership with the school system and parents and pupils' home environment in order to raise standards for education outcomes to prepare children to participate in a multinational world bound together by communication and by economic and social relations. (Anand, 2012: 243)

The holistic approach recommended for Delhi would require social workers to utilize their skills in working with individuals and communities. The experience in the United States is that social workers have to use all these skills and the main goal of social workers in schools tends to be to enable students to function and learn in the school environment (Openshaw, 2007: 5). Like elsewhere, the actual role of social workers if they were to be deployed in Kenyan schools, would depend on the needs and issues in the particular schools and localities.

## What Kenya can do

There is confusion as to what giftedness is by organizations supporting students who scored high marks in examinations believe that they were supporting gifted children. This may be the case but many more gifted children would be lost along the way if only the national examination results were considered. The experts in this field have called for policies and research that would assist in clearly defining what giftedness in the Kenyan context means and how to measure it (Report for National Conference on Gifted and Talented Persons in Kenya, 2010). Those who are gifted in athletics are often identified by overseas talent scouts and offered scholarships. Those who are talented in other fields such as music, art, sciences and other creative learning areas may be getting no support.

There is also need for the identification of other key players to avoid duplication and develop strategic and holistic alliances that can adequately address the needs of gifted children within a human rights framework. Such stakeholders include the corporate sector, professional social workers, communities and other social institutions like churches and schools. In all of these, social work practitioners and researchers could serve as a crucial link between the said stakeholders and the government.

Social workers also need to develop clear strategies on how they can contribute to this emerging field of intervention in Kenya. The participants felt that social workers have not been as active as they could be, given their skills in child development, assessment, advocacy, research and counseling. A major reason why social workers would not have been active in this field is the failure to recognize the needs and human rights of gifted children and their vulnerability.

The focus on children who are doing well in the existing system and giving them extra financial support and mentoring is an easier option than changing the curriculum (which may be outside the mandate of the agencies interviewed, and many others may be doing similar work). Nevertheless, these agencies are committed to children and their education and could play an important role in advocating for the formulation and implementation of policies for gifted education. Appropriate policies would include a clear system of identifying and nurturing such children. Since poverty is a major issue that could hinder development of talents in a country like Kenya, policies for gifted education in Kenya would be inadequate if they failed to address this issue.

There is a need for social workers to strive to be more focused on child's rights to education as this is a fundamental human right. Their employing agencies also have a responsibility to accord social workers supportive working environments that build their capacities to support gifted and talented children.

## Conclusion

Social workers are challenged to open up new and more integrated channels of social work intervention with the support of the corporate sector. This calls for social workers to improve their networking skills as they play a more active role in spearheading the rights of children in multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral environments. Social workers need to research how the profession can form alliances with teachers and other relevant professionals to identify the issues around gifted and talented children in circumstances like those occurring in Kenya today and formulate strategies for appropriate interventions.

The government for its part is devoting large amounts of resources to education at all levels and has enacted some legal frameworks for child support and protection. These, however, are not adequate for the enhancement of children's rights in Kenya particularly those relating to gifted education. There is need for more holistic approaches involving all stakeholders working for children including social workers. There is also a need for policies that specifically focus on gifted education, not only for nurturing future leaders but also to meet the human rights of gifted and talented children whose potential for high intellectual abilities are wasted by an education system that is not equipped to respond to their needs.

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### Author biographies

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