

Teachers' and School Administrators' Preparedness in Handling Students with Special Needs In Inclusive Education In Kenya

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Abstract

The philosophy of social inclusion is embedded in current legislation of the convention of child rights and the requirement of equal opportunities for those with disability (Salamanca Statement, 1994). Inclusive education entails taking care of all students including those with special needs like physical, mental or developmental. This paper reports the outcome of a study that assessed the level of teachers' and school administrators' preparedness to handle inclusive education. The participants were 140 teachers and 13 Principals of selected secondary schools in Kenya. A questionnaire, interview schedule and classroom observation tool were used for data collection. Data were analysed descriptively and using inferential statistics. Results revealed physical infrastructure and instructional resources are unsuitable to support learners with special needs. There was general lack of teacher training on pedagogy and knowledge on how to handle students with special needs. School management policies regarding learners with special needs were not comprehensive enough to cater for all students. Collaboration among teachers to support learners with special needs falls below expectation. There is need to develop knowledge base on inclusive education, to meet learning needs of individual students. Teachers should undergo periodic refresher courses to develop personalized learning approaches, skills and competences, to effectively handle the heterogeneous nature of contemporary classes.

Key words: Inclusive education, Special needs, Preparedness, Pedagogical knowledge base

Introduction

Education refers to the act of developing knowledge, skills or character of a child (Omona 1998). Relatedly, UNESCO (2006) viewed education as the process through which knowledge; skills, attitudes and values are imparted for the purpose of integrating the individual in a given society, or changing the values and norms of a society. Contextually, education can be viewed from different angles. Ocit (1994) divided education into three categories: formal, informal and non-formal education.

i) Formal education: This refers to the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded education system running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialized programmes and institutions for full-time technical and professional training.

ii) Informal education: This refers to the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment, for example, from family and neighbours, work and play, the market place, the library and the mass media.

iii) Non-formal education: This refers to any organized educational activity outside the established formal system, whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives, such as disadvantaged groups.

In underscoring the importance of the formal education for all children, being the focus of this study, the United Nations (1994) indicated that all children and young people of the world, with their individual strengths and weaknesses, with their hopes and expectations, have the right to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 further states:

Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (art.26 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

At the core of this declaration is that every child, irrespective of physiological, psychological or social conditions, has inalienable right to access formal education anywhere and anyplace. The educational systems must therefore be designed to suit the needs of all learners. Thus, this declaration emphasised inclusive education.

According to UNESCO (2003) Inclusive Education (IE) is an approach or a process which occurs when children with and without disabilities, HIV status, age and children of diverse backgrounds and abilities learn together in the same classroom, interact socially with each other within the regular school setting for the whole day. This means encouraging each child to take part in the everyday activity of the school and helping every child to achieve the most from school. In such a system, according to the World Education Forum (2000 cited in UNESCO 2000), schools accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. These include disabled and gifted children, street and children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups. Simply put, it is about teaching groups of children with disabilities together with other children. In other cases it is about individual integration, meaning that one child with a disability received all or most of his education in ordinary classes. Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (Salamanca Statement, Art. 2, 1994).

Noteworthy, within the inclusive educational system, students have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. In this context, inclusive education must ensure adjusting the educational systems to meet the children's special needs, rather than expecting children to fit into the educational system. It is, therefore, imperative that teaching and learning undertaken in all the educational settings must be centred on diverse interests and peculiarities of the learner.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Kenya has always placed education as a priority, promoting it as a key indicator for social and economic development (UNESCO 2000). The vision of the MoE is to provide quality education for development, while its mission is to provide, promote and co-ordinate lifelong education, training and research for Kenya's sustainable development. The focus of the Ministry of Education notably is to achieve the Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015 within the context of the wider objective of the UNESCO/World Bank initiative Education for All (EFA) (Ministry of Education, 2008; UNESCO, 2006).

To achieve EFA goals, the teachers and school administrators should serve as a pivot around which the educational programmes revolve. The teacher must be aware of the differences that exist in the classroom and design and tailor learning tasks that are equitably distributed to all learners. For the learners to benefit from group influence and collaborative learning, the teacher should design learning tasks that involve exchange through indiscriminate interactive behaviours. All learners should be receptive to each other so that either the disabled or disadvantaged members of the group benefit from the able or advantaged group members.

In order to accelerate the achievement of EFA agenda (2015), the Ministry of Education (2008) reportedly, has been embarking on returning all students with disabilities to regular classrooms. Furthermore, the MoE has been organizing series of seminars for special educators and school administrators to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to handle the needs of students with disabilities.

Statement of the problem

Teachers and school administrators have a significant role to play in the sustaining the all-inclusive education agenda of the government. Firstly, the teachers must have practical skills, knowledge and ability to handle the complex behavioural tendencies of all-inclusive classroom. In such a classroom, some of the students are comfortable with theories and abstractions; others feel much more at home with facts and observable phenomena; some prefer active learning and others lean toward introspection; some prefer visual presentation of information and others prefer verbal explanations. One learning style is neither preferable nor inferior to another, but is simply different, with different characteristic strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, the administrators of all-inclusive schools must provide instructional materials and an enabling school environment for teaching and learning.

In spite of the widespread adoption of policies on mainstreaming, and more recently on inclusive education for children and young people with special educational needs, little is actually known about the relationship between what teachers think about such policies and the type of learning environments that they provide. It has been established that learners with special needs are not one homogeneous group. They have individual needs and experience different barriers. Some of these are linked to their disabilities which may include different categories such as visual, hearing, physical, albinism and speech impairment. Others are related to children who are gifted, talented or slow learners. Many teachers, school administrators and parents are worried about the consequences of enrolling children with special needs in regular schools. They are concerned about how this may affect the

performance of the other students in the schools, especially the gifted and talented ones. However, there is no compelling evidence that teachers and school administrators have the needed attitude, pedagogical competences, perceptions and instructional resources as well as school infrastructure to facilitate the accommodation of the heterogeneous nature of the learners in the all-inclusive schools in Kenya. Unfortunately, researches in this area which can facilitate decision making are few and not well disseminated. This study, therefore, provided an in-depth assessment of teacher and administrator preparedness in the smooth implementation of all-inclusive education.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- i) identify the availability of instructional resources and infrastructure in secondary schools to support all learners.
- ii) establish knowledge base of teachers and administrators about learners with special needs
- iii) ascertain the level of special skills possessed by teachers in handling learners with special needs.
- iv) find out the school management policies put in place to handle learners with special needs
- v) assess the level of collaboration among teachers in supporting all learners.

Justification of the Study

This study was necessitated by the need to sensitize teachers of learners with special needs. They ought to be aware of the diverse nature of their classrooms and adapt their teaching strategies to suit all the learners. School administrators need to understand the heterogeneous nature of inclusive schools and provide resources and facilities that could facilitate teaching and learning. Further, this study would not only help teachers and school administrators, but also teacher trainers and the government in getting insights into the needs of all learners. There is need to provide support and resources the teachers need to effectively teach learners with special needs. Not much research has been done in this area in Kenya, to effectively inform decision making at all levels of education.

Theoretical framework

The most cases, it is difficult, especially in learning environments with large classes, to provide students with a teacher who can design learning experiences to suit the learning needs of all learners. In view of this, educational theorists and psychologists propounded theories that can help a practicing teacher to meet the learning needs of all students. One of such theories is Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism is seen as an approach according to which individual knowledge relies on its social construction. Constructivists believe that knowledge does not have objective reality which is externally located but that it is individually constructed inside people's minds through their activities and interactions with others in the world (Wilson, 1997).

The theory relates to the multidisciplinary approach in providing special needs education and its related services to learners. Thus, from the perspective of inclusive educational contexts, Vygotsky's social constructivism theory underscored the need for peers, teachers, parents and the community members to work collaboratively to help the learner master concepts that he or she cannot understand on his own. For social constructivists, learning must be active, contextual and social.

Research design

The research design was a descriptive survey analyzed through both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study sample (See Table 1) was drawn from a population of secondary school principals and teachers in Kenya. A questionnaire was used to seek the views of teachers about the availability of learning resources and management policies regarding learners with special needs. Furthermore, same questionnaire also sought information on the availability of suitable infrastructure, level of teachers' knowledge about supporting all learners, collaboration among teachers, competence and ability to support all learners, including those with special needs.

An interview schedule for the school Principals was used to complement and confirm the information given by the teachers. Information on administrative matters concerning management policies on inclusive education were also sought. Additionally, an observation schedule was used to examine the kind of facilities and resources available in various schools and how they were used. Table 1 below shows the list of the institutions and sample size of Principals and teachers.

Table 1: An overview of the sample: institutions, teachers and Principals

| Institution | Teachers | Principals |
|----------------------|------------|------------|
| Girls' school | 8 | 1 |
| Girls' school | 10 | 1 |
| Girls' school | 9 | 1 |
| Girls' school | 8 | 1 |
| Boys' school | 31 | 1 |
| Boys' school | 9 | 1 |
| Boys' school | 9 | 1 |
| Boys' school | 10 | 1 |
| Mixed gender | 7 | 1 |
| Mixed gender | 8 | 1 |
| Mixed gender | 9 | 1 |
| Mixed gender | 11 | 1 |
| Private boys' school | 11 | 1 |
| Total | 140 | 13 |

Date Analyses and Discussion of Findings

(i) Principals' data on learners with special needs

The synthesized qualitative data from the Principals revealed that majority of the schools have few students with special needs. The Principals argued that such students are kept in special institutions such as schools for the deaf, the blind and mentally disadvantaged. Some communities do not expose such children to the public and many of them do not attend regular schools. The few that the Principals identified were having learning problems and some of them lacked financial support. Such students were identified during form-one admission processes, where all students are expected to fill a questionnaire regarding personal and other confidential matters. The majority of the Principals indicated that periodic examinations are done in the schools with the intention of identifying and correcting any noticeable exceptionality. For example, in one school, a student with a disability is supported through a funds mobilization project dubbed "support your kitty". These initiatives are supported by the community and County government. The kitty also supports some students with special needs.

Although some Principals (14.2%) claimed that there were few learners with special needs in the secondary schools, the qualitative data collected from the teachers revealed there were various categories of learners with special needs. These are: Speech impairment, (SI) Visual impairment (VI), Hearing impairment (HI), Physical Impairment (PI) Orthopaedic impairment (OI) Albinism, Slow learners (SL) and Specific learning disability (SLD).

(ii) Study Objectives

The study was also guided by five objectives:

Objective 1: Availability of instructional resources and infrastructure to support learners.

Classroom observations showed that many schools were well lighted, chalkboards and desks to facilitate teaching and learning. The teachers' responses are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Availability of instructional resources and infrastructure in schools to support all learners

| Resources and facilities in schools | Yes | | No | |
|--|-------|----|-------|----|
| | Freq. | % | Freq. | % |
| The school has enough resources and facilities | 45 | 32 | 95 | 68 |
| There are suitable classrooms and physical facilities | 43 | 31 | 97 | 69 |
| The school has special services and materials suitable for learners with special needs | 28 | 20 | 112 | 80 |

The majority of the teachers (68%) lamented about the inadequacy of teaching aids for the special needs learners. They indicated that the communities are not particularly interested in assisting schools to provide resources to help learners with special needs.

With regard to suitability of other physical facilities needed in the classroom, 69% of the respondents said the facilities were not suitable. Under the third statement, the majority (80%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their schools have special services and materials that are appropriate and available to learners with special needs.

The study further sought to investigate the kind of assistance the school administration, community and the Ministry of Education had provided to support learners with special needs. Table 3 shows a summary of the findings.

Table 3: Facilities and support provided to learners with special needs

| Facilities and support | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|------------|------------|
| None | 124 | 88.6 |
| Seminars held | 9 | 6.4 |
| ICT support | 5 | 3.6 |
| Boarding facilities | 2 | 1.4 |
| Total | 140 | 100 |

N = 140

Data from the above table show that overwhelming majority (88.6%) of the respondents indicated that they were not given any form of support from school administration, community and the MoE. From the analysis, it can be concluded that physical infrastructure and instructional resources are not adequate to support learners with special needs. It is also evident that ICT support Boarding facilities and holding of seminar are inadequate and not given much attention. The possible reason for this situation could be that most of the schools were established when not much attention was paid to learners with special needs.

Objective 2: Knowledge base of teachers about learners with special needs

When the school Principals were asked whether the teachers had the necessary background knowledge in handling learners with special needs, the majority 80 (57%) indicated that no specialised training was given to them. However, the Principals were quick to add that teachers use general classroom management techniques to handle cases of special needs students. Some arrange remedial lessons for such students who are slow learners, to enable them catch-up with their classmates.

A classroom observation conducted in the selected secondary schools revealed that some of the teachers used differentiated learning or multisensory approach to teach. For example, in one English language classroom, students were made to read aloud and the teacher summarised the main points on the chalkboard. However, in the same school, it was observed that some of the teachers do not provide appropriate materials or learning activities that specifically meet the varying student needs.

Information on teachers' knowledge base in handling learners with special needs was sought from respondents and the following are the responses, as indicated in the table below.

Table 4: Teachers' pedagogical knowledge in handling learners with special needs

| Pedagogical Knowledge | Yes | | No | |
|---|-------|----|-------|----|
| | Freq. | % | Freq. | % |
| Teachers are knowledgeable in handling learners with special needs | 60 | 43 | 80 | 57 |
| The school is adequately staffed with trained teachers who can support learners with special needs | 40 | 29 | 100 | 71 |
| Most teachers in my school have received adequate training in teaching students with special needs | 29 | 21 | 111 | 79 |
| Teachers in my school focus more on the average learners and often ignore slow and struggling learners. | 51 | 36 | 89 | 64 |

N= 140

The above table shows that 43% of the respondents indicated that teachers in their schools were knowledgeable in handling learners with special needs. However, the majority (71%) said the school is not adequately staffed with trained teachers who can support learners with special needs. Similarly, 79% indicated that most teachers had not received adequate training in teaching students with special needs. When asked whether teachers in their school focus more on the average learners and often ignore slow and struggling learners, the majority (64%) disagreed.

Overall the data show that most teachers had unsatisfactory pedagogical knowledge on handling learners with special needs.

Objective 3: Level of competences and abilities possessed by teachers in handling learners with special needs.

A question was posed to teachers on whether they were competent enough to handle students with special needs. The self-assessment responses from the teachers indicated that 64.3 percent were competent, while 35.7% said they did not have the relevant competence.

Further questions were asked to probe into the abilities of the teachers. The results are shown in table 5 below.

Table 5: Abilities of teachers to handle learners with special needs

| Statement | Very | Good | Good | Fair | Poor |
|--|------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Ability to identify different learning needs of all my students | | 27 (20%) | 44(31%) | 47(34%) | 21(15%) |
| Ability to plan and prepare for learners with special needs | | 15 (11%) | 32(23%) | 62(44%) | 31(22%) |
| Ability to assist slow learners | | 21(15%) | 52(37%) | 52(37%) | 15(11) |
| Ability to enrich good performance | | 46(33%) | 49(35%) | 36(26%) | 9(6%) |
| Ability to create warm and motivating learning atmosphere that supports all learners | | 39(28%) | 65(46%) | 32(23%) | 4 (3%) |
| Ability to create different for learners with diverse needs | | 21(15%) | 66(47%) | 37(26) | 16(12) |
| Ability to provide feedback that caters for students' individual differences | | 21(15%) | 61(44%) | 45(32%) | 13(9%) |
| Ability to use different student activities to suit learner's interests and abilities | | 22(15.7) | 61(43.6%) | 47(33.5) | 10(7.1%) |
| Ability to acquire learning materials that suit different instructional needs | | 18(12.9%) | 65(46.4%) | 44(31.4%) | 13(9.2%) |
| Ability to organize learning methods and activities to cater for the different needs and preferences of learning | | 18(13%) | 62(44%) | 46(33%) | 14(10%) |
| Ability to create teaching materials that meet the varying needs of learners | | 18(13%) | 58(41%) | 47(34%) | 17(12%) |
| Ability to use ICT to address different needs of learners | | 13(9.3%) | 45(32.1%) | 37(26.4%) | 45(32.1%) |
| Overall self-assessment of teachers' ability to handle inclusive education | | 23(17%) | 56(39%) | 44(32%) | 17(12%) |

N = 140

The 12 statements in Table 5 were to find out teachers' **ability** to handle students with special needs. Overall mean assessment of the various abilities indicate that 23 (17%) of the respondents graded themselves as having very good ability in handling students with special needs. Further, 56 (39%) rated their ability as "good" while 44(32%) described their abilities as "fair" with the remaining respondents 17(12%) considering themselves as not having any ability to handle students with special needs. From the above data, it is evident that the majority of the teachers have the necessary competences (64%) and ability (about 56%) to handle learners with special needs.

The respondents were probed further to find out whether they were **trained** to handle students with special needs. An overwhelming majority, 123(88%), stated they did not receive any formal training to that effect. A question was asked whether they require any kind of assistance in order to handle learners with special needs. Majority of the respondents 109 (78%) answered in an affirmative. Those who indicated they needed assistance

emphasized the need to have sufficient skills in the use of ICTs; others also mentioned seminars, provision of teaching materials.

In summary, there was general lack of training for the teachers to enable them teach inclusive classes.

Objective 4: School management policies put in place to handle learners with special needs

Information about school management policies in the context of supporting learners with special needs was sought. The responses are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6: School management policies in relation to learners with special needs

| S/n | Statements | Yes | | No | |
|-----|--|------|------|------|------|
| | | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| 1 | Classes in my school are inclusive, having regular and learners with special needs | 72 | 51 | 68 | 49 |
| 2 | The school administration supports the use of learner specific instruction to accommodate learning styles of students | 66 | 47 | 74 | 53 |
| 3 | Ministry of education officials play a very important role in helping my school support learners with special Needs | 48 | 34 | 92 | 66 |
| 4 | In my school, slow learners are not given any special attention and are often repeat classes in order to improve their performance | 26 | 18.6 | 114 | 81.4 |
| 5 | My school has an effective programme for peer support, tutoring and mentoring of learners with special needs | 44 | 31 | 96 | 69 |
| 6 | My school has a system of identifying, assessing and planning for learners with special needs | 43 | 30.7 | 97 | 69.3 |

N=140

Table 6 contained analysis of the school management policy. The table shows a slim majority (51%) of the teachers indicating that their classes were inclusive. Similarly, 66% of the respondents admitted that the school administration supports the use of learner specific instruction to accommodate learning styles of most students. However, (66%) denied that the MoE officials play an important role in helping their schools to support learners with special needs. The majority (69%) disagreed with the statement that their school has an effective programme for peer support, tutoring and mentoring of learners with special needs. With regard to the assertion that slow learners are not given special attention and often repeat classes in order to improve their performance, most of the respondents (81.4%) disagreed with the statement. The data further indicated that 69.3% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their schools have a system of identifying, assessing and planning for learners with special needs. All in all, school management policies regarding learners with special needs seemed not to be comprehensive enough to cater for all students.

Objective 5: Level of collaboration among teachers to handle learners with special needs

Questionnaire items under this objective were assembled to address the level of collaboration among the teachers. Table 7 shows the responses by teachers to the various items.

Table7: Assessment of collaborations among teachers

| Collaboration | Yes | | No | |
|--|-------|------|-------|------|
| | Freq. | % | Freq. | % |
| Administrators and staff in my school hold discussions on how to support all learners | 92 | 65.7 | 47 | 33.6 |
| In my school, teachers work in teams to prepare adequately for learners with special needs | 53 | 37.9 | 87 | 62.1 |
| My school collaborates with the community and other agencies to support all learners | 41 | 29.3 | 99 | 70.7 |

N= 140

Table 7 contains findings on collaboration among the teachers. Results show that (65.7%) of the respondents were of the view that administrators and staff in the schools hold discussions with the aim of supporting all learners. However, 62.1% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that teachers work in teams in order to prepare adequately for learners with special needs. Similarly, most of the respondents (70.7%) also disagreed with the statement that schools collaborate with the community and other agencies in order to support learners with special needs. Implications from this analysis point out that though teachers and administrators hold regular meetings, they do not collaborate to support learners with special needs.

Summary

The essence of this study was to investigate the level of preparedness of teachers and administrators to handle inclusive classes in selected secondary schools. The study revealed that physical infrastructure and instructional resources are not adequate to support learners with special needs. There was general lack of specialised training for the teachers and therefore, they do not have satisfactory pedagogical knowledge base to handle students with special needs. School management policies regarding learners with special needs seemed not to be comprehensive enough to cater for all students. Even though teachers and administrators hold regular meetings, collaboration among them falls below expectation and needs to be improved.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following specific recommendations are made:

- i) The school management should embark on concerted effort to mobilize the needed resources from the stakeholders in education, NGOs and other international agencies in support of learners with special needs.
- ii) For teachers to work effectively in inclusive settings, they need to develop a broad based knowledge and understanding of concepts of inclusive education that must meet the learning needs of the individual students.
- iii) Teachers must be made to undergo periodic refresher courses and training, that should not only be geared towards developing personalized learning approaches for all learners, but also the appropriate values and attitudes, skills and competences to effectively handle the heterogeneous nature of the inclusive classes.
- iv) Teachers should be encouraged to work in collaboration with each other, engage the services of different professionals whose skills and experiences are relevant to the individual needs of the learners.
- v) Finally, teachers and school Principals must ensure that all learners, irrespective of their physical or mental or social disposition, are given equal opportunity, not only to access quality education, but also attain their respective goals in life.

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