

Teacher Competencies in Implementation of Curriculum for Learners with Special Needs in Kenyan Schools

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Abstract: *In the past decades, special needs education has been evolving with tremendous changes being experienced in public schools. This has made such schools progressively more diverse as the limits of the traditional school system continue to stretch. Teachers are and perhaps the very key element in a child's learning environment, so it is important that they have a clear understanding of Special Needs education and a strong commitment to teaching all children. These teachers, however, lack appropriate preparation and support in teaching children with disabilities in regular schools. This paper is an examination of the competencies of teachers who are in charge of implementing the curriculum for special needs education in Kenya. The study was based on the Social Model of Disability theory, as advanced by Rieser (2012). With a target population of 2080 special needs education teachers, the author sampled out 624 special education teachers through simple random sampling technique to participate in the study. Data was collected by use of questionnaires and analyzed by the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The findings indicated a higher proportion of teachers unable to deliver services to Special Needs learners since they are trained but not competent. The author recommends that the Ministry of Education provides regular training and sensitization to teachers and motivate them to improve in their competencies.*

Key Words: *Teacher Competence, Special Needs Education, Curriculum Implementation, Learners with Special Needs*

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I. Introduction

The first step in attempting to overcome the enormous disparities affecting many groups including the marginalized ethnic minorities, urban poor and the disabled is basic education (UNICEF, 2013). Age and special needs are among others some of the main determinants in the implementation of curriculum as pointed out by the University of Zimbabwe (1985). It is therefore crucial that the needs of pupils are put into consideration by those who implementer the curriculum. In this case, teachers of learners with special needs are the centre of focus as they are the curriculum implementers for special needs education. Various policy documents have been put in place by the Kenyan government to ensure access of quality education to all. Of concern in this paper is the National Special Needs Education Policy Framework (Ministry of Education, 2009).

In the past, the general definition of diversity was on the basis of culture, language, gender and economy. The recent adoption of inclusive models has however made a turnaround broadening the term to include students with various abilities, particularly those with disabilities (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2002). According to Government of Kenya (2005) teachers are an important human resource in the teaching and learning process and constitute one of the main inputs of primary education costs. Republic of Kenya (2005) considers teacher as an important resource in the teaching/learning process whose training and utilization require critical consideration. The Kenya Education Commission of 1964 advocated for training of all teachers to take care of the Special Needs child into the mainstream. Engelbrecht (1998) points out that teacher education lies at the heart of all development schemes as it is recognized as one of the major areas of focus for poverty reduction, economic progress, social and cultural development.

The cost of providing educational services to learners with Special Needs and disabilities is relatively high and constitutes the single most limiting factor to increased enrolment, retention and transition of such learners with educational programmes. This is compounded further by the fact that majority of learners with Special Needs and disabilities come from poor families. Such families find it difficult to participate in cost sharing where this is required. There is also inadequate planning of service delivery programmes. This is mainly due to lack of skilled personnel and insufficient financial resources thereby compromising the quality of services provided. On the other hand, uncoordinated planning amongst partners often results in duplication of programmes, poor utilization of resources and gaps in service delivery. Financial and human resources are inadequate, the prices of equipment are ever rising and training of professionals is below expectations.

Consequently, educational services for children with Special Needs call for concerted efforts between the government, private sector and development partners (WHO, 2013).

Teachers lack appropriate preparation and support in teaching children with disabilities in regular schools. This is a factor in the stated unwillingness of educators in many countries to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in their classes (Nair, 2009). For example, one study of prospective teachers of special education in Israel found that they held unhelpful preconceptions about people with disabilities and that some discriminated between different types of disability. Resources for children with disabilities tend to be allocated to segregated schools rather than to an inclusive mainstream education system. This can prove costly as well as inappropriate. In Bulgaria, the budget per child educated in a special school can be up to three times higher than that for a similar child in a regular school (Latimier, 2011).

According to Praisner (2003) a review of the situation of children with intellectual disabilities in twenty two European countries highlighted the lack of training of regular teachers to work with children with disabilities as a major concern. Most of the time, these students were taught by support staff rather than certified teachers. The greatest opportunity appears to exist among teachers who are still fresh in the profession. Recent systematic literature review of countries as diverse as China, Cyprus, India, Iran, the Republic of Korea, the state of Palestine, the United Arab Emirates and Zimbabwe found teachers with the least general teaching experience had more positive attitudes than those with longer service. Teachers who had received training in inclusive education had more positive attitudes than those who had received no training and those who had most positive attitudes were those with actual experience of inclusion (Praisner, 2003).

Another challenge is the lack of diversity among teaching personnel. Teachers with disabilities are quite rare and in some settings considerable obstacles exist for adults with disabilities to qualify as teachers. In Cambodia, for example the law states that teachers must be free of disabilities. Partnerships with civil society are providing encouraging examples of ways to enhance teachers training and diversity. In Bangladesh, the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD), a national non – governmental organization (NGO), employs a group of inclusive education trainers who run a ten-day training session during school terms for twenty schools at a time, with training provided to one teacher from each school (Miles, 2012). Several of the CDD trainers are visually impaired or have other disabilities, so they are important role models for teachers and students with or without disabilities. In Mozambique, for example, Ajuda de Desenvolvimento de PovoparaPovo, a national NGO has worked closely with the national disabled people’s organization known as ADEMO to train student teachers to work with children with disabilities and to train student teachers who have disabilities (Schuman, 2006).

Schumann (2006) points out that teachers tend to work in isolation, which means they are often unsupported in the classroom, and are often under pressure to complete a narrow syllabus imposed by the government. Inclusive education requires a flexible approach to school organization, curriculum development and pupil assessment. Such flexibility would allow for the development of a more inclusive pedagogy, shifting the focus from teacher-centred to child- centred to embrace diverse learning styles. Due to their unique individual characteristics, learners with special needs may require to be taught certain subjects over and above those detailed in the regular school syllabus. Such subjects include; typing, orientation and mobility, activities of daily living skills, perceptual training, sign language and individual speech training.

Teachers are often simply not trained or supported to teach children with disabilities which make these children among the most marginalized in terms of educational opportunity and attainment. An estimated fifteen percent of the world’s population has a disability (WHO & World Bank, 2011). Globally, ninety three million children are estimated to have moderate and severe disabilities and many of those children are out of school. This means that they are not being given the chance to become empowered as individuals and support their communities. The exclusion of children with disabilities from education and from faire life chances requires urgent and sustained attention. In particular, attention needs to be paid to prepare teachers who are capable of including children with disabilities in the education curriculum.

Agbenyega (2007) holds the view that qualified teachers know that classroom needs must be approached “from a curricular stand point”, in which difficulties are defined on each specific task, activity and classroom conditions. Eleweke & Rodda (2000) advocate that successful inclusive education programs require the services of different professionals who assist in identification, referral, diagnosis, treatment and training. World Bank (2004) reports that adequately trained professionals are required in the provision of meaningful educational services to children with special needs in regular schools.

A few decades ago, Kenya was vulnerable by inadequate human resources in special education programmes. The Ministry of Education has however taken the main lead by offering both pre-service and in-service training of teachers for children with various special needs. The aspect of development leaves a lot to be desired. Specially trained teachers are not posted to institutions where they can be able to give their best services. Specialist teachers for learners with learning disabilities and those learners who are gifted and talented are sometimes posted in programmes for learners with mental retardation. The common practice has been

posting teachers back to regular institutions without careful considerations of whether they will be wasted or not (MOE, 2003). Competent special educators possess technical knowledge that is important to the dynamic and specialized field of special education. Of concern then is that these teachers are assigned to institutions with learners in the special needs category; inclusion therefore does not neutralize or diminish the importance of specialization in the field of special education. Some of the special educators have specific competencies related to specialized knowledge. This may include; knowledge of characteristics of disabilities, specialized instructional techniques or methods, and legal responsibilities and processes. In this paper, the author looks at whether the special needs teachers possess the necessary competent skills.

II. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey strategy. Descriptive survey designs are used in preliminary and exploratory studies to allow researchers to gather information, summarize, present and interpret for the purpose of clarification. Data was collected from special schools and units in nine counties in Kenya. The nine counties were; Elgeyo-Marakwet, Uasin-Gishu, Trans-Nzoia, Baringo, West-Pokot, Turkana, Kuria, Homabay and Kisumu. The reason for selecting these counties were according to a survey carried out by Educational Assessment and Resource Co-coordinators (2011) which established that the communities in these counties had limited knowledge about the concept of disability. It also sought to establish how these institutions were managed in order to accommodate learners with special needs education. The study was carried out in special schools and units in the study area on a target population of 2080 special needs education teachers.

Sampling as defined by Orodho (2009) is the process of selecting a subset of cases in order to draw conclusions about the entire set. The study used the 30 percent of the population based on Mugenda & Mugenda's (2003) view that sample of between 20 and 30 percent is adequate for a population of below 1000. Therefore 624 teachers formed the sample for the study.

Questionnaire guide was used for the data collection. The author opted to use questionnaire because by this, a large area of study could be covered. The questionnaires provided adequate time to give out well thought responses. The questionnaire thus had both open and close ended questions seeking the background information from the respondents and knowledge and skills of Special Needs education teachers. Data analysis was descriptively done using SPSS version 20 and presented in tables.

III. Results and Discussion

In Special Needs education, pupils with diverse needs are handled by the teacher. Therefore, such teachers ought to possess the necessary competence, qualification and experience to enable learners acquire the knowledge and skills in order to adapt to the environment.

Education Level

The qualification held by the teachers ranged from O-level certificate to Degree. Those that had attained Bachelor's degree were (37.5%), PI course (59.2%) and Masters had the least percentage of (1.2%) and Diploma had (2.1%). Table 1 gives a summary of this information on the education level of the teachers.

Table 1: The Education Level of the Teachers

Education level	Frequency	Percent
P I Certificate	370	59.2
Diploma	13	2.1
Bachelors Degree	234	37.5
Masters	7	1.2
Total	624	100.0

From the findings, majority of teachers had PI certificates followed by those who had attained Bachelors degree. This implies that teachers who trained in colleges have not necessarily been trained for Special Needs Education, but few have opted to seek training in Special Needs Education either by furthering or initially being enrolled in public and private universities which in the recent years have now integrated degree programmes in Special Needs.

According to Praisner (2003) the situation of children with disabilities highlighted the lack of training of regular teachers to work with children with disabilities as a major concern. Most of the time, these students were taught by support staff rather than certified teachers. The greatest opportunity appears to exist among teachers who are still fresh in the profession. The related literature review states that there is inadequate planning service delivery programme because of lack of skilled man power which results into duplication of programmes and utilization of scarce resources. Teachers need to improve their academic qualifications by enrolling in universities which have open doors for professionals to enhance their pedagogical standards in order to handle learners with Special Needs and disabilities properly.

Experience of Teachers in Special Needs Education

The study findings on the teaching experience showed that the experience of teachers range from below 3 years to over 10 years. A higher proportion, 90% of them have served for between 5 to 10 years while 87% have served for over 10 years. Those teachers who have taught for more than ten years are considered to have been the right personnel to teach these learners because they have had the experience and techniques of handling learners with Special Needs. The experience of the expertise in handling learners with special needs have gained confidence, knowledge and skills to effectively support special needs learners. The biggest challenge for most teachers is that they are not often exposed to children with specific needs, as well as not having adequate training in inclusive teaching.

National standards for teachers training can vary considerably between countries, and are often inadequate. Teacher training for regular teachers also rarely prepares teachers for working in diverse classrooms, and in particular do not equip them with the confidence, knowledge and skills to effectively support learners with disabilities. This is a key reason why so many children with disabilities remain out of school or excluded from the learning process within schools. If we are to reignite progress towards quality basic education (early childhood, primary and lower secondary schooling) for all, then regular teachers need to be prepared to meet the learning and participation of children with disabilities. To do this they need to be given appropriate initial training, ongoing training and professional development and ongoing access to adequate high quality support and advice from specialist personnel (Global Campaign for Education, 2012).

Competence of Teachers in Special Needs Education

The study findings indicated that the competence of the teacher was crucial in provision of quality teaching and learning. The competence of the teacher is still a problem in provision of quality teaching and learning. A significant proportion (76.3%) of the teachers still lack the competent skills like commitment and devotion in their teaching work and other related responsibilities required to carry out classroom duties. This undermines the fact that integration is being accelerated by the government. Table 2 gives the responses to the item on competence.

Table 2: Teachers' Response to their Competence and Training in Special Needs Education

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	476	76.3
No	148	23.7
Total	624	100.0

The results on competence indicated a higher proportion of teachers who are unable to deliver services to Special Needs learners since they are trained but not competent. This is a key reason why so many children with disabilities remain out of school or are excluded from the learning process within schools. A higher proportion (76.3%) of the respondents indicated that there is need to improve the quality of teachers teaching learners with special needs. They were in agreement that the skills that teachers have in teaching Special Needs learners need to be improved. Many of the respondents in the findings of the study pointed out that the challenges they encountered was lack of adequate training of teachers in handling learners with disabilities and they were of the opinion that teachers with disabilities be employed to teach these learners and more so other education stake holders be trained in order to assist.

Teachers must have a clear understanding of Special Needs education and should possess strong commitment in teaching all children. Thus, there is need for continuous training through in-service, seminars and/or conferences to update them on the new developments, ensuring that every child has a teacher who can offer them a quality education. This means we also need to look carefully at who becomes a teacher. Striving for a diverse teaching staff that represents male and female sections of the community, with or without disabilities found in the community is, therefore very important.

The findings agree with literature documented in the Ministry education & handbook (2003), that when teachers complete their training in special needs education they are posted back to their former schools to teach instead of being posted to special schools and units in pursuant to the specialized areas they were trained in. Specialist teachers for learners with learning disabilities are otherwise viewed in the same way as those who were trained to teach in programmes for learners with mental challenges.

IV. Conclusion

The qualification held by the teachers ranged from PI Certificate to Diploma to Bachelor's Degree and to Masters level. A higher proportion of the teachers have served for between 5 to 10 years with others having served for over 10 years. There is still a higher proportion of teachers who are unable to deliver services to Special Needs learners since they are trained but not competent. This is a key reason why so many children with disabilities remained out of school or were excluded from the learning process within schools. Most

teachers emphasize on the need to improve the quality of teachers teaching learners with special needs. They were in agreement that the skills that teachers had in teaching special needs learners need to be improved.

Implications to Research and Practice

The need to have special needs teacher education being driven by standard and competencies is vital in the growing numbers of children with disabilities. It is important for these teachers to be prepared for programs to develop the curriculum around required competencies essential for teachers for learners with special needs. On the contrary, the lines between general and special education have blurred both in terms of practice (i.e., in the schools and community) and teacher education. This study helps to explicate what competencies ought to be included in teacher education programs that prepare teachers to work in special needs integrated environments. Issues in teacher education; both general and special educators, is one way to address the common competencies necessary for learners with special needs. Teaching the competencies would ensure that the essential knowledge and skills for inclusive education are addressed in the implementation of the curriculum for special needs children.

V. Recommendations

Support policy makers and teacher educators should develop a more in-depth understanding of Special Needs education and a better sense of how to embed special education principles throughout all pre and in-service teacher training and all continuing professional development.

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