

COPING STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN KENYA: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

According to Kenyan Special Needs Education Policy (2009), learners with special needs are supposed to be included in regular schools. Recent baseline survey across a nearby county, by the researcher indicated 233 learners with low vision, 267 hard of hearing and 109 physical disabilities were placed in regular Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Kakamega. However, as a result of inclusion the learners face a number of challenges. The paper is intended to identify the challenges learners with disabilities encountered in ECD and find out the teachers' coping strategies in handling such learners.

Keywords: coping strategies, inclusive education, disability, early childhood

1.0 BACKGROUND

Inclusion in the context of education is the practice, in which learners with special educational needs spend most or all of their time with regular learners (Wanjohi, 2013). Inclusive education means that all children attend and are welcomed by their neighborhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school. Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programs and activities so that all students learn and participate together (Leonard Cheshire International, 2012).

Inclusion for early childhood programs supports the right of all children, regardless of abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities. Natural settings include, but are not limited to: home, preschool, nursery school, Head Start program, kindergarten, neighborhood/community, school classroom, child care center, place of worship, recreational space, and other settings that young children and families enjoy.

2.0 PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE

Worldwide, there are approximately 106 million children with disabilities. And, while roughly a billion children are in school globally, the UN estimates that of the 61 million children now out of school, a third have disabilities. Most out-of-school children live in Sub-Saharan Africa (43%) and South and West Asia (27%). In Kenya, recent baseline survey across Kakamega County by the researcher indicated 233 learners with low vision, 267 hard of hearing and 109 physical disabilities were placed in regular ECD.

3.0 PROSPECTS AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Various policies support inclusion of learners with disabilities in regular schools. Every child in the world has the right to a primary education: this lies at the heart of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by every country in 2000. Although disability was not originally included in the MDGs, this was rectified in September 2010 when disability was officially acknowledged with regard to the MDGs. MDG 2 — universal primary education (UPE) — was reinforced by the world's most recent human rights treaty, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), when it came into force in 2008. The CRPD recognizes that children with disabilities have the right to the full range of educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2007).

Key policy framework that has advocated for the education of children with disabilities in regular ECD programs includes: The universal declaration of human rights (1948), advocated for children right to education and to special care and entitlement.

United Nations convention on the rights of the child (1989), the child's best interest is key. Thus, if a child with disability best interest is to learn in regular ECD program should be given the right. In addition, the child with physical or other disabilities must be provide for and educated. Kenya ratified the UNCRC in 1990, it emphasized on non-discrimination, best interest of the child, respect of views of the child. These have been used in advocating for education of ECD children with special needs in regular schools.

Salamanca conference (1994) emphasized education for all, specifically children with special needs. It called for education of children without discrimination. It emphasized education of learners with special needs in regular schools, which should accommodate them with a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting their needs. Inclusive education was born from the Salamanca conference.

The Kenyan children act (2001) emphasizes right of the child to free and compulsory primary education provided by the government. Thus, it is appropriate for the Kenyan government to fund education of children with disabilities in regular schools from ECD level upwards to class eight.

Kenyan Special Needs Education Policy (2009) advocated for education of all learners in their neighborhood schools. ECD learners being part and parcel, they too need to be included in the neighbourhood ECD programs for them to learn effectively.

The Kenyan new constitution (2010) emphasized on free and compulsory primary education for all children. Children with disabilities in ECD have a right to education.

In Kenya, the new constitution devolved the early childhood education as a devolved function to county governments (Kenyan new constitution, 2010). The forty seven county governments are funding early childhood education programs in regular schools. This has enhanced provision of resources and staff-employment in all the counties.

4.0 CHALLENGES

Toreno (2012) noted the following challenges to inclusive education; it was expensive to hire staff to support learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. Coordinating services and offering individual supports to children requires additional money that many school districts do not have, particularly in a tight economy. Inadequate funding can hinder ongoing professional development that keeps both specialists and classroom teachers updated on the best practices of inclusion. Negative attitude was a key barrier to inclusive education, these attitudes and stereotypes are often caused by a lack of knowledge and understanding. The attitudes and abilities of general education teachers and paraeducators in particular can be major limitations in inclusive education. Training teachers and paraeducators to understand and work with children with disabilities is often inadequate, or it may be fragmented and uncoordinated. If educators have negative attitudes toward students with special needs or have low expectations of them, children will unlikely receive a satisfactory, inclusive education.

UNESCO (2010) outlined various challenges facing implementation of inclusive education in sub-saharan africa. Such included; negative attitude from the society and school towards learners with disabilities; physical barriers such as inaccessible environment such as narrow doors, narrow pathways, staircases on building. This creates a barrier for some learners to enter school buildings or classrooms. inadequate funds to funds to provide resources and facilities needed; a rigid curriculum that does not allow for experimentation or use of different teaching-learning strategies; teachers who are not trained in special and inclusive education and who are unwilling or unenthusiastic about working with different able children are a major barrier to inclusion; inadequate training of teachers in special and inclusive education. UNESCO further argue that policy challenges such as rigid examination systems in schools, rigid timetables do affect inclusion of learners with disabilities in schools. Lastly, negative attitude of stakeholders is a major barrier to inclusive education.

Davis and Lani (2004) observed lack of accessibility was a problem to children with physical challenges in regular schools. A student with a disability cannot learn in an inclusive classroom if he cannot enter the room, let alone the school building. Some schools were still inaccessible to students in wheelchairs or to those other mobility aides and need elevators, ramps, paved pathways and lifts to get in and around buildings.

Lack of communication among administrators, teachers, specialists, staff, parents, and students. Most schools with inclusive program do not have open communication system among stakeholders. This has resulted to lack of cooperation in enhancing the quality of education among the ECD learners with disabilities (Surgiharto, 2008).

Leonard Cheshire Disability (2008) survey in two districts of Uganda (Budaka and Mukono), found that, despite the Uganda Primary Education Policy, specific issues kept many girls and boys with disabilities out of school. These included physically inaccessible schools, poor teacher training around disability, and a lack of assistive devices and appliances adapted to support learning, mobility and communication. These are key challenges which must be addressed for any ECD centre to be inclusive and offer effective quality education for children with disabilities.

In Kenya, various researchers have identified five key barriers that hinder effective and quality inclusion of learners in the ECD programs: resource, negative attitude, poor practices, poor policy implementations with regard to inclusion and environmental barriers. For instance,

Wanjohi (2013), noted that while inclusive education has various benefits, it has numerous challenges such as inadequate educational facilities, poor teacher training and poor policy implementation.

4.1 Way Forward: Suggested Coping Strategies

The following coping strategies can help improve the quality of inclusion among children with disabilities in ECD programs in Kenya:

4.2 Educational Modifications

Just as the environment must be accessible to students with disabilities, the curriculum must facilitate inclusive education, too. General educators must be willing to work with inclusion specialists to make modifications and accommodations in both teaching methods and classroom and homework assignments. Teachers should be flexible in how students learn and demonstrate knowledge and understanding. Written work, for example, should be limited if a student cannot write and can accomplish the same or similar learning objective through a different method.

Sensitization of stakeholders: there is need for teachers trained in inclusive education, to carry out a sensitization programme to regular teachers, parents, regular learners, school administration, and county government officials on how to accommodate learners with disabilities in ECD centers, what is inclusive education and what to be done to build an effective inclusive ECD programs in regular schools. This will help in reducing stigma towards learners with disabilities. It will also assist in seeking support from the stakeholders with easy.

Collaboration of stakeholders: Open communication and coordinated planning between general education teachers and special education staff are essential for inclusion to work. Time is needed for teachers and specialists to meet and create well-constructed plans to identify and implement modifications the, accommodations, and specific goals for individual students. Collaboration must also exist among teachers, staff, and parents to meet a student's needs and facilitate learning at home.

Teacher-training- the 47 county governments need to in-service the ECD teachers in special needs education in order for the them to handle learners with special needs in their classes with easy. There is need for the Kenya institute of curriculum development to make special needs education an integral part of the ECD teacher curriculum. This will enhance pre-service and in-service training of teachers with inclusive skills on how to handle children with disabilities in schools by the trained teachers.

Use of varied teaching methods. ECD teachers need to vary the teaching-learning methods in order to reach a variety of learners with learning needs. Child-cented pedagogy need to be used while teaching learners with disabilities in an ECD program. The teacher need to ensure a learner with disability is accommodated and given enough time in participating in class. this will ensure the needs the learner are well catered for.

Reduced class size- schools should reduce the number of learners in ECD per class. This will enable the teacher to have enough time on one to one with the child with disabilities. A class with a learner with disability needs to have a few learners compared to the other classes.

Environmental adaptability: the teachers and the school administration should ensure learners with disabilities are provided with an accessible environment. This can be achieved by building ramps instead of staircases on classes. The playground in all regular ECDs need be levelised in order for the wheel chair to move with easy. The latrines and toilets in all schools in Kenya, need to have wider doors for free movement of the wheel chair.

Use of assistive technology- assistive technology need to be used to make learning easy for learners with special needs. For example, learners with hearing impairment need to be give hearing aids to boost their hearing level. Learners with physical challenges need to be provided with wheel chair and crutches for mobility. Joystick, head held pen for writing. Learners with low vision need to be provided with low vision optical and non-optical devices for enhancing the print. Teachers need to provide large print for those with low vision.

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