

CHALLENGES THAT AFFECT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS IN UMOJA ZONE, EMBAKASI DISTRICT, NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

FLORENCE R. KATINGI¹ & AGNES W. KIBUI²

Senior Lecturer, University of Nairobi, School of Education, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Inclusion education advocates the notion that all children have a right to access high quality education and this right should not be affected by disability or any special needs in a child. Inclusion is the approach of integrating all children and their various needs in a similar setting to learn. The purpose of this study was to establish challenges that affect academic performance of children with special needs in an inclusive setting in early childhood education. The study adopted a descriptive research design which embraced both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze data which was collected from 50 pre-school teachers and 10 children with educational special needs. The study established that there is a lack of enough resources, competent teachers, quality time for individual attention and appropriate curriculum for children with special needs. The study concluded that a lack of collaboration from administration and parents, a lack of relevant resources, sufficient time and clear laid down policies on inclusive education is a major challenge of children with special educational needs in early childhood education. The study recommends that there should be a formalized system of support for parents of children with special needs and disabilities, and that the Government should intensify monitoring, supervision, and quality control in schools to ensure children with special needs are provided for without discrimination.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, Performance, Special Needs, Inclusive

INTRODUCTION

A high quality inclusive education involves recognizing all children as children who should be assisted to achieve the best care and education that can possibly be offered. Inclusive education takes into account the Education for All by finding ways of enabling schools to serve all children in their communities as part of an inclusive education system. Both developed and developing countries have been trying to implement the objectives of inclusive education. The *Salamanca Statement of 1994* states that every child has a fundamental right to an education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain acceptable levels of learning (UNESCO, 1994). However, successes and failures have been noted in these countries suggesting that the way to full inclusion was tough and challenging especially for the children. The challenges that children with special needs face manifest themselves in various ways such as school dropouts, constant repetition of classes, bullying, discrimination and segregation, lack adequate and appropriate learning and play resources, and this makes them lag behind educationally. Teachers fail to understand the appropriate interventions for assisting children with special needs and this results in the children being ignored and overlooked (Kavale, 2001). Special needs education started in Kenya after the end of the Second World War and has since been offered mainly to 4 categories of children with disabilities, namely: children with hearing impairments, mental handicaps, visual impairments and those with physical handicaps. Education to these children was only offered in special schools until the 1970s when units and integrated programs were initiated (National Special Needs Education Policy, 2009). According to the Ministry of

Education in Kenya (MoE), the main constraints in inclusive education relate to access, equity, and quality in the provision of education and training for learners with special needs. These constraints include, a lack of guidelines to support inclusive education implementation, lack of reliable data on children with special needs, and inadequate teaching/learning resources and skills. In addition, assessment and curriculum were not tailored to meet special needs education. The UNESCO Salamanca statement (1994) calls on governments to give the highest priority to inclusive education.

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Special needs education is education which provides appropriate modification in curriculum delivery methods, educational resources, medium of communication and the learning environment in order to cater for individual differences in learning. The United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disability (UNCRPWD) 2006 affirms the right to education in an inclusive setting for all children. The focus here is to enable children with special needs to enrol in schools of their choice within localities. Therefore, there is a need to remove barriers within the educational system that bars these children from inclusive education and equity. United Nations (2006) pointed out that throughout the world, children who have mental disabilities and many others who experience difficulties in learning have been traditionally marginalized within their communities or excluded from schools. They further stated that provision of education for children with special needs has not been easy in Sub-Saharan Africa because schools lack trained teachers, learning materials, and suitable classrooms.

REGULAR AND FULL INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusion education has two subtypes of settings: regular/partial inclusion and full inclusion. Inclusive practice is not always inclusive but is a form of integration, meaning that children with special needs are educated in regular classes for nearly all day or at least for more than half the day. Whenever possible, children with special needs may receive additional help or special instruction in the general classroom. In full inclusion settings, children with special needs are always educated alongside children without special needs as the first and desired option while maintaining appropriate support and services. Giangreco and Baumgart (1995) explain that full inclusion is more effective for children with special needs than partial inclusion because these children learn a lot from non-special needs children when they interact with one another.

The concept of integration is that children with special needs should be educated alongside the rest of the school population and enjoy all the benefits that follow from this. In some national settings, this process is referred to as mainstreaming. In one sense it is useful to consider integration as a broad educational principle which is the precursor of inclusion. There are sharp differences in philosophy between integration and inclusion. Integration unlike inclusion places no particular emphasis on teachers, administrators, non-special needs education pupils and the culture and ethos of the school. The pupil with non-special education needs has to fit in the existing arrangements (Kvale, 1996).

Inclusive education differs from previously held notions of integration and mainstreaming which tended to be concerned principally with disability and non-special needs education. By contrast, inclusion is about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child. Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities. Fully inclusive schools which are rare, no longer distinguish between general education and special education programs; instead, the school is restructured so that all students learn together. Through this inclusion,

children learn the importance of individual and group contributions and develop valuable skills that are often unexplored in less inclusive settings.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- Establish teaching/learning resources and assistive technologies found in inclusive Early Childhood Education settings.
- Determine the teacher’s level of competence in special needs education.
- Examine the difficulties faced by teachers while implementing inclusive education for children with special needs.
- Find out the challenges faced by children with special needs in an inclusive setting.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to achieve these objectives, the study employed a descriptive survey design. Data was analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. Using simple random sampling technique, 50 pre-school teachers in five schools were selected. The study used questionnaires, interviews and observation schedule to collect data from the participants. Ten children with special education needs were observed together with regular children. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequencies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study are discussed as per each objective.

Objective one established the teaching/learning resources and assistive technologies found in inclusive settings. The findings are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Teaching and Learning Resources as per Teachers of Children with Special Needs

	Frequency	Percentage
Special needs assistants	13	20
Special education teachers	15	23
Montessori projects	6	9
Computer	10	15
Radio	16	25
Special needs room	5	8
	Total 65	Total 100

- **Teaching and Learning resources for Children with Special Needs**

Data analysis in table 1 shows that the inclusive settings had a special needs teacher as well as a special needs assistant whom they considered an integral human resource in fostering inclusion. In schools where the curriculum was Montessori based, the presence of the Montessori projects which are learner centred were seen as a great resource for teaching children with special needs.

- **Assistive Technologies in Pre-schools**

The study findings revealed that assistive technologies were rather limited in the inclusive classes. There was presence of the computer and the radio as assistive technology. Most teachers did not understand what assistive technology was and gave examples of the special needs teacher as well as Montessori projects in the Montessori based schools that the researcher obtained data from. From the interviews conducted with the special needs teachers, there was a clear need for more assistive technology in the form of projectors, televisions as well as iPad and tablets for various children who have poor fine motor skills due to the nature of their special needs.

Objective two examined the level of competence teachers needed in handling children with special needs. The analysis is as follows:

The study revealed that 40% (n=20) of the respondents had taken a course in inclusive education, while 60% (n=30) had not taken any course in inclusive education. This indicated that more than half of the teachers did not know what inclusive education was from an academic angle. Lack of teacher education and expertise was mentioned frequently by teachers in the questionnaires and interviews as posing challenges for them in including learners in regular programmes. Insufficient pre-service and continuing professional development opportunities for teachers in relation to the education of children with special educational needs were cited by Gordon (2010) as barriers to inclusion and this in turn appeared to have implications for teachers' confidence in their ability to teach students effectively.

Objective three established difficulties faced by teachers while including children with special needs into regular programmes. The analysis is presented in table 2.

Table 2: The Difficulties Faced by Teachers while Including Children with Special Needs in Regular Programmes

	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of expertise	15	23
Lack of time	28	43
Lack of coordination and Collaboration	10	15
Challenges in Curriculum Delivery	12	19
Total	65	100

- **Lack of Expertise**

There was evidence of lack of expertise on the part of some teachers in the study with regard to Individual education plans for learners. One of the barriers to the inclusion of children with special educational needs which has been identified by Kavale (2001) is lack of awareness by mainstream classroom teachers of the individual education plan for children with special education needs. They also fail to link special needs education with general education programmes. The observation and interview data indicates that in the majority of mainstream teachers did not make reference to the specific individual education plan targets for students with special educational needs. The following comment from a pre-school teacher sums up many of the teachers' view: *In terms of children with special needs I think targeting their needs is a challenge because sometimes you may not have had adequate training and their needs can be very hard to pinpoint (Teacher, primary school C)*

- Lack of time

Participants cited lack of time to carry out administrative duties including planning, differentiating the teaching of individual differences and interacting with colleagues to share their problems as a barrier to inclusive education. 43% (=28) of the respondents felt that the time they had on a daily basis was insufficient to include children with special needs.

- Lack of coordination and collaboration

Lack of collaboration with the child’s parents and administration and all those involved in providing for the needs of children with special needs was cited as a key challenge of inclusive education. 15% (n=10) of the respondents expressed lack of commitment as a challenge that they face in including children with special needs in their programmes. The administrations lack of adequate knowledge on what special needs are cause long delays to provide the resources needed by the children.

- Challenges in curriculum delivery

Due to the unique needs of each child with special needs, the respondents 18% (n-12, cited challenges in the curriculum delivery especially in the schools where the curriculum that was followed was the 8-4-4 system of education. The respondents lacked skills on how to deliver the content to children with special needs and this led to frustrations and several repetitions of this children. The respondents also cited a lack of an appropriate curriculum that is modified to fit the child with special education needs as a challenge that they face in including children with special needs in their programme.

Objective 4 determined the challenges children with special needs face in inclusive education. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges Children with Special Needs Face in Inclusive Education

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of resources	26	40
Negative teacher attitudes	15	23
Poor socialization	10	15
Withdrawal for special lessons	14	22
Total	65	100

- Limited resources

Some respondents (40% (n=26) cited a lack of resources in the form of well equipped and spacious classrooms, qualified teachers, physical environment as a challenges that face children with special needs. The structure of the physical environment was also cited as a challenge facing children with special needs; the physical environment was not conducive for children with special needs and the children could fall frequently.

- Lack of attention by teachers

The results revealed that 23% (n=15) of the respondents did not have enough knowledge on how to respond to the needs of children with special needs and that they ignored them during classroom activities as they consumed a lot of time that was needed for curriculum coverage. The respondents felt that these children delayed them in achieving their objectives.

- Poor socialization

Children with special needs miss important social skills which are needed for life. The study revealed that 15% (n=10) of the respondents found these children to be dangerous individuals to associate with. The other children see them as bullies because they don't understand them. The interview revealed that autistic children are perceived to be dangerous to the other children because of their hyperactive behaviour. Also due to lack of communication ability in some children with special needs, they are unable to express themselves in a way that the other children can understand them in order to engage them in play. Therefore, they are usually isolated, and seen as loners. Non-special needs children run away from them for the fear of being bullied by them. This isolation affects negatively on the child's social and emotional development.

- Withdrawal from peers for special lessons

The researcher observed that sometimes children with special needs were withdrawn from classroom activities and taken to a special class in order to be given special attention. This was seen as a challenge and a barrier to effective inclusion because the time they were withdrawn from their class mates makes them miss normal classroom learning which affects their social development.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study established that the main challenges children with special needs face in inclusive settings are: inadequacy of resources, lack of competence from the teachers, teachers' negative attitudes, communication difficulties, lack of quality time for individual attention, inappropriate curriculum, misconceptions about children with special needs leading to social discrimination. Difficulties that are faced by teachers in implementing inclusive education included: lack of collaboration from administration and the parents, lack of relevant resources, insufficient class time, curriculum delivery, lack of knowledge on the nature of special education needs, and a lack of clear laid down policies on inclusive education. The study suggests the following recommendations.

- Schools should be assisted to offer a full range of programmes to meet the diverse needs of learners.
- There is a need for dedicated time outside existing teaching hours for shared planning and collaboration to develop high quality inclusive classroom practices.
- The use of technology, shared web space, and virtual learning environments should be used to facilitate collaboration and planning.
- There is need for a formalised system of support for parents of children with special educational needs in choosing placement options for their children.
- The provision of social and emotional support systems for children with special educational needs should be strengthened in order to minimize school dropouts and reduce behavioural difficulties.

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