



Universiteit Utrecht



**Parenting in rural Uganda: A Qualitative Study on the Influence
of the Parenting Challenge on Parental Beliefs and Practices**

Thesis

Youth, Education & Society, Utrecht University

2023-2024

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Date: 21 June 2024

Abstract

Children's well-being is closely tied to fulfilling their needs across different dimensions, including physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects. Considering the significant impact of overlooking children's needs and the key role parents have in promoting children's well-being, the utilization of parenting programs is on the rise. The Parenting Challenge (TPC) is a community-based parenting program which aims to improve children's lives by enhancing parenting skills and knowledge. This qualitative study explored the influence of TPC on parental beliefs and practices in rural Uganda by conducting and analysing interviews with 20 parents before and after attending the basics module of TPC. The results showed that parents view parenting through a materialistic lens and perceive childhood from a utilitarian perspective. Although the emphasis on providing material matters as parental role remained consistent post-training, the utilitarian view on childhood was less prominent. Furthermore, the study uncovered a gap between parental beliefs and practices before the training. Nevertheless, post-training, parents reported positive change as parents began to align their parental practices both with existing and newly acquired beliefs, leading to a more family- and child-centred approach with a future-oriented vision. The findings show that TPC holds the potential to positively influence parental beliefs and practices in rural Uganda, ultimately improving the well-being of children.

Keywords: parenting, parenting program, parental beliefs, parental practices, Parenting Challenge, Uganda

Samenvatting

Kinderwelzijn is nauw verbonden met het vervullen van diverse behoeften zoals fysieke, cognitieve en emotionele aspecten. Aangezien het negeren van de behoeften van kinderen een grote impact kan hebben en ouders een cruciale rol spelen bij het bevorderen van kindwelzijn, worden ouderschapsprogramma's steeds vaker ingezet. 'The Parenting

Challenge' (TPC) is een gemeenschapsgericht ouderschapsprogramma dat streeft naar het verbeteren van kinderwelzijn door de opvoedingsvaardigheden en kennis van ouders te vergroten. Deze kwalitatieve studie onderzocht hoe TPC de ouderlijke overtuigingen en praktijken van ouders in ruraal Oeganda beïnvloedt door middel van het uitvoeren en analyseren van 20 interviews met ouders voor en na het volgen van de basismodule van TPC. Uit de resultaten bleek dat ouders een materialistische ouderschapsopvatting hanteren en de kindertijd vanuit een utilitaristisch perspectief bekijken. Hoewel de focus op het voorzien in materiële behoeften als ouderlijke verantwoordelijkheid consistent bleef na de training, was de utilitaristische kijk op kindertijd minder zichtbaar. Bovendien toonde de studie aan dat er een kloof bestond tussen de ouderlijke overtuigingen en praktijken voor de training. Na de training meldden ouders positieve verandering, waarbij ouders hun opvoedpraktijken in overeenstemming brachten met zowel bestaande als nieuw verworven overtuigingen. Dit leidde tot een meer gezins- en kindgerichte benadering, met een toekomstgerichte visie. De bevindingen tonen aan dat TPC het potentieel heeft om ouderlijke overtuigingen en praktijken in ruraal Oeganda positief te beïnvloeden, uiteindelijk leidend tot verbetering van kinderwelzijn.

Sleutelwoorden: ouderschap, ouderschapsprogramma, ouderlijke overtuigingen, ouderlijke praktijken, Parenting Challenge, Oeganda

Parenting in rural Uganda: A Qualitative Study on the Influence of the Parenting Challenge on Parental Beliefs and Practices

Children have the fundamental right to well-being, just like everyone else. Well-being can be described as a state in which children's needs are fulfilled, enabling them to pursue their goals and experience a satisfactory quality of life (Ansell, 2017b). Children's needs encompass various dimensions, including physical health, cognitive development, and material resources, as well as educational, social and emotional requirements (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). Neglecting children's present needs can have enduring consequences for their lives (Ansell, 2017a).

Parents play a key role in supporting their children's well-being and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; OECD, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for parents to comprehend their children's needs. Influenced by factors such as perceptions of childhood and parental beliefs, parental practices significantly shape children's daily lives (Ansell, 2017c; Lin et al., 2022). Parenting programs assist parents in understanding their children's needs and improving their parental practices, ultimately aiming to improve children's well-being (Evans et al., 2008).

Parenting Programs

Parenting programs are increasingly utilized in developmental aid efforts, often focusing on reshaping parenting behaviours through group interventions (Van Esch & De Haan, 2017). The primary objective of parenting programs is to empower parents to improve their care and interactions with children, thereby fostering stronger parent-child relationships (Evans et al., 2008). Additionally, parenting programs raise awareness about the crucial role parents play in promoting children's growth and development, providing parents with opportunities to enhance their parenting skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

Recognizing that individuals in parenting roles strive to provide the best care for their children, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant constraints they often face. Therefore,

parenting programs should be designed to align with families' cultural practices, support networks, available resources, and unique requirements (Evans et al., 2008). This cultural and contextual sensitive approach is essential to prevent introducing practices from different cultures that could lead to confusion and self-doubt. Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics within a specific context is vital. Furthermore, parenting programs should complement, rather than replace, efforts aimed at tackling issues like poverty, unemployment, and public health (World Health Organisation, 2022).

The Parenting Challenge

One of the parenting programs that considers diverse influences on parenting, such as culture and context, is The Parenting Challenge (TPC). This program was developed by Help a Child and is implemented in several countries, including Uganda. TPC aims to enhance parenting skills and knowledge by empowering parents to offer adequate and relevant support to their children. Involving both mothers and fathers, it emphasizes raising awareness of parents' individual parenting styles and strengthening parents' social networks. TPC distinguishes itself from conventional Western positive parenting initiatives by employing a community-based, bottom-up approach, which encourages collective learning and long-term impact (Help a Child, 2020). TPC comprises a 4-day training session, called the basics module, which will be referred to as training. The training is followed by bi-weekly sessions that extend over a year. Help a Child has recently expanded TPC to several countries. With the program's growth, there is a heightened focus on demonstrating its effectiveness and gaining a deeper understanding of the key elements that make the intervention successful, as well as its ability to be adapted to various cultural settings. Accordingly, this thesis will investigate the influence of TPC in Uganda, with a specific focus on the West Nile region.

Theoretical and Social Relevance

Parenting interventions in general have shown the potential to assist countries and communities in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (World Health Organisation, 2022) by improving family relationships and increasing parental sensitivity, which could lead to a reduction in child maltreatment (McCoy et al., 2020; Puffer et al., 2015; Van Esch & De Haan, 2017). However, while research on parenting programs has been extensive in high-income countries, far fewer studies have been conducted in low- and middle-income countries, highlighting the scientific need for more comprehensive research in regions with limited resources (Knerr et al., 2013). This thesis aims to gain insight into the working mechanisms of parenting programs, in contrast to existing research which often takes an at-risk approach, neglects local practices and focuses on deficits in parental components (Van Esch & De Haan, 2017). It is necessary to conduct further comprehensive studies to understand how parenting programs operate in diverse socio-economic contexts and ensure their cultural sensitivity and effectiveness.

Evaluating the effectiveness of TPC is socially important due to its potential impact on individual households, children's well-being, and family dynamics. In Uganda, efforts to improve child well-being have mainly been top-down, with government and other agencies acting as experts in intervention decisions. This undermines community ownership, self-reliance, and sustainability in development initiatives (Amollo et al., 2022). As TPC adopts a bottom-up approach, studying its effects is crucial to assess effectiveness and inform future decision-making in child well-being interventions. Moreover, the program appears to have broader implications for societal progress, serving as a key driver for broader transformation and change, laying the groundwork for subsequent initiatives related to food supply and healthcare.

Theoretical Framework

Since parenting is a broad topic, this thesis focuses on the influence of TPC on parental practices and beliefs, crucial elements that shape how parents raise their children and directly affect children's well-being (Harkness et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2022). The connection between children's well-being and parental practices and beliefs is examined and supported in the theoretical framework, specifically through the theory of the developmental niche. Before delving deeper, it is essential to establish a clear understanding of the concepts of parenting and childhood.

Concept of Childhood

As parenting programs primarily aim to enhance children's well-being, it is crucial to examine how children's roles are perceived. Children's roles and contributions differ based on cultural norms, family wealth, social class, parents' jobs, household structure, and whether they live in urban or rural areas (Ansell, 2017c). In African societies, children often play active roles, shaping their identities in line with cultural norms and sharing family responsibilities. Children in rural Africa often contribute to household tasks from a young age, like caring for siblings or working in the field (Ansell, 2017c). This aligns with the core definition of childhood in agricultural communities, which emphasizes children engaging in useful work (Stearns, 2021). Additionally, within agrarian societies, intergenerational reciprocity stands as a fundamental principle of social existence. Children are often seen as essential for ensuring their parents' security in old age, especially in countries where formal support systems for the elderly and disabled are lacking (LeVine & White, 1991). This perspective, in which children are perceived as a useful labour force and expected to provide future support, leads to the attachment of *utilitarian values* to children (Kagitcibasi & Ataca, 2005). In contrast, as societies undergo socio-economic development, the utilitarian value attributed to children diminishes, while their psychological value increases. This

psychological value, encompassing the benefits parents gain from having children, such as happiness, companionship and a sense of accomplishment, is particularly prominent in Western countries.

Concept of Parenting

Parents can be defined as individuals who acknowledge, accept, and perform the parental role, encompassing those fulfilling the duties and responsibilities typically associated with parental roles, regardless of their biological relationship to the child (Evans et al., 2008; Mowder, 2005). Parenting involves socially recognized roles with specific behaviours such as guidance and discipline. Parenting is shaped by personal experiences in parent-child relationships, perceptions and emotions regarding parenthood, child-rearing knowledge, interactions with children, family dynamics and external factors such as societal influences and legal obligations for children's safety and well-being (Mowder, 2005). Additionally, cultural context significantly influences parenting practices, shaping parents' identities and approaches to child-rearing (Bornstein, 2012). In traditional agrarian societies, parents play a crucial role in not only nurturing their children but also teaching their children household tasks and agricultural duties to prepare their offspring for their future roles (LeVine & White, 1991). However, modernization, industrialization, and urbanization can significantly impact the parent-child relations. For instance, parents may find themselves lacking the specific skills their children need for future occupations beyond farming, as well as social connections with individuals possessing such expertise.

Developmental Niche

Given that this study explores the influence of TPC on parental practices and beliefs in Uganda, the *developmental niche* framework offers a strong foundation by emphasizing how cultural beliefs and practices shape children's upbringing, underscoring the importance of taking the context into account. The developmental niche emphasizes the

interconnectedness of the physical, social, and cultural factors that influence a child's growth and learning experiences. The developmental niche outlines three key components: a) the physical and social setting in which the child grows up; b) cultural practices and customs; and c) parental ethnotheories or beliefs (Super & Harkness, 1986). The following paragraphs elaborate on the developmental niche and its application to parenting in Uganda, with a specific focus on the West Nile region.

Physical and Social Setting. The physical and social settings in which children grow up include housing arrangements, neighbourhood, family structure and relationships, parental roles, etcetera (Super & Harkness, 1986). In Uganda, households play a vital role in meeting children's needs for care and protection (Boothby et al., 2017). Traditionally, many African children are raised by the extended family and community (Evans et al., 2008). However, urbanization is leading to a transition from extended families to smaller nuclear families (Ansell, 2017c). Approximately 40% of Ugandan children live in overcrowded or poorly constructed homes and 56% of Ugandan children live in poverty, facing various deprivations (United Nations International Childrens Fund [UNICEF], 2019). The West Nile region stands out as one of Uganda's poorest areas. Poverty in Uganda impacts children's material and social well-being, leading to challenges like limited access to clean water, malnutrition, and exposure to violence and neglect (Boothby et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2019). Northern Uganda is a post-conflict region, due to the violent civil war that lasted until 2006 (Wieling et al., 2015), which still impacts the economy, society, and mental well-being (Mehus et al., 2018).

Parental Practices. Parental beliefs serve as a compass for how parents behave, interact with their children, make decisions, and fulfil their responsibilities in both everyday life and difficult circumstances (Lin et al., 2022; Mowder, 2005). Boothby et al. (2017, p. 157) studied parental practices in three districts in Uganda and found seven fundamental themes: "Investing in children's future, protection, care, enterprising, relationship with

neighbours, intimate partner relationship, and child-rearing.” The most commonly mentioned aspect of positive parenting was investing in children’s future, particularly through education. Conversely, the failure to provide care for children was frequently identified as a key characteristic of negative parenting (Boothby et al., 2017).

Parenting Beliefs. The way parents fulfil their parental role is influenced by their parental ethnotheories, which encompass beliefs on children’s development, socialisation goals, and effective parenting practices (Harkness & Super, 1996). While there are universal notions of good parenting, like the importance of caring for children, the specific definition of an ideal parent varies across cultures (Lin et al., 2022). In sub-Saharan Africa, parenting often focuses on ensuring survival and meeting physical needs (Strachan et al., 2020; Zaidman-Mograbi, 2020). This relates to a *material concept of parenting* referring to the way parents focus on provision and organizing the child’s physical world (Bornstein, 2022). Research in Uganda has shown that parents also value showing love to children and hope for their intelligence, although intelligence is often perceived as innate rather than influenced by parenting. Additionally, Ugandan caregivers prioritize instilling good behavior and manners in children and often view play as valuable just for fun (Strachan et al., 2020).

To illustrate the interconnectedness of the three components, consider the following example: Ugandan parents may believe they have limited influence on their child's intelligence and view play solely for enjoyment. This perspective can result in fewer intentional efforts to enhance children's social and cognitive skills through parent-child interactions. Moreover, the time parents can dedicate to their children, influenced by the physical and social settings, plays a crucial role in shaping these interactions. Therefore, the developmental niche offers a useful framework to understand the context of parenting in rural Uganda, providing insight into the background in which TPC takes place.

Current Research

Following from the above, studying the influence of TPC is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of parenting programs in low- and middle-income countries and their influence on children's well-being. The primary research question of this thesis is: How does the Parenting Challenge influence parental beliefs and practices concerning parents' role in supporting their children's needs in Uganda? Subquestions include: (1) What beliefs do Ugandan parents express about their parental responsibilities in supporting their children's needs before and after completing the basics module of the Parenting Challenge? (2) What practices do Ugandan parents report to meet their children's needs before and after completing the basics module of the Parenting Challenge? The research question arises from Help a Child's hypotheses regarding the program's influence, suggesting increased consciousness of parental roles, expanded notions on parenting, and increased feelings of competence among participants.

Method

Research Design

The research question of this thesis forms part of a broader, qualitative evaluation study into the effectiveness of the Parenting Challenge (TPC) involving repeated measures. Therefore, not all data collected was utilized to address the research question posed in this thesis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by a team of four researchers for data collection between mid-March and mid-April 2024.

Sample

The research took place in a rural sub-county in the West Nile region of northwestern Uganda. This area was chosen to utilize existing facilities and partnerships, as well as considering the relative unfamiliarity of TPC. Two villages in the West Nile region were chosen, in which each approximately 50 parents were selected to participate in the

intervention and study using non-probability, purposive sampling. The sampling condition specified that participants had to be (grand)parents actively caring for children regardless of biological relation. In each village, a mobilisation day was organised for participant selection, coordinated by the program coordinator and parenting group facilitator from African Evangelistic Enterprise (AEE) in collaboration with community leaders.

From the total study sample of 103 participants in the post-training phase, data from a subset of 20 parents was analysed to answer the research question of this thesis. To select those 20 participants, 10 parents from each village were selected, with an equal number of men and women. Table 1 contains the descriptives of the 20 participants whose data were utilized for this thesis.

Table 1

Descriptives study sample

Nr.	Gender	Age	Marital status	(Grand)parent	Children under care	Age range of children	Highest level of education
1	Female	39	Married	Parent	4, 5	5-13	Primary 4
2	Female	32	Married	Parent	5	3-12	Primary 6
3	Female	35	Married*	Parent	5, 2	0-17	Senior 4
4	Female	48	Married*	Parent	6, 3	8-20	Primary 4
5	Male	49	Married	Parent	5	12-25	Primary 7
6	Male	49	Married	Parent	8, 1	1-21	Primary 6
7	Male	50	Married	Parent	8, 1	4-14	Primary 7
8	Male	40	Married*	Parent	9, 3	1-21	Primary 6
9	Male	65	Married	Grandparent	11, 5	9-34	Primary 7
10	Male	36	Married*	Parent	6, 1	0-17	Primary 5
11	Female	35	Married	Parent	2	3-6	Unknown

Nr.	Gender	Age	Marital status	(Grand)parent	Children under care	Age range of children	Highest level of education
12	Female	25	Married	Parent	2, 4	2-4	Senior 4
13	Female	25	Married	Parent	3	2-7	Unknown
14	Female	21	Married	Parent	1	9	Primary 4
15	Female	28	Married	Parent	4	1-10	Primary 5
16	Female	28	Married	Parent	4	0-14	Unknown
17	Male	27	Married	Parent	3, 1	1-5	Senior 4
18	Male	24	Married	Parent	2, 1	1-12	Primary 5
19	Male	37	Married	Parent	2	3-6	Primary 5
20	Male	46	Married	Parent	7	7-24	Primary 6

Note. All in italics refer to non-biological children of the parent.

* Polygamous marriage

Instruments and Procedure

Interviews were conducted at convenient and nearby locations of the respondents to make it as easy as possible for the parents to participate, while also providing a private space for parents to speak freely. This resulted in two researchers conducting interviews from parental homes and two from a church. Couples were interviewed separately. The interviews typically lasted around 45 minutes. Respondents were interviewed before, referred to as pre-training interviews, and two weeks after completing the basics module of TPC, referred to as post-training interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and the English segments of the audio recordings were transcribed for further analysis.

Pre-training interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic list. Through a group discussion with local staff members from AEE the topic list was tested for cultural and local relevance. Interview topics included notions on parenthood, family dynamics,

disciplining, and community of learning. The topics derived from Help a Child's hypotheses regarding the influence of TPC, as well as earlier exploratory research on TPC in Malawi (Ammerlaan, 2022; De Rooij, 2022; Hondelink, 2023). A preliminary interview was conducted with a participant from one of the villages to gather insight into the applicability of the topic list. This data was not included in the research analysis. During the post-training interview a similar topic list was employed, with adjustments and additions made to better reflect TPC experience.

To ensure validity and reliability, the topic lists were translated into Lugbarati, the local language in the West Nile region of Uganda, and back-translated into English to verify the alignment of meanings. Interviews involved a translator to facilitate communication between English and Lugbarati. Translators proficient in English and Lugbarati were trained to facilitate effective communication during the interviews. The training emphasized the significance of precise translation, refraining from personal judgment, and avoiding personal interpretations and additions.

The Intervention

In addition to conducting interviews, the researchers observed TPC activities to gain a deeper understanding of the program's process and parent's reactions. The training included various assignments related to notions on parenthood. On the first day, parents formed a parenting group and engaged in discussions about the definition of a parent. During the "24 hours of your life" assignment, groups were divided based on gender and parents talked about their daily activities. Additionally, parents discussed their roles and responsibilities as fathers and mothers and mutual expectations. The second day focused on parents sharing the problems they encounter and the way they deal with challenges. Conversations revolved around strategies to eliminate problems or enhance strengths to find a better balance in parenting. During the third day, parents delved into child development, discussing the needs

of children at different stages and the roles parents play during these phases. On the final day, parents brainstormed about future needs and identified steps they could implement at home and within their communities to enhance child-rearing practices. Practical action points were developed to apply the knowledge gained during the training.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to investigate the influence of TPC on parental practices and beliefs in Uganda. This method was employed to uncover patterns and themes within the qualitative data. The data analysis process involved organizing, classifying, and coding the data, interpreting the data, and integrating data with existing literature. Nvivo, a software program for qualitative analysis, was utilized for the data analysis process.

The first step was that the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading through the transcript data. The second step was highlighting text segments related to notions on parenthood, for which the questions about notions on parenthood from the topic list of the interviews were used as a guideline. The third step was finding key themes relevant to the research question by highlighting text passages related to notions on parenthood. The key themes were then deliberated upon with other researchers, enhancing the understanding of the data and increasing the credibility of the research. Finally, the data was coded according to the identified themes. The pre-training themes included: *view on parenting*, *view on childhood*, and *parental practices*. The post-training themes included: *view on parenting and childhood*, *reflecting on beliefs and practices*, *parental practices*, and *future-orientation*.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Utrecht University's ethical committee and the Institutional Review Board Uganda. On the mobilization day, the study's objectives were presented and all parents were asked for informed consent to participate in the research, which was shortly repeated at the start of the interviews. To keep the participants' identities

confidential, data was processed anonymously using codes and gathered data was securely stored in YoDa, an online repository from Utrecht University. Research findings were shared with Help a Child, African Evangelistic Enterprise, and involved researchers from the University of Utrecht.

Results

Key themes were identified that were important for addressing the research question. The pre-training themes included: 1) View on parenting; 2) View on childhood; and 3) Parental practices. The post-training themes involved: 4) View on parenting and childhood; 5) Reflecting on beliefs and practices; 6) Parental practices; and 7) Future-orientation. Themes 1, 2, and 4 delve deeper into parental beliefs. Themes 3 and 6 discuss parental practices. Themes 5 and 7 address both parental beliefs and practices.

Pre-Training

View on Parenting

During the pre-training interviews, parents were questioned about their perceptions of good and bad parenting, the roles of fathers and mothers, as well as the children's needs. Parents mainly highlighted that children need food (mentioned by 18 parents), clothing (9), and healthcare (9). Parents emphasized the importance of hygiene practices (11) such as bathing and washing clothes, providing shelter (3), and maintaining a well-kept home (7), through activities like cleaning and sweeping. Parents acknowledged their role and responsibility as providers and caregivers in fulfilling these needs. The emphasis on providing material needs and maintaining the child's physical environment reflects a materialistic perspective on parenting, which all twenty parents adhered to.

Additionally, the materialistic view on parenting was also evident in discussions about the parental responsibility regarding their children's education. Seventeen parents discussed the parental role as provider, with 11 parents talking about the parental responsibility of

paying school fees and nine parents talking about supplying scholastic materials such as school uniforms, books, and pencils. In comparison, only three parents discussed the significance of engaging in conversations with children about education, while one parent mentioned assisting with homework.

To be able to provide for their children 18 parents mentioned that they were ‘digging’, referring to farming as source of income and food provision. Four parents mentioned ‘selling’ as a form of income, primarily carried out by women who purchase food from the main market and resell it at a profit in their village.

Non-material beliefs about parenting were predominantly centred around religious upbringing, as mentioned by five parents. This included taking children to church, talking about God, and praying together. Two parents mentioned the importance of teaching children about their cultural practices and two talked about the importance of showing love to children. However, the concept of showing love was perceived in a somewhat materialistic manner, as parent 14 described showing love to her children: “by giving them things to make them happy,” as translated.

View on Childhood

When asked about children’s roles, parents primarily discussed their expectations of children doing house chores (with 18 parents mentioning this), such as cooking, sweeping the compound, digging, fetching water, collecting firewood, going to the market, rearing animals, and washing clothes. Seven parents talked about their parental responsibility in teaching house chores to their children, with one parent stating that she does so to prepare her children for marriage. The focus on children engaging in useful work reflects a utilitarian view of childhood, highlighting their active support to the family.

Another aspect of the utilitarian perspective also became apparent, which was the expectation of future support, mentioned by nine parents. Parent 12 expressed her hope that

her children acquire good jobs and assist her and her husband: “We shall educate them. When they get a job, they can help us. Sometimes when we fall sick, they can say that ‘our parents are sick’. They can take us to the hospital.” Only one parent expressed the hope that his children would follow in his footsteps and become a farmer. In contrast, three parents expressed the aspiration for their children to study to overcome the difficulties they experienced.

All 20 parents expressed the belief that children should attend school. Education was viewed as a means to empower children to provide for their families (7), which again relates to the utilitarian perspective on childhood by emphasizing the practical role of children in contributing to their family’s welfare. Other reasons for the importance of education included self-reliance (5) and achieving a better quality of life (2).

Three parents deliberated on the non-utilitarian, but rather psychological value of a child in bringing happiness to their parents. Parent 15 expressed her joy when her children are close by, translated as: “They [the children] give us happiness when they're in the compound. When they're around, I feel happy with them.”

Parental Practices

In the initial interviews, participants were questioned about their daily practices to meet their children's needs, parents mainly mentioned engaging in activities such as digging (11), providing food (10) and practices to do with education (8), like paying school fees. Regarding fulfilling parental roles, 11 parents confirmed meeting their responsibilities. Seven parents mentioned that they were either striving to do so or facing challenges in fulfilling their roles. The translator explained about parent 8: “He is trying his best, but because of lack of certain things like money. And now he's also becoming weak. And sometimes you feel you've not fulfilled up to a maximum.” Furthermore, five parents discussed their partners were not fulfilling their roles as expected. Reasons included the partner not providing money,

food and other material necessities (5), partner consuming alcohol (2), partner spending excessive time away from home (2), and partner not engaging in garden work (1). One parent shared for example that her family planted a tree, but her husband sold it to obtain money to purchase alcohol.

Post-Training

View on Parenting and Childhood

Post-training participants were asked if they learned something new about good and bad parenting, the roles of fathers and mothers, as well as children's needs. All 20 parents appeared to maintain a materialistic parenting view by highlighting the importance of providing essentials such as food (14), healthcare (8), and clothing (6), and also named methods of providing, such as activities like digging (15) to be the role of parents.

Additionally, education remained a significant topic, with 20 parents addressing it as a necessity that children go to school, and 12 parents specifically mentioning the parental responsibility to provide school fees or scholastic materials. Moreover, as a non-material belief regarding parenting, the importance of raising children with religion was referenced twice as often (by 10 parents) after the training, and the mentions of other non-material beliefs such as showing love (2) and teaching about cultural practices (2) remained consistent.

Following the training, the utilitarian perspective on childhood appeared to decrease, based on two indications. Firstly, the participants were asked if they had acquired new insights into the roles of children and a notably smaller number of parents (10) mentioned children's involvement in household chores compared to before the training (18). Secondly, there was a shift in the reasons given for the importance of education following the training. Post-training, the number of parents emphasizing the importance of education for improving their children's own quality of life increased from two to six, whereas those mentioning the

expectation of future support from their children as a reason for their education decreased from seven to two. Additionally, a relatively new aspect that emerged was the need for children to play, with five parents mentioning it post-training while only two parents mentioned it pre-training. However, that parents did not regard playing as solely for fun was illustrated by parent 18, who expressed the hope that playing with his children would enhance their educational level, translated as: “I started doing that [playing with his children] because I want them, I want the level of education to be high.”

Reflecting on Beliefs and Practices

Following the training, participants reflected on their parenting beliefs and practices and discussed putting into practice what they had learned. Participants appeared to realize the gap between their beliefs and practices before the training. Parent 7 shared that during the training, many parents admitted not fulfilling their roles: “There's so many parents even gave their testimonies that there are so many things they are not really doing. So it has opened their mind. To start afresh.” Thirteen parents mentioned lacking sufficient knowledge to fulfil their roles before the training. After the training, they acquired the necessary knowledge and now feel capable of fulfilling their responsibilities. For example, parent 11 explained that the training taught her how to provide for her family, translated as: “It helped me in the ways of looking for survival. I make sure I look for something for the family. Then before, the knowledge was a little.” However, not all parents attributed the gap between their beliefs and practices before the training to a lack of knowledge. For instance, the translator of parent 15 translated: “The things of school or feeding, of giving medications. All these things were there since. Only that we didn't follow them. But since this training, they reminded us. Now we are following them.”

All parents expressed that they were positive about the training. They reported experiencing positive change within themselves, their families and their communities, and all

parents expressed that the training helped them in dealing with challenges. Pre-training, parents mostly talked about challenges such as poverty (9), difficulty paying school fees (8), lack of food (7), poor harvest and climate change (6), and sickness (5) like malaria. Post-training parents explained that the training helped them to deal with challenges because the training positively influenced their working attitudes and the ability to provide for their families, as well as the way of communication within both the family and the broader community. The translator described that parent 20 elaborated on the transformation he observed within the community: “People were just yelling, fighting, drinking, drinking extensively. But after this, a few days after the training, he has not yet seen. Then you meet with the friend, you just shake hands. Lovely. (...) He's very happy.” Twelve parents even mentioned training others who did not participate, like partners, children and neighbours, by sharing the knowledge they gained from the training.

Post-training, when parents were asked to reflect on their roles, 13 parents reported fulfilling their roles, including five parents expressing that they are performing their roles more effectively than before. Two parents mentioned striving to fulfil their parental roles, with both acknowledging that they gained insights from the training.

Parental Practices

After the training, parents reported that they began implementing their beliefs into practice and noted several changes in their parenting practices. Twelve parents reported that either they or their partner reduced or abstained from alcohol. Translator of parent 8 described:

After the training, he sat down and started calculating. Like every day if he's taking a bottle of alcohol for a period of six months, how much is he going to spend and how much will that money help him in the family? So he started reflecting about it. He realized that he was really doing a bad thing. So he has stopped it.

Furthermore, 11 participants reported that either they or their partner more actively provided material necessities for their children. The translator of parent 2 translated: “Because the husband now provides, this time there's food.” Additionally, 10 participants reported that post-training either they or their partner worked more on the field. The translator of parent 1 explained: “The man [husband] has been has not been doing garden work. But now after this training he reached home. He started doing garden work every day.” That these aspects of abstaining from alcohol, providing for the family and working are related to each other was described by the translator of parent 8: “Whatever money you [he] used to get, he would only think about drinking. You [he] forget about providing for the family. (...) But nowadays when he starts working, he thinks less about drinking.”

Parents reported implementing family- and child-oriented practices, like prioritizing spending time with children which was mentioned by nine parents. For instance, parent 1 mentioned that her husband now dedicates time to their children, translated as: “This time now he has time for those children. For coaching in the evening.” Eleven parents emphasized the importance of collaboration within the family and indicated that they had put this into practice by working with their partners. Parent 15 highlighted the significance of working together with her husband to meet their children's needs, translated as: “These days we work together, after discussing. Then we would hope that if we continue like that, we shall even be able to help our children (...) in their needs.” Six parents emphasized the importance of constructing essential structures like houses or latrines for the family and three parents even mentioned that they started building. Three parents shared that before the training they were thinking about leaving their families, but after the training, they chose to stay. For instance, the translator of parent 13 explained:

She was hoping to leave the husband, because the husband was not helping. But now the husband is helping, that dream of hers to leave the husband is no longer there. (...)

They should be unite with their spouse to upbringing their children.

Future-Orientation

Following the training, a notable shift was observed in parents expressing more future-oriented beliefs and practices, like family plans for the future, time management, or saving money. While only three parents discussed future-oriented topics during the pre-training interviews, 15 parents brought up these topics during the post-training interviews. Nine parents mentioned conducting family meetings post-training to discuss, address issues, and plan for the future. For example, the translator of parent 15 translated: “So these days we just sit together. Like the next day’s plan, we make it today. We have meetings together.” Moreover, after the training, nine parents emphasized the importance of planning for future income through strategies such as farming plans, planting trees, and raising livestock. Furthermore, time management emerged as a new topic in the post-training interviews, with eight parents stressing the importance of dividing time and tasks. Additionally, thinking about the children’s future was highlighted by five parents. The translator of parent 4 described: “She now thinks, the focus is so much about the future of her children. And wants the future of the children to be good.” Also, four parents underlined the importance of budgeting and saving money and one parent explained that he created a money-saving box.

Eight parents expressed positive thoughts regarding the future, highlighting their confidence in fulfilling their children’s needs and achieving their parental dreams. The translator of parent 17 translated: “So it made me to think that if I’m going to continue with all this current state I have, I’m going to achieve my dream in the future.” Two parents specifically mentioned aiming to prosper and no longer dreaming small, envisioning a brighter future for their children and the community, for example, the translator of parent 10

explained: “It [the parenting-group] has brought a lot of changes in a vision about their children. Maybe how in future they can even kick away being poor in this village. So they can do something greater in the future.”

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the influence of the Parenting Challenge (TPC) on parental beliefs and practices regarding children’s needs in rural Uganda. The findings indicate that TPC has indeed influenced parental beliefs and practices.

Firstly, the findings indicate that parents in rural Uganda, both before and after attending the basics module of TPC, adopted a *materialistic perspective on parenting*, prioritizing meeting their children’s physical needs and engaging in primarily farming to be able to do so. This materialistic viewpoint is consistent with previous research on perspectives on parenting in sub-Saharan Africa (Ammerlaan, 2022; Hondelink, 2023; Strachan et al., 2020; Zaidman-Mograbi, 2020). The focus on material aspects of parenting among parents in rural Uganda can be attributed to the challenges they face, as revealed in the interviews and supported by research on parental priorities for early childhood development in Uganda (Strachan et al, 2020). Challenges such as poverty, malnutrition, and illness underscore the necessity of addressing practical needs first for the well-being of the child. Aligning with prior research suggesting that parenting programs can enhance existing parenting norms within their pre-existing cultural parenting framework (Van Esch & De Haan, 2017), TPC equipped parents with knowledge and skills that they incorporated into their existing material viewpoint on parenting.

Secondly, closely related to the materialistic perspective on parenting is that parents in rural Uganda hold on to a *utilitarian perception of childhood*, highlighting the child’s useful role in household tasks and future support expectations. This perspective confirms the connection between agricultural societies and children’s engagement in productive activities

(Stearns, 2021), and the concept of intergenerational reciprocity and its link to agriculture (LeVine & White, 1991). Interestingly, the utilitarian aspects became less prominent post-training, with parents shifting their focus towards securing a better life for their children and expressing positive thoughts about the future. It is possible, therefore, that there is a link between an increased sense of hope for the future and a decline in utilitarian values attached to children. Kagitcibasi and Ataca (2005) stated that the utilitarian value parents attach to their children tends to decrease as societies undergo socio-economic development. However, the findings hint that the mere hope for socio-economic progress could be sufficient to diminish the utilitarian values. Positive outlooks on the future might for example reduce concerns about future material support. Another explanation for the shift in the utilitarian view on childhood post-training could be that parents specifically were asked if they gained new insights into children's roles, possibly shifting the conversation away from pre-training topics. Nonetheless, the idea that diminishing utilitarian values attached to children are linked to increased socio-economic hope for the future appears likely. Therefore, addressing socio-economic issues through parenting programs can encourage parents to adopt broader perspectives on childhood that extend beyond mere utility.

Thirdly, the results revealed a gap between parental beliefs and practices before the training. Pre-training, parents reported engaging in behaviors such as drinking alcohol, neglecting family needs, and reduced work involvement. However, post-training, a noticeable shift occurred. Parents reported reduced alcohol intake, increased work productivity, improved provision for their children, enhanced communication and collaboration, and prioritized spending time with their children. The *developmental niche* concept underscores the interconnected nature of parental beliefs, practices, and settings (Super & Harkness, 1986). Despite this, it does not fully explain the observed change in parental practices post-training, as the parenting settings remained consistent, with parents having access to similar

resources as before the training. In contrast, the *theory of planned behavior* offers a more comprehensive explanation for the shift in parental behaviors, because it highlights how changes in attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and social influence impact behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Post-training, parents showed a shift in attitudes, for example highlighting the significance of parent-child interaction and play. Additionally, perceived behavioral control seemed to increase, with more parents stating feeling capable in meeting their responsibilities and understanding their roles better. Moreover, the community played a significant role in influencing parental behavior post-training. Since most residents from both villages attended the training, a standard for parental practices was set, making these practices the norm in the community. Furthermore, parents mentioned sharing their knowledge from the training with other community members, thereby spreading the impact of the training. Accordingly, both those who attended the training and even those who did not, started implementing parental practices discussed during the training. The implementation of practices by the community is also consistent with the *social identity theory*, which implies that individuals tend to adopt the normalized behaviors of their social group (Tajfel et al., 1979). Therefore, given that TPC influenced parental attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and social influence, leading to a more family- and child-centered approach, parenting programs can utilize these three components to foster positive change in parental behavior.

A final, somewhat unanticipated, result is that post-training parents adopted more future-oriented beliefs and practices, as parents for instance mentioned having family meetings to plan for future income and the importance of time management. Previous research refers to future orientation as an individual's vision of their future, acting as the foundation for goal-setting, exploring possibilities, and making commitments that shape the individual's behavior (Seginer, 2008). Lewin (1948) proposed that individuals who can construct a 'psychological future' for themselves tend to perceive challenging situations more

positively and cope better with adversity than those who cannot. He also noted that the individual's perception of the future, whether accurate or not, significantly influences their current practices, which was supported by different studies (Seginer, 2008; Snyder et al., 1991). It really is plausible that Lewin's hypothesis could be applicable, as parents no longer felt defeated by challenges post-training. Instead, parents gained renewed hope for the future, which acted as a driving force to incorporate new practices bridging the gap between their beliefs and actions, leading towards a more family- and child-centered approach.

Limitations

These results may be biased, due to the researchers' presence in the villages during the interviews and training sessions. While the researchers did not actively participate in TPC activities and solely observed, their presence as "whites" may have had an impact and could have attached a certain label to the training, especially considering the historical context of colonialism, missionaries, and NGOs operating in the area. Moreover, it's important to note that the researcher is of Western origin, bringing a Western perspective on parenting that could have influenced the interpretation of the gathered data.

Furthermore, another limitation of the current study is the reliance on various translators during the interviews, each with their own translation style. Also, the study relies on self-reported data from parents. However, given that baseline interviews were carried out, parents shared numerous specific examples of how TPC influenced their parenting beliefs and practices, and considering the consistency of these accounts across different translators and villages, it can be presumed that the gathered data is accurate.

Additionally, this study only involved baseline interviews and interviews conducted shortly after the training. Yet, a more extended period is necessary to observe the true influence of TPC on parental beliefs and practices. However, since this thesis is part of a broader research into TPC influence, an endline measurement is scheduled for next year.

Finally, this study concentrated on one rural area in Uganda, limiting its applicability to all rural Ugandan parents. Due to Uganda's diverse cultural landscape across regions, cultural differences among rural areas may influence parental beliefs and practices in varied ways.

Recommendations

Since the ultimate goal of TPC is to improve the well-being of children, future research could explore the program's influence on the children whose parents participated in TPC. Secondly, it is recommended to conduct a similar research with repeated measures in a culturally distinct region to compare and complement the findings of the current study to gain a comprehensive understanding of the influence of TPC across cultures. Thirdly, further research is necessary to confirm whether the decrease of utilitarian values attached to children is linked with an increase in hope for the future, or specifically hope for socio-economic development. Fourthly, additional research is needed to better understand the influence of parenting programs on parental future orientation, perceived hope for the future and the relation with coping with challenges.

Help a Child can utilize this study to assess whether the outcomes align with the objectives of TPC and leverage the findings to enhance the program. For instance, this study showed that even the basics module alone can influence parental beliefs and practices in rural Uganda. However, although the manual includes these components, post-training parents hardly discussed the emotional and psychological needs of children. Therefore it could be beneficial to emphasize this aspect during the basics module or delve deeper into the topic in the follow-up sessions.

Conclusion

In summary, in this qualitative study on the influence of the Parenting Challenge on parental beliefs and practices in rural Uganda, parents initially viewed parenting through a

materialistic lens and perceived childhood from a utilitarian perspective. Although the emphasis on providing material matters remained consistent post-training, the utilitarian view on childhood was less prominent. The study revealed a gap between parental beliefs and practices pre-training, but post-training a positive change occurred as parents aligned their practices with their beliefs, leading to a more family- and child-centred approach with a future-oriented vision. In conclusion, it can be inferred that the Parenting Challenge holds the potential to positively influence parental beliefs and practices in rural Uganda, ultimately improving the well-being of children.

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank Tjitske de Groot, my thesis supervisor, and Maria de Haan for their guidance and expertise throughout the research process. Special thanks to Liesbeth Speelman and Help a Child for facilitating and supporting this research. I also thank my fellow students Chun, Deniz, and Esther for sharing this amazing experience together. Above all, I want to thank God, ending with a phrase I often heard in Uganda: “Praise the Lord. The Lord is good all the time, and all the time, the Lord is good!”

Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-training interview semi-structured topic-list

Through observation

1. *What is the sex of the parent? (male/female)*
2. *What village is the parent situated?*

Background information

3. How old are you?
 - a. *If the parent does not know, ask: Could you give an estimation of your age?*
Researcher will note which age category is applicable:
(<18, 20-25, 25-30, 30-35, 35-40, 40-45, >45)
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. What is your marital status? *(married/separated/single/widowed)*
 - a. *If single or separated: Is the father of the children in any way involved in the care of your biological children?*
6. How many children are under your care?
 - a. How many girls?
 - b. How many boys?
7. How many of them are your biological children?
 - a. Are you the parent or grandparent?
 - b. From your biological children, what is the age of your oldest child?
 - c. From your biological children, what is the age of your youngest child?

General question

8. Did you hear about the Parenting Training before?
 - a. If so, what did you hear? And from whom?

Notions on parenthood

9. What is a good parent?
10. What is a bad parent?
 - a. Are there specific roles for fathers? *(do not ask if interviewee is single)*
 - b. Are there specific roles for mothers? *(do not ask if interviewee is single)*
 - c. What is the role of the child?
11. What are your visions/dreams as a parent?
12. What do you think your children need from you?
13. What do you do in daily life to support your children?
14. Do you feel you are fulfilling your role as a parent?
15. What are the challenges you face as a parent?

Family dynamics

16. How do you communicate to your child that there is a problem?
17. How do you communicate to your partner that there is a problem?

18. When there is a problem within the household, how do you solve this with your partner?
19. Are there other people involved in the upbringing of your children?
 - a. How are they involved / what do they do?
 - b. Who lives on your compound?
20. Do your biological children live with you?
21. Are there challenges in upbringing your children together with the other people you mentioned?
 - a. If so, what challenges can you describe?

Disciplining

22. According to you, what is good behavior of a child?
 - a. What do you think of the behavior of your own children?
23. What is bad behavior of a child?
24. What are factors contributing to a child's misbehavior?
25. When do you believe it is necessary to correct your children?
26. Why is it important to correct your children?
27. How do you correct your children when they do not behave according to what you expect?
28. Are there other people who correct your children?
 - a. How do others correct your children?

Community of learners

29. Who taught you to be a parent?
 - a. In what way?

Appendix B: Post-training interview semi-structured topic-list

General questions for evaluation of the Parenting Training

1. How would you describe the Parenting Training to another parent who does not know about the training?
2. What did you learn from the Parenting Training?
 - a. What was the most important lesson for you?
3. Did you talk with your partner / other caregivers in your household about the Parenting Training?
 - a. What did you talk about?
4. Was there something you enjoyed about the Parenting Training? If so, what was this?
5. What did you not enjoy about the Parenting Training?
 - a. Did you miss something in the training?
6. What would you advise on how to improve the Parenting Training?

Notions on parenthood

7. Did the program change your vision on what is a good or bad parent?
 - a. Did your view on parenting change during/after the Parenting Training?
8. Did the Parenting Training change your view on the role division between mothers and fathers?
 - a. Did the Parenting Training change your view on the role of a child?
9. Has your view about what your children need from you changed after the training?
10. What do you do in daily life to support your children?
 - a. Has this changed as a consequence of the Parenting Training?
11. Did the Parenting Training help you with the challenges you face as a parent?
 - a. If so, how?
12. Did the training change your view with respect to your opinion if you are fulfilling your role as a parent?
13. Did your visions/dreams as a parent change after the training?

Family dynamics

14. Did the Parenting Training change the way you interact/communicate with your partner?
15. Did the Parenting Training change the way you interact/communicate with your children?
 - a. How do you communicate to your child that there is a problem?
 - b. Did this change as a result of the Parenting Training? If so, how?
16. Did you change your thinking about the involvement of others in the upbringing of your children as a result of the Parenting Training?
 - a. If so, how?

Disciplining

17. How did the Parenting Training influence your view on the behavior of your children?
18. When do you believe it is necessary to correct your children?

- a. Has this changed since you followed the Parenting Training?
- 19. Did the training provide you with new insights on correcting children?
- 20. Given what you learned in the Parenting Training, what methods are you planning to use in the future to correct your children?
- 21. What role do others play in correcting your children?
 - a. Has your view on this changed since you followed the Parenting Training?

Community of learners

- 22. From whom did you learn about parenting during the training?
- 23. What was the role of the Parenting Group in the training?
- 24. Do you think the group or other people is/are important for learning about parenting?
 - a. Can you give an example?
- 25. Would you like to keep learning about parenting in the future?
 - a. If so, how?