



# Keep It in the Family: A Case for Homeschooling in Kenya

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While most Kenyans associate formal education with institutional schooling, a significant number of their compatriots have opted for homeschooling. Homeschooling is *not* a specific curriculum, but rather the implementation of a curriculum by the parents themselves and/or their own directly chosen delegates. With the dominance of institutional schooling, many now view homeschooling as part of [alternative education](#).

Several Kenyan families have homeschooled their children from the early 1990s using a variety of curricula, including 8-4-4, I.G.C.S.E., and Accelerated Christian Education. A number of Kenyan children have completed their high school education through homeschooling and have been admitted to universities inside and outside Kenya, and several are already employed, while others have ventured into entrepreneurship.

The [Constitution of Kenya](#) recognises the right of the child to education. Article 43 (1) (f) lists education as one of the fundamental rights of every person. Furthermore, Article 53 (1) (b) states that every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education. Nevertheless, neither of the articles limits education to the school environment.

However, Homeschooling Kenyan parents have expressed concern over provisions in the [Basic](#)

[Education Act 2013](#) that presume education can only be attained through institutionalised schools. For example, Article 28 of the Act, titled “Right of Child to Free and Compulsory Education”, states that “The Cabinet Secretary shall implement the right of every child to free and compulsory basic education” (Article 28(1)), but the tenor of the Act is that such education can only happen in the context of an institutional school.

The homeschooling community in Kenya is already feeling the effects of the [Basic Education Act 2013](#) limiting education to the school environment. The [Daily Nation](#) carried a story on the 18<sup>th</sup> February this year, about the arrest of Silas Shikwekwe Were in Malaba, later arraigned in a Butali court in Kakamega County for allegedly abdicating his duty to enroll his children in school. Mr. Were and Mr. Onesmus Mboya Orinda filed Constitutional petition No. 236/19 at the High Court, Milimani Law Courts, asking the court to recognise home schooling as a legal and viable alternative method of according children in Kenya their right to education. They argue in their petition that the provisions of the [Basic Education Act 2013](#) requiring a parent to enroll a child to an institution of learning limits the scope of what education is. They aver that sections of the [Basic Education Act 2013](#) infringe on the rights of parents to determine the forum and manner in which their children will be educated. During the first mention of the Constitutional Petition on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2019, the courtroom was packed with homeschooling parents.

A number of considerations have led some Kenyan parents to choose homeschooling over institutional schooling.

### **A short history of schools**

Schools have been a part of human societies for thousands of years. Among some of the peoples of Africa, the age groups system used to pass on knowledge, skills and attitudes to the young adults. It entailed a degree of deliberate, formal passing on of knowledge, skills and attitudes in a manner reminiscent of a contemporary school. There were schools in the ancient societies of Egypt, India, China, Greece, and Rome. The [Byzantine Empire](#) had an established school system until the fall of the Empire in 1453 C.E. In Muslim societies, mosques combined both religious observances and learning activities, but by the 9th century, the madrassa arose as a separate institution from the mosque. In Western Europe, a number of [cathedral schools](#) were founded during the [Early Middle Ages](#) in order to teach future clergy and administrators. Mandatory school attendance became common in parts of Europe during the 18th century, with the aim of increasing the literacy of the masses.

Formal schools become widespread only during the past two centuries. With the advent of the Western Scientific Revolution, certain fields of knowledge became highly specialised, making it significantly more difficult for parents to help their children to master them. The rise of factories during the Industrial Revolution led to the need for mass formal schooling to inculcate requisite habits in the workforce - punctuality, adherence to instructions, among others.

### **Education is the primary responsibility of parents, not schools**

The word “education” comes from the Latin word *ēducātiō*, which literally means “breeding”, “bringing up”, or “rearing”, all of which are primarily associated with parents rather than with schools. Indeed, theorists of education frequently define education as the deliberate, planned equipping of the young with knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable them to participate effectively in the life of society. Again, such equipping is primarily the responsibility of parents, not schools. For most of human history, parents have been in charge of their children’s education. Their homes served as spaces for imparting social values and etiquette and particular trades. Families were known for certain trades. The presence of English surnames such as Tailor, Cook, Baker, and

Smith partly explains this naming practice.

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Despite the rise of universal compulsory education through schools, the responsibility of providing education primarily rests with parents as part of their wider responsibility to provide for their children. Parents who take their children to school are delegating rather than abdicating this responsibility, and this is evident in the practice of schools regularly meeting parents to brief them on their children's progress. As such, parents who choose homeschooling are simply choosing to discharge their responsibility directly rather than delegating it to the schools.

### **Direct and consistent parental involvement in moulding character**

In [Philosophy and Education in Africa](#), R.J. Njoroge and G.A. Bennaars point out the four dimensions of education: the cognitive dimension entails the acquisition of knowledge; the normative dimension has to do with the inculcation of values; the procedural/creative dimension involves the approach or methodology through which the knowledge and values are acquired; the social/dialogical dimension entails the fact that education is an interactive process within human groups rather than in solitude.

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Regrettably, in our day, many think that education (formal education) is exclusively geared to equipping students with knowledge (the cognitive dimension). It is no wonder we have so many highly skilled people whose ethical orientation is grievously wanting. Many parents who choose homeschooling seek to be directly and consistently involved in moulding their children's character throughout their formal education on the basis of the conviction that with good moral and mental habits, high academic achievement and success in career are almost guaranteed.

There is consensus among theorists and practitioners of education that the ideal model of education is one in which the child gets maximum personalised attention in order to take care of his or her uniqueness. Harvard's educational psychology [Prof. Howard Gardner](#) pointed out that human beings have [multiple intelligences](#) ("learning styles"), and that each of us uses one or two of them to learn most effectively. Following Gardner's approach, the US-based [Institute of Learning Styles Research](#) has identified seven learning styles, highlighting the various ways in which different people learn most effectively using their five senses.

The seven learning styles are print (looking at printed or written text), aural (listening), visual (looking at depictions such as pictures and graphs), haptic (touch or grasp), interactive (verbalisation), kinesthetic (whole-body movement), and olfactory (smell and taste). Schools typically focus on the three competencies referred to in Western tradition as "the 3Rs" - reading, writing and reckoning (calculating), and mainly approach learning from a verbal and logical perspective, thereby largely neglecting people whose learning styles cannot cope with this approach.

By the very nature of the size of a typical family, a home-schooled child gets much better

personalised attention than a child in a typical institutional Kenyan public school where one teacher attends to tens of pupils in one lesson. When Kenya's National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government introduced Free Primary Education in [Kenya in early 2003](#); the number of pupils rose dramatically, but the number of teachers, classrooms and other facilities by and large remained unchanged. The quality of learning was significantly compromised. Some short-staffed schools had to run shifts to accommodate the pupils. By and large, the school system moves the pupils from class to class regardless of how much they have actually learnt; and the few who are required to repeat a year for extremely poor performance suffer the humiliation of doing so among their peers.

The dire implications of a grossly unhealthy teacher-to-pupil ratio quickly showed. From 2009, [Uwezo](#) initiative implemented large-scale household surveys to assess the actual basic literary and numeracy competencies of school-aged children across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, culminating in [annual reports](#). A July 2013 newspaper headline on one of those reports declared: "[Over 50 Per Cent of Class 8 Pupils can Barely Read – Report](#)". The article stated "The report by Uwezo Kenya also reveals that over 50 out of 100 children in Classes Four and Five can't comprehend stories written for class two pupils." In its [Sixth Annual Report](#) covering the year 2015, Uwezo observed, "Assessments across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda have highlighted the learning crisis since 2010. The key observation has been that budgets and other inputs to learning have been increasing steadily, but learning outcomes have remained essentially stagnant."

Personalised attention is critical for exceptionally gifted children and for children with disabilities. Exceptionally gifted children who master concepts and skills grow bored when subjected to the average pace of learning: they might be able to complete the tasks assigned for one year in three months. Requiring them to sit in school and learn at the pace of the average child is torturous mass production, not education.

Children with disabilities often need special, even specialised attention to learn effectively. The Kenyan public school system is grossly ill-equipped to provide education for children with autism, so parents of autistic children have to equip adequately for the task of schooling. The class size at Thika School for the Blind where I went to school was fifteen rather than the prescribed forty in a typical public school. In certain subjects such as maths, geography and biology where teachers rely heavily on chalkboards and other visual teaching aids, children with visual disabilities would be left behind unless there was a resource teacher to offer extra support. At Thika, the teacher spent considerable time with each student helping them to appreciate maps, diagrams, graphs and maths formula. The parents of children with different disabilities ought to have the liberty to home-school them if they are able and willing to do so. Indeed, such liberty would affirm the right of children with disabilities to high-quality education in line with Articles 27 and 54 of the [Constitution](#).

History offers a number of cases of exceptionally gifted children who performed very poorly in school because the school system could not cater for their learning disabilities. People with [dyslexia](#) (reading and writing difficulties) or [dyscalculia](#) (difficulties with maths) are cases in point. English scientist [Michael Faraday](#) was a person with [dyslexia](#), and yet through personal study he made numerous ground-breaking discoveries and inventions, including [electromagnetic rotary devices](#) that were fundamental to the development of electric motor technology used to generate electrical power. [Albert Einstein](#) had difficulty in school due to [dyslexia](#), and his achievements can be attributed to his ability to teach himself. Some of the other famous Western scientists with dyslexia include Alexander Bell, Galileo Galilei and Thomas Edison.

A friend of mine confessed that he could not read at all by Standard 3; his first attempt at the then Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) exam at a Nairobi Eastlands primary school yielded dismal results. His mother then took him to a high-cost primary school to re-do the CPE and he excelled: today he is a university lecturer in pure Maths – the most abstract branch of mathematics.



I know of several parents with university degrees who have chosen to stay at home to provide their children with quality education. I am acquainted with a parent who holds a Masters degree in educational Psychology who has chosen to provide homeschooling for her children instead of pursuing a career in the schools or colleges. Some parents would give up pursuing their careers to home-school their children to shield them from the associated dangers of institutional day and boarding schools. It is evident that the home-schooled children of such parents enjoy certain advantages over their counterparts in institutional schools.

The commute to school is associated with several challenges. Day schooling children are exposed to undesirable social elements and dangers in their daily commute. Those parents determined to find quality schooling for their children beyond the limits of a neighbourhood, get up as early as 4:30 a.m. to prepare children to board buses at 5:30 a.m. to schools on the other side of town, in a continuous dawn to dusk routine.

Boarding schools come with their own set of social challenges such as unhealthy competition and bullying that have lasting effects on many young lives.

### **Home-schools as private schools**

The culture of private schools is entrenched in Kenya. The children of prominent Public officials attend private schools rather than public ones. Private schools have better educational facilities, better teacher-to-pupil ratios, leading to better performance in public examinations.

Economic realities and high tuition fees prevent many parents from the privilege of private schools but rarely considered is the option of responding with privately tutored high-quality schooling at home. Home-schooled children register as private candidates for public exams, and some of them have done exceptionally well.

There is really no essential difference between private schooling and homeschooling: both models of learning are a move away from public schools. Denying a section of society the right to educate children at home is discriminatory contrary to Article 27 of the [Constitution](#) of Kenya.

Parents with highly mobile careers that require them to relocate frequently find changing schools almost always a traumatic experience for children, as they must make new friends, and adapt to the new physical environment and new teachers. This challenge is greater in situations where children are frequently moved from one cultural context with its education system to another with a different education system. If one of the parents in a family going through this kind of experience is available to home-school the children, the homeschooling experience provides a point of stability for the children which significantly mitigates the trauma.

Parents of home-schooled children form networks that facilitate regular joint activities among their children: they visit places such as museums, factories, universities, go boat-rowing, and attend music concerts. They enroll their children in various activities outside their homes such as football, swimming, and music lessons. In addition, there are joint annual events for various homeschooling communities.

Contrary to the belief that the school environment is the best for learning social skills, it often inculcates unhealthy competition rather than co-operation. The idea that all children progress intellectually at roughly the same pace is ingrained in the thinking of the school system, and yet it necessarily works against the need to cater for the children's individual differences. Pupils are often contented to come out top of their class irrespective of the fact that any class will have a top student however low the quality of learning. An emphasis on coming out top in class easily encourages

contentment with mediocrity rather than the pursuit of excellence. Schools function in a specific social context, and is a reflection of that context.

Thus with the increasing erosion of social values, schools are now places where children learn some grossly anti-social habits such as violence and substance abuse.

### **Homeschooling and social class**

Members of the Kenyan middle class are more likely to be inclined to homeschooling: this is mainly due to the fact that they are likely to appreciate educational theory and practice. Middle-class parents are likely to afford the availability of one parent devoted to homeschooling their children. Parents in low-income brackets cannot live off the salary of one spouse. Nevertheless, homeschooling is not the exclusive province of the middle class and the wealthy.

Most homeschooling parents use officially sanctioned curricula. Some of the curricula used in home-schools require that parents get training before embarking on using them. Homeschooling parents also benefit from the resources of homeschooling organisations outside Kenya, including [Global Home Education Exchange](#), [Home School Legal Defense Association](#), and [National Home Education Research Institute](#).

Kenyan universities typically assess students for admission using the results of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results whether a candidate sits for the exam in a public school, private school, or is privately registered as would typically be the case for Home-schooling candidates. For those home-schooled students going through other curricula, the Kenya National Examinations Council has a system of interpreting results to indicate their 8-4-4 equivalents, thereby enabling universities to make informed decisions about admissions.

For overseas education, various clusters of universities use a variety of entry tests to assess students who have gone through different education systems to determine whether or not they have the requisite skills (such as language proficiency, comprehension, reasoning, and basic maths) to handle university work. American universities rely on tests such as the [SAT](#) set by [The College Board](#) to assess applicants for undergraduate courses, and the [Graduate Record Examinations](#) (GRE) administered by the [Educational Testing Service](#) (ETS) for applicants to post-graduate courses.

There is no evidence that children who have gone through Home-schooling are disadvantaged in comparison with those who have attended institutional schools. The U.S.-based [National Home Education Research Institute](#), score the home-educated 15 to 30 percentile points above public-school students on standardized academic achievement tests (the public school average is the 50th percentile; scores range from 1 to 99). Home-schooled students typically score above average on the standardised tests such as [SAT](#). The measured conclusion of the [Institute](#) is: "It is possible that Home-schooling causes the positive traits reported above. However, the research designs to date do not conclusively 'prove' that Home-schooling causes these things. At the same time, there is no empirical evidence that Home-schooling causes negative things compared to institutional schooling."

I first met a home-schooled child in the mid-1990s. She was the daughter of friends of mine and also neighbours in Nairobi's Buruburu Estate. At the age of five, she was already confident and articulate. This began to dispel my doubts about Home-schooling. About ten years ago, I was requested to help look at some research papers written by some home-schooled high school finalists using a different curriculum from 8-4-4. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that unlike their counterparts in the 8-4-4 system, they were considerably well acquainted with library research and writing: they intelligently cited various books and articles using footnotes, and meticulously laid out their lists of references in a manner reminiscent of what is expected of first-year university students

in Kenya! I have also had an opportunity to facilitate a “Thinking Skills” course for five home-schooled high school students, and was impressed by their confidence, clarity of thought and expression, and keenness to learn.

In view of my reflections, parents who are willing and able to provide personalised education for their children at home, often at great sacrifice to themselves, ought not to be denied the right to do so. The Home-schooling community is not lobbying for the abolition of schools: it appreciates that not everyone can home-school because some are ill-equipped for the task, while others are obligated to work to provide for their families. Nonetheless, society is enriched by diversity, including diversity in approaches to formal education. What we must all ensure is that whether through institutional schooling or Home-schooling, the child gets the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable him or her to contribute positively to the holistic development of both himself or herself and society.

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