



Findings and Recommendations on Supporting All Learners in Kenyan Secondary Schools

**Kenyatta University and Syracuse University:
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Ideas on multiple intelligences have popularized the notion that people learn in different ways. Effective teachers have always worked to provide alternatives for students. It is now relatively common to see lesson plans that acknowledge different learning paths. Accommodation and modifications are frequently discussed, which make curricula accessible to different ability levels and proficiencies. Technology can play an important role in the success of all students.

According to Swartz (2007), the level of participation in research by people with disability has been negligible or has been vaguely mentioned. The empowerment of disadvantaged individuals in education, research and work place is important for self-actualization. According to Swartz, disability has not been adopted as a cross cutting issue. The specific needs of people with disabilities are not highlighted as much as for those of girl child, youth women and minorities.

There is need to identify factors that act as facilitators and barriers to supporting all learners in education. Such knowledge would assist in policy formulation and change practice, both in school, institutions of higher learning and at the government level. Where there have been disability friendly policies such as in Uganda and South Africa (Kenya has followed suit in the new constitution) there is a greater chance of disability research having an impact. There are, however, considerable problems. For example, in Kenya, though policy is formulated within the education

policy and structures, the actual implementation is slow. The Kenya government has emphasized the need to include issues of disability, both in education and healthcare.

Independence and Integration

Technology has helped people with disabilities gain greater independence and integration in the society. Speech recognition systems, electronic communication, personal computers, iPads, iPods, robots and artificial intelligence are transforming people's lives, especially of those with disabilities. The movement towards miniaturization, use of lighter materials and higher-capacity information processing devices, are slowly by slowly presenting even greater opportunities for this population. As schools move to mainstream and provide full inclusive environments for persons with disabilities, it is important that teachers are aware of possibilities of using assistive technologies. As teachers plan ways that they can use to increase student independence and create classrooms that support differentiated instruction, assistive technology becomes a vital resource.

Research Study

As part of our partnership activities, one of the collaborative research studies we undertook was to: (a) identify the availability of instructional resources and infrastructure in secondary schools to support learners with special needs; (b) establish a knowledge base of teachers and administrators about learners with special needs; (c) ascertain the level of special skills possessed by teachers in

handling learners with special needs; (d) find out the school management policies put in place to handle learners with special needs; and (e) assess the level of collaboration among teachers in supporting all learners.

Rationale for the Study

The study was necessitated by the need to sensitize teachers and school administrators about the needs 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, to provide resources that could facilitate teaching and learning. Further, the study would not only help the school administrators, but also teacher trainers and the government in gaining insights into the needs of all learners. There is need to provide support and resources the teachers need to effectively support learners with special needs. Not much research has been done in this area, especially in institutions of higher learning

Research Design

The research design was a descriptive survey. The study sample comprised 140 teachers and 13 school principals. A questionnaire was used to seek views of teachers about the availability of learning resources and management policies regarding learners with special needs. Furthermore, the questionnaire also sought information on the availability of infrastructure, level of teachers' knowledge about supporting all learners, collaboration among teachers, competence and ability to handle all learners in the classroom, especially those with special needs.

An interview schedule for the school principals was used to complement the information given by the teachers on issues of resource availability, school management policies and teacher competencies, in the context of handling students with special needs. In addition, an observation schedule was used to examine the kind of facilities, resources and equipment available in various schools, and how they were used.

From our data analysis, we have the following findings:

- ***Finding #1: Principals' Perspectives on Learners with Special Needs***

The synthesized qualitative data from the principals revealed that majority of the public schools have few students with special needs. To buttress this claim, they stated that such students are kept in special institutions, such as schools for the deaf, the blind and mentally challenged. 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 that may affect their studies.

The majority of the principals indicated that periodic examinations are done in the schools with the intention of identifying and correcting any noticeable exceptionality. In some schools, a student with a disability is supported financially. For example, in one school, the school community and the County government has embarked on a funds mobilization project dubbed "support your kitty", to help brilliant but needy students continue with school. 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, qualitative data collected from the teachers revealed there were few categories of learners with various degrees of special needs. These are: speech impairment (SI), Visual impairment (VI), Hearing impairment (HI), Physical impairment (PI), Albinism and Slow learners (SL).

- ***Finding #2: Availability of Instructional Resources and Infrastructure to Support all Learners***

Regarding availability of teaching and learning resources and other facilities in the schools to handle learners with special needs, majority of the principals lamented about the inadequacy of teaching aids for the special needs learners. Generally, they indicated that the communities are not particularly interested in assisting

schools to provide resources to help learners with special needs.

Classroom observation showed that many schools were well lighted, had students' desks and a chalkboard, to facilitate teaching and learning. In response to the above objective, 95 (68%) of the teachers said schools did not have enough resources and facilities, 97 (69%) said there were no suitable classrooms and physical facilities to support all learners, while 112 (80%) said the schools have no special services and materials suitable for learners with special needs.

The study further sought data on the kind of assistance that the schools' administration, community and the Ministry of Education had provided to support learners with special needs. The results show an overwhelming majority (88.6%) of the respondents indicated that they were not given any form of support by school administration, community and the Ministry of Education.

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that physical infrastructure and instructional resources are not adequate to support learners with special needs in Kenyan secondary schools.

- ***Finding #3: Knowledge Base of Teachers about Learners with Special Needs***

When the principals were asked whether the teachers had the necessary background knowledge in handling learners with special needs, majority 80 (57%) indicated that no specialized 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 use differentiated learning or multisensory approach to teach. 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 students' needs.

Information on teacher's knowledge base in handling learners was sought and specifically, teachers' pedagogical knowledge in handling students with special needs. Data showed 68% of the respondents were knowledgeable in handling learners with special needs. However, the majority (71%) complained that the schools were not adequately staffed with trained teachers who can support learners with special needs. Similarly, 79% disagreed to the statement that "most teachers have received adequate training in teaching students with special needs". A majority (64%) also disagreed with the statement that "teachers focus more on the average learners and often ignore slow and struggling learners". These findings imply that teachers do not have satisfactory pedagogical knowledge base to handle students with special needs.

- ***Finding #4: 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 64.3% were competent while 35.7% said they did not have the relevant competences. Further questions were asked to find out if they were trained to cater for 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. A question was asked whether they required any kind of assistance in order to handle learners with special needs. The majority of the respondents 109 (78%) answered in the affirmative. Those who indicated they needed assistance emphasized the need to have sufficient skills in the use of ICT. Others mentioned seminars, while other wanted provision of teaching materials. In summary, there was general lack of training for the teachers to enable them teach inclusive classes.

- ***Finding #5: School Management Policies Put in Place to Handle Learners with Special Needs***

Responses about school management policies in the context of supporting learners with special needs were examined. A slim majority (51%) of the teachers indicating 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%) of the respondents also 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, the majority (81.4%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. Further, 69.3% of the respondents indicated that their school had a system of identifying, assessing and planning for learners with special needs. Generally, school management policies regarding learners with special needs seemed not to be comprehensive enough to cater for all students.

- ***Finding #6: Level of Collaboration Among Teachers in Handling Learners with Special Needs***

Questionnaire items under this objective were assembled to address the level of collaboration among the teachers. The findings show that the majority (66%) of the respondents were of the view that administrators and staff in the schools should hold discussions with the aim of supporting all learners. However, 62% disagreed that teachers work in teams in order to prepare adequately to support learners with special needs. Similarly, most of the respondents (71%) said the schools do not collaborate with the communities and other agencies to support learners with special needs. Implications from this analysis points out that though teachers and administrators hold regular

meetings, collaboration among them falls below expectation.

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 specialized 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 to support all learners needs to be improved.

Based on our research, we have the following recommendations:

- ***Recommendation #1:*** The school management should embark on conscious efforts to mobilize the needed resources from the communities, NGOs and other international agencies in support of learners with special needs.
- ***Recommendation #2:*** For teachers to work effectively in inclusive settings, they need to develop broad-based knowledge and understanding of concepts of inclusive education that must meet the learning need of the individual students.
- ***Recommendation #3:*** Teachers must be made to undergo periodic refresher courses and training that should, not only gear towards developing personalized learning approaches for all learners, but also the appropriate values, attitudes, skills and competences, to effectively handle the heterogeneous nature of the contemporary classes.
- ***Recommendation #4:*** Teachers should be encouraged to work collaboratively and engage the services of different professionals whose skills and experiences are relevant to the individual needs of the learners.

- **Recommendation #5:** Teachers and school principals must ensure that all learners, irrespective of the physical, 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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