

Understanding Disability: Perceptions among Parents of Children with Disability in the Society

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Abstract: Recent times have witnessed an emergence of schools to cater for specific disabilities. This could be attributed to society's realization that persons with disabilities are capable of learning. Cognizant of the benefits of education to persons with disabilities, it was felt that although they could benefit from education, this had to be offered in separate exclusive schools. While the education offered in the special schools is determined by people who deem the children incapable of learning the same concepts as their non-disabled peers, identifying these children back in the society still remains a problem. Are parents aware of the existence of these cases in their environments? And if they do, what perception do they have of the same? Guided by the Social Model of Disability, as advanced by Rieser (2002), this paper discusses the findings of a study that sought to establish the level of awareness parents have towards the concept of disability in the society and how they perceive disability. With a target population of 134 parents, 40 parents were selected by simple random sampling to participate in the study. Data collection was done using interview schedule to ensure parents who could not read have the questions asked in the language they understood. The collected data was then analyzed by the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The findings revealed that parents had a positive attitude towards learners with disabilities and that there was no provision of quality teaching and learning resources. This paper is aimed at creating awareness among parents of children with disability and through this recognition, the rightful measures can be taken to cater for the disabled children.

Keywords: Disability, Parents, Children, Awareness, Education Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Before the seventeenth century, persons with disabilities were considered worthless members of the society. Some were killed at birth while those who survived were neglected and mistreated [1]. During this period of neglect, people with disabilities had no rights and their fate was often determined by the individual societies. The mid eighteenth century marked the development of institutions for people with disabilities, mostly in the United States of America and Europe. These institutions were meant to protect them from hostile environment in which they were living and marginalisation. Subsequently, the institutions degenerated into asylums. While the society thought that they were doing a favour to persons with disabilities [1], in reality they were discriminating against them. Concerns were raised on the conditions that prevailed in the asylums and most of them were therefore closed down [2].

While inclusivity is seen as mitigation to this problem, UNESCO [3] observes that the greatest barriers to inclusion are caused by society, not by particular medical impairments. Negative attitudes towards differences result in discrimination and could

lead to a serious barrier to learning. Negative attitudes could take the form of social discrimination, lack of awareness and traditional prejudices. Regarding children with special needs, some regions still maintain established beliefs that educating the disabled is pointless. Often, the problem is identified as being caused by the child's differences rather than the education systems shortcomings. Mass media stereotypes of disabled people serve to encourage and reinforce negative attitudes. The marginalization of parents by professionals and the desire of some disabled adults for a more luxurious specialist system further complicate the issues. Promoting positive attitudes and respect for difference is a pre-requisite for policy development and the implementation of inclusive education at school level.

Assie-Lumumba, cited in Onsomu [4], identifies five sources of financing education: the state, local communities, families, business and external sources. According to the Ministry of Education [5], the Government of the Republic of Kenya, under the Free Primary Education (FPE) programme, facilitates provision of additional capitation grants to facilitate implementation of inclusive education. This is in line

with her policy measures and investments in education are designed to provide sufficient funding to primary education in order to alleviate household costs burden, to increase access, to ensure adequate teaching learning inputs and ensure internal efficiency [11].

Parents' involvement in the educational process has been shown to positively impact their children's educational progress. For example, parental involvement has been shown to influence motivation to learn, improve consistent attendance patterns, and decrease dropout rates and behaviour problems [6]. Additionally, parental involvement provides opportunities for parents to serve as role models for their children by reinforcing the skills that are taught in school [7]. Therefore, it is important to examine parental involvement as a component of student achievement. However, parent-teacher interaction is a strong component of parental involvement because teachers are the primary transmitters of knowledge at school. It is also valuable for teachers to understand parental involvement so that they can effect change [8].

With respect to parents of children with disabilities in particular, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required that parents play a role in the decision-making process for the education of their children [13]. Many parents of children with disabilities initially got involved with the planning of their children's programs in preschool, but they tended to become disengaged overtime. As their children progressed in their education, parents' involvement in school decreased, suggesting the possibility of changing perceptions of their roles, consequently additional knowledge is needed related to parental perceptions and involvement. Parents' culture and acculturate on disability have been shown to strongly influence their views of education of their children with disabilities as well as their perceptions of their involvement in the educational process [9].

This study is based on Social Model of Disability, as discussed by Rieser [10]. This model encourages the society to view the issue of including the People with Disabilities (PWDs) from a human right and equality perspective rather than a focus on the PWDs as faulty. The model views the barriers that prevent PWDs from participating in any situation as what handicaps them. The disability movement comprising of the PWDs and their supporters are of the view that the position of the PWDs and the discrimination against them are socially created. Through fear, ignorance and prejudice, barriers and discriminatory practices develop which disables and handicaps them. The PWDs are often made to feel that it is their own fault that they are different. Impairment does not make them less human beings. This is emphasised well by the social model. The PWD's

movement believes the „cure“ to the problem of disability lies in the restructuring of the society, and not focusing on the individual's impairment [10]. This paper therefore looks at the level of awareness and involvement of the parents in providing special care and education to children with disabilities in society.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey design was adopted in this paper's inquiry. Descriptive survey designs are used in preliminary and exploratory studies to allow researchers to gather information, summarise, 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 based on a survey carried out by Educational Assessment and Resource Co-coordinators [14] which established that the communities in these counties had limited knowledge about the concept of disability. The study sought to establish the level of awareness of parents of children with disabilities examining their perception on the concept. The study targeted 134 parents from which a sample of 40 parents was randomly selected to participate in the study. Data collection was done using interview schedule from which the author had guiding questions addressed to parents. Interviews were deemed appropriate as some of these parents may not have been well educated/old and would have been unable to read. Data analysis was descriptively done using SPSS version 20 and presented in tables using Frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive education is that educational idea that all children (with and without disabilities) should be educated in the same schools/ classrooms in their local community. Parents have a great role to play in ensuring inclusivity in Education without which marginalization would remain a matter needing attention in society. Parental beliefs and perceptions related to disability may influence their decisions regarding the health care and rehabilitation services they seek for their children with disabilities. This section presents the findings of the study on the level of parents' awareness and their perceptions.

Gender of Parents

Out of the interviewed parents, it was revealed that majority (55%) were male while (45%) were female. Opinions and nature of men and women vary given that they encounter different experiences, expectations, needs and problems in different situations and circumstances. Hence, women had emotional attachment to children with special needs compared to men. The study established the persistence of stigma

towards women in that the child born with disability in the family was sought due to the women lineage.

Parents Awareness on the Concept of Disability

To establish the awareness of the parents towards the concepts of disability, parents were asked if they were aware and the findings indicated that, parents and the community were aware about disability. This is

represented by 77.5% of the parents being aware of the concept of disability while 22.5% were not aware about children disability. The parents who exhibited positive attitude towards children with disability were significantly higher. However, they don't engage these children in activities as they do with other non-disabled children. The results are shown in Figure 1.

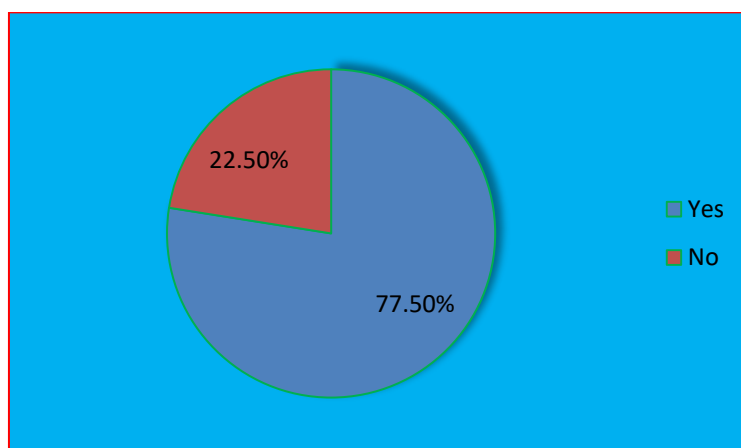


Fig-1: Awareness of the Parents towards the Concepts of Disability

Lack of engagement of children with disabilities as indicated by parents included; not giving them responsibilities like caring for siblings, fetching water, washing clothes looking after animals. Some form of discrimination was seen in the cases where some parents would promptly take non-disabled children to school while delaying to take the disabled ones to school. Ignorance on the part of parents was depicted in the cases where parents do not bother to provide assistive devices/support equipment required by these children in their day to day life. Those parents who depicted a negative attitude towards these children had their perceptions attributing disability to a curse to the family concerned. Others thought that there were issues of genetic makeup or simply that they were unlucky. This study expounds on the fact that, the inclusion of children with disabilities in the society is possible but first requires a change of perception, a recognition that children with disabilities hold the same rights as others that they can be agents of change and self determination, not merely the beneficiaries of charity that their voices must be heard and heeded in a policy making and programmes. Harry *et al.*, [9] found that many parents of children with disabilities initially got involved with the planning of their children's programs in preschool, but they tended to become disengaged overtime. As their children progressed in their education, parents' involvement in school

decreased, suggesting the possibility of changing perceptions of their roles. Consequently, additional knowledge is needed related to parental perceptions and involvement. Furthermore, parents' culture and acculturate have been shown to strongly influence their views of education of their children with disabilities as well as their perceptions of their involvement in the educational process.

Parents had greater responsibility to the provision of their children education in that they had to prepare school environment for disability inclusion, with appropriate infrastructure, teaching and learning materials and assistive devices to realise the quality education to these learners [12].

Common Disabilities in the Community

Some of the common disabilities that were encountered in various families included hearing and visual impairment, physically handicapped and mentally challenged. The most common disability was the physically challenged who was represented by 32.5%. This was followed by mentally challenged at 27.5% while 22.5% accounted for children with visual impairment. Never the less, the hearing impairment was also said to be in existent among some children with a representation of 17.5%. Table 1 summarises these information.

Table 1: Common Disabilities in the Community

Type of Disability	N	%
Physically challenged	13	32.5
Hearing Impairment	7	17.5
Visually Impairment	9	22.5
Mentally challenged	11	27.5
Total	40	100

The findings of the study do not concur with the literature review because the parents interviewed agreed that they were aware of the children with disabilities and therefore had developed positive attitude towards them. They agreed that the physically handicapped represented the most common disability in the areas under study due to the fact that other disabilities like hearing, visual or mental are not considered to be disabilities but results of a curse. According to Ministry of Education handbook [5], lack of awareness about issues surrounding learners with special needs and disabilities by service providers, policy makers and community at large is a common problem. There is low level of advocacy and lobbying of the rights of persons with special needs and disabilities by parents communities and disability organisations. Many children with disability were stereotyped and considered unworthy to be educated as captured in the following voices:

Children with disabilities are useless to educate. They should only train to repair shoes (P₁, Personal Communication, 2016).
Some parents view it as a waste of time and resource to educate a child who won't be of

any help to them (P₂, Personal Communication, 2016).

Children with disabilities are difficult to train and some are unable to work so they should not be taken to school. Many kids with disabilities are neglected and left out of school because they are purported to be of no use to the society (P₃, Personal Communication, 2016)..

Parents’ Attitude towards Learners with Special Needs

Asked what would happen if their families get a child with disability, parents indicated that they would accept and treat them like any other child in the family. On the attitude of the teachers, parents revealed that some teachers have negative attitude towards children with disability while others portrayed positive attitude. The findings revealed that majority (97.5%) of the parents were of the opinion that teachers had positive attitude towards children with disability whereas (2.5%) sowed that teachers had negative attitude towards the learners with special needs. Figure 2 illustrates the results.

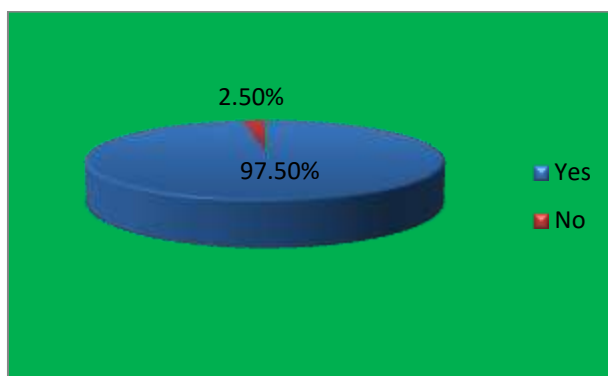


Fig-2: Parents’ View of Teachers Attitude towards the Disabled

These findings contradict with the data from Ministry of Education [5] which indicated that lack of awareness about issues concerning learners with special needs and disabilities by service providers, teachers, policy makers and community at large were negative. The respondents showed that the level of disability awareness is very high and as such created positive attitude.

Disability is not inability and nowadays the disabled people have been recognised by the government and as such should be educated. Currently, the communities’ perception in educating a child with disabilities or special needs is a positive act, unlike in the past. If a child with disability is educated the magnitude of the disability reduces, he or she won't be a burden to their family. Through education, children

with disabilities might acquire jobs that could enable them support their families.

Children with disabilities should be taken to special schools to enable them acquire life skills. These children should be educated because it is a fundamental right to education. Despite, their disability all children are equal and have the same rights. If you do not educate a disabled child you expose him or her to different types of dangers. These children should be able to get access to the proper education just as the other children without disabilities.

Ways of making Children with Disability meet their Education Obligation

Teachers have realised that students learning needs and any wider cross-sectional issues that may be impacting on presence, participation and achievement, develop innovative ways to help students participate, learn and seek an appropriate extra help from colleagues or other professionals when their own knowledge/skills are not sufficient to fully address a particular problem, has really changed teachers negative attitude towards these learners. It is equally important for teachers to participate in ongoing professional development that helps them to constantly reflect on their attitudes and practices and strive to improve the inclusiveness of their schools.

The parents suggested a number of ways in which children with disability could be assisted to meet their educational obligation. These included: purchasing assistive devices, teaching/learning materials, exhibiting positive attitude and hiring competent teachers. Others include improving infrastructure like building ramps and inspecting buildings for disability compliance and to a lesser extend engage them in leisure / work / games activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Gender shows the nature of human experiences since male and female parents think differently and therefore have different experiences, expectations and problems. Men opined that the cause of disability in the family depended solely on the women's family lineage. Awareness on the educational needs and capacities of learners with Special Needs Education (SNE) and disabilities is to be promoted. Beyond initial advocacy and awareness raising there should be a follow-up training and support for policy makers on parent recognition of children with special needs to help them understand of special needs education and disabilities. A key part of this is to ensure that policy makers educate the parents, the communities and the regular learners on the needs of the learners with special needs. The Ministry of Education should provide regular training and sensitization during school holidays to parents in order to reflect changing and newer

perspectives as concerns the contemporary emerging issues pertaining to awareness of special needs education.

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