

Research Note

Autonomous hunter-gatherer children in hierarchical schools: A review of the literature from the Global South

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Abstract: We recently conducted a review of the literature regarding hunter-gatherer children's schooling experiences in the Global South (Ninkova et al, forthcoming). In this research note, we highlight one central finding of our review: that the autonomy granted to hunter-gatherer children determines their participation in school. Children decide for themselves whether they will attend. Children also decide for themselves whether they will pursue alternative endeavors, such as subsistence activities or play. When children do attend school, autonomous behavior is generally not tolerated within the hierarchical classroom structure. Hunter-gatherer children are often reprimanded or punished when they fail to observe hierarchical rules, leading them to drop out. An important conclusion of our review is that if the global development priority of universal education is to be realized, the focus must be on local needs rather than broad global solutions. For hunter-gatherer children, local needs involve designing schools which reflect and respect hunter-gatherer autonomy.

This research note highlights the importance of personal autonomy in school participation for hunter-gatherer children from the Global South, and the need for local approaches to education. Modern hunter-gatherers are small scale, often mobile communities that traditionally relied upon resources obtained directly from the environment through hunting, gathering, fishing, and scavenging. Today many have lost access to their ancestral lands, and generally rely upon other subsistence modes (Thompson 2016; Gilbert and Begbie-Clench 2018; Reyes-García and Pyhälä 2016; Hitchcock 2019). Yet, many hunter-gatherers continue to practice traditional subsistence activities where they can, and identify themselves in relation to them (Lavi and Bird-David 2014; Hays and Ninkova 2018). Anthropologists working with hunter-gatherers have noted that, although such groups are highly diverse culturally and linguistically, and have adapted to diverse environments, they share several common cultural ideals and values. This includes an egalitarian ethos, widespread sharing, and an insistence upon personal autonomy (Lee 1979; Woodburn 1982; Gardner 1991; Endicott 2011; B.S. Hewlett et al 2011; Lavi and Friesem 2019).

By *personal autonomy*, we refer to societal norms in which interpersonal coercion is strongly discouraged, and with a high level of respect for individual will. It is important to highlight that in hunter-gatherer social contexts, autonomy does not entail complete self-directedness and separation of individuals from others. Instead, personal autonomy is embedded in close relationships, mutual support, caring, and cooperation (Endicott 2011; Gardner 2000; Woodburn 1982; B. S. Hewlett et al. 2011; N. Peterson 1993; Lavi and Friesem 2019; Lee 1979; Gibson and Sillander 2011). Such autonomy is extended to children (Lew-Levy et al., 2018). In what follows, we will show that this emphasis on personal autonomy is at odds with the structure and values of formal schools.

Globally, hunter-gatherers (along with other Indigenous communities) face well-documented problems in formal education systems, including the simultaneous processes of assimilation and exclusion (Hays et al. 2019). When they do access formal schooling, hunter-gatherer children often face extreme ignorance about, or active denigration of, their knowledge and culture. During the colonial era in the settler states, formal education was often imposed on Indigenous communities with the explicit aim of destroying their culture – a practice today recognized as having been a violation of human rights (Sissons 2005, Woodman 2019; Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010). In the post-colonial Global South, contact with formal education for many hunter-gatherer groups is more recent. Compounding issues including under-investment in teachers, infrastructure, and locally relevant curriculum exacerbates exclusion of minorities and rural communities (Huisman and Smits 2009; UNESCO-PRIE 2007). Considering these challenges, hunter-gatherers in the Global South are often not a priority for governments who are already struggling to provide access to education for their citizens. There are few resources for alternative projects that recognize hunter-gatherer home language and culture; the options that exist are highly assimilative. Further, schooling options are often inadequate and include practices that are no longer acceptable in the Global North, such as corporal punishment, degrading characterizations, and separating children from their communities at a young age (Woodman 2019). As a result, Global South hunter-gatherer participation rates in education are very low, with sharp levels of drop-off in higher grades (Hays et al. 2019).

We recognize that many of the barriers and challenges that we describe below are shared with hunter-gatherer communities in the Global North – including the emphasis on autonomy that is the focus of this research note. Our focus on the Global South is intended to highlight the less-explored challenges faced by hunter-gatherer children in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In our recent

paper on the experiences of hunter-gatherer children with formal schooling in the Global South, we reviewed 80 publications from 23 countries (Ninkova et al, forthcoming). In this article, we describe general trends. In support of these trends, we cite illustrative examples—many more supporting citations, and discussion of cross-community nuance, can be found in Ninkova et al., (forthcoming).

Our literature review revealed several common barriers to accessing education faced by hunter-gatherer children. *Economic* barriers include the costs associated with attending school, including school fees, school supplies, clothes, and toiletries; food scarcity also plays an important role (Ninkova 2017). *Infrastructural* barriers describe the incongruence between stationary schools and mobile lifestyles, and the general lack of schools in the remote areas where they live, which are both far from urban areas or larger villages, and often scattered over a large area (Ngales and Astete 2020). School attendance thus often requires living in hostels at boarding schools, far from their families (contributing to assimilation processes) (Mokibelo 2014). Most teachers, school officials, and hostel staff are from other ethnic groups which are different from and almost always politically dominant to neighboring hunter-gatherer communities (Kaare 1994). *Cultural* barriers reflect contradictory expectations between their home culture and that of the school. These include conflicts between school schedules and important seasonal subsistence activities; clashes between the social norms associated with the hierarchical culture of schools and the egalitarian standards of their home villages; the use of corporal punishment; and the absence of hunter-gatherer languages in schools (Bombjaková et al. 2019). Collectively, these barriers contribute to the common *structural* barriers reported in the literature. Throughout the Global South, hunter-gatherer children are highly stigmatized based on their association with ‘the bush’, ‘the forest’, or ‘nature’; in some places they are considered to be on a lower evolutionary rung (Shahu 2019; Hays 2016a). This perspective feeds common perceptions in which the blame for their lack of participation in school is placed entirely on the hunter-gatherer communities themselves, thus reinforcing the existing hierarchies.

Notably, our literature review identified a cultural emphasis on autonomy – also extended to children – as a central element that intersects with the barriers described above, and that often determines the participation of hunter-gatherer children in school. Reflecting their autonomy, generally hunter-gatherer children themselves decide whether they will participate in schooling. Many children are initially enthusiastic about attending school for many different reasons, including recognizing the future benefits of education, wanting to visit with friends, or being excited to have novel experiences and meet new people (Kamei 2001, Lavi 2021). However, children often do not attend regularly: they may choose instead to participate in subsistence activities or play (Paksi 2019; Morelli 2012). In these cases, their parents usually do not force them to attend school (Lavi 2019). This differs from most mainstream societies, where parents ensure that their children attend school. School officials appeal to parents to encourage their children to attend school (Ninkova 2017), but this practice is foreign to hunter-gatherer parents, who often express that it is the children’s decision whether or not they attend (Hays 2016a:68). Sporadic attendance is not acceptable to school staff, and ultimately leads to withdrawal, or expulsion, from school (le Roux 2000).

When children do attend, autonomous behavior is generally not tolerated within a hierarchical system, and it plays an important role in existing stereotypes of the children as ‘undisciplined’ and ‘wild’, and the parents as neglectful (Ninkova 2017). Our literature review found that in formal educational settings, children are not only denied the opportunity to make their own decisions, but

that this contributes to feelings of powerlessness and fear, leading children to drop out of school (Strader 2015). According to many of the papers we reviewed, hunter-gatherer children experience being verbally commanded or reprimanded as extremely harsh, as they are not accustomed to being punished (Kakkoth 2014). Equally common are references to corporal punishment as a reason for dropping out (Bombjaková 2018; Shahu 2019). Hunter-gatherer children are often reprimanded or punished when they fail to observe hierarchical rules, such as properly greeting or otherwise treating teachers and other elders with sufficient respect – also often causing them to drop out (Sercombe 2010). This aspect of the problem is generally not well understood by local school authorities, and deserves further attention.

Importantly, ‘self-directed learning’ and an absence of coercion – strategies practiced by hunter-gatherer parents – have received attention in recent years as contributing to effective learning strategies (Gray 2011, 2015; Ryan and Deci 2017). Many hunter-gatherer children do participate in at least some schooling, and some of the studies reviewed show that the behavior of school-going children (and in some cases, their parents) begins to change to model the more hierarchical and coercive relationships experienced at school, and that personal autonomy is repressed (Ninkova 2020; Lavi 2019; Le Roux 2000). Furthermore, the intra- and intergenerational transmission of language, knowledge, skills, and values is also disrupted, especially when children attend boarding schools (Paksi 2019; Kaare 1994). In these and in other ways, school curricula not only do not reflect the lived reality of hunter-gatherer children in the Global South, they actively undermine effective teaching and learning strategies and sophisticated forms of knowledge and skills, without providing viable alternatives.

Despite the daunting challenges and problematic effects noted above, hunter-gatherer parents generally express a desire for their children to gain some of the skills, knowledge, and broad social competence associated with formal schooling. Under the right conditions, school can be a place where hunter-gatherer languages and cultures are validated, as the Latin American experience has shown (Lopes da Silva Macedo 2016). An important conclusion of our review is that if the global development priority of universal education is to be realized, the focus must be on local needs rather than broad global solutions. Given the findings of this review, we argue that imposing existing assimilative versions of ‘schooling’ on hunter-gatherers does not make sense pedagogically; it is also in violation of human rights. Such approaches not only create barriers to participation for hunter-gatherers, they also ignore a valuable opportunity to rethink what a school is, and how it could be designed to benefit all children. For hunter-gatherer children, local needs involve designing schools which reflect and respect hunter-gatherer autonomy. In the Global South, where many of these processes are currently acute and few real alternatives exist, it is particularly important to have these conversations. The literature review described here aims to summarize the current body of literature in order to inform this conversation.

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