

Adaptation of the Curriculum to Suit Children with Visual Impairment in Integrated ECD Centres in Kenya: A Case of Narok Sub-County

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the adaptation of the curriculum for children with visual impairments in integrated ECD centres. Curriculum is a strong integratory and exclusionary device. This is so because a curriculum encompasses what is believed to be essential for the children to learn in order to become productive citizens in an integrated society (Soudien, 2006). The very essence of our teaching i.e. how we teach and where we teach is shaped and espoused by the values embodied in the curricula. Children who have special needs in education require appropriate adaptations to curricula, learning environment, medium of communication and most importantly, the teaching methods (Policy framework paper, R.O.K 2012). This paper intends to critically analyse the adaptation of the curriculum to suit children with visual impairments in integrated ECD centres. There has been an argument that integration in schools is a very complex issue because it involves a 'wholesome restructuring' (Dyson, 2001). For integration to become a reality, a 'recapturing' as cited in Fullen in Swart and Pettipher (2006) of every aspect of the education integration not only requires education systems to change but also requires a process of developing democratic values and practices in school communities. The ECD policy framework (2006) is based on principles that are accepted universally as founding the cornerstone of quality service in ECDE. The policy addresses the issues of vulnerable and marginalized children top on the list being children with special needs in education. The issues are postulated with the aim of providing affirmative action for them. In view of this, the paper will critically analyse the adaptation of the curriculum for children who have visual limitations.

Keywords: Integration, adaptation, curriculum, visual impairment, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

There is no standard definition of Early Childhood Care and Education (Mbugua, 2004). Worldwide, different countries differ on their definitions of ECDE. In the more industrialized nations, Early Childhood is considered to be the period from birth through age 8 (Worthman, 2000). The developing nations define ECDE as the ages between birth to age 6 (Eville-Lo and Mbugua, 2001). UNICEF (2002) postulates that regardless of the differing definitions of ECDE, the increased interest in early childhood education society's particular philosophical beliefs about children. Among these children, there are those with disabilities.

The World Health Organization (2006), states that people with disabilities make up 10% of the total population of Kenya, approximately 3.5 million people. PWD are the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups. They experience discrimination at all levels of society starting from their formative years. The report asserts that many children with special needs live in a hostile bleak environment, where their safety and security is compromised and future jeopardized. These cadres of children are disempowered and marginalized, have no opportunity to advance and remain voiceless as a result of in built social, cultural, economic

prejudices, violence and abuse. The existing legislation suffers slow implementation leading to a violation of rights for the children.

Visual impairment can be defined as a loss of vision that even with correction, negatively affects a learner's educational performance. WHO (2007) notes that visual impairment is a complex term that encompasses a vast range of impairments all related to vision. Medical professionals and teachers have developed several other terms to distinguish the types of services and funding needed. The subcategories of visual impairment include legal blindness, functional blindness and light perception only (Hardman, Drew and Egan, 2005). Legal blindness is when vision "cannot be corrected to better than 20/400 in the better eye and when the visual field is 20 degrees or less, even with a corrective lens". Therefore, legal blindness takes into considerations both the visual acuity and the field of vision (Corn and Koenig in Hardman et al., 2005). A learner who is unable to use sight and must rely on his/her other senses to learn and get around is labelled as having functional blindness. Individuals who are without sight but who can distinguish between the presence and absence of light are referred to as light perception (Heller et al., 1996).

Data on school mapping indicates that there are 3464 special needs institutions in Kenya. Of this, 2713 are integrated institutions while 751 are special schools. 38.2% are ECDE, 34% are NFE and 54% are primary while 4.3% are secondary. The highest number of SNE units is recorded in the Eastern region at 734 while the lowest is North Eastern at 56. The data gives the figures as 10 public secondary schools for learners with hearing impairments, 3 for physical handicaps and 4 for learners with visual impairment, (ROK, 2009). From the above figures, it is evident that access and participation of children with special needs is relatively low across the country. This translates to mean that the needs of these children are not being fully met more so for children at the pre-school level. According to Gender policy in education (2007), there are 23,459 pupils with special needs enrolled in primary and secondary schools in 2003 with a significant increase after free primary education. There was a total enrolment of 36,239 in 134 special units, 7 secondary schools and 4 special technical training institutions. In 2013, there were 231 children with visual impairment in Narok County (Narok County office statistics – EMIS, 2013). This confirms that children with special needs in education are spread all over the county and need attention. One of the major challenges related to access and equality in the provision of education and training for learners with special needs and disabilities is the lack of guidelines to support integrated education (ROK, 2002).

CURRICULUM ADAPTATION FOR LEARNERS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

ROK (2012) indicates that curriculum is defined as a plan for providing learning opportunities and experiences to the learners in order to achieve the educational goals and specific objectives required by the Kenyan society. It is the sum total of the learning opportunities presented to the learner (Education Act, Cap 211). In a different policy paper by the ROK (2009), it is noted that efforts have been made by KIE to develop pre-school curriculum for children with visual and hearing impairments, developmental and independent living skills syllabus for learners with Visual impairment, perceptual training, Communication and mathematical skills syllabuses for learners with mental handicaps; foundation syllabus for learners who are deaf-blind; certificate curriculum for SNE teachers and various diploma curricula in SNE.

The South African curriculum is geared towards the majority of learners who are in the mainstream school (Zimba, 2006). In the final report of the national Policy on integration education, Vyrynen (2008) pointed to the fact that the basic education broad curriculum does

not adequately address the diverse needs of all learners. In her opening speech at a conference on integration education held by SAALED in June, 2009, Ndjozo-ozo stated that currently South Africa is in the beginning process of developing of special curriculum. Earlier on in the year, she had also stated that the national Institute for Educational Development (NIED) has been charged with curriculum development. NIED followed up this by appointing an integration education officer in order to make sure that the curriculum development is geared towards integrated education.

Hallahan (1991) stated that methods in the education of learners with visual impairments are determined by the needs of the child who is blind or low vision. Lowenfeld (1981) asserts that the five principles that are essential parts of special methodology encompass individualization, concreteness, unified instructions, additional stimulation and self-activity. Individualization is when each child is considered as an individual. Modern education recognizes the importance of providing for individual differences. This is possible through various administrative and instructional means. In dealing with each child, factors which must be considered include the eye condition, causes of blindness and low vision, age of onset-congenital or adventitious, the degree of the visual defect and eye care are required. Kimani (2002) noted that concreteness involves the child gaining actual knowledge of the various objects surrounding them through touch. Through tactual observation, the learner can have the actual knowledge of the object world and its spatial characteristics children with low vision or blindness react with all their senses to the stimuli. Mcliden (2003) describes unified instructions as the varied impression gained by hearing, smelling, feeling, air currents and temperature changes. When all this is unified, it becomes meaningful experiences to the child Chapman (1989) states that children with visual impairment may also have curricula needs that are additional to those of children who have sight.

Mason et al., (2003) state that daily living skills are the ability to look after oneself and one's possession independently. A whole range of different skills is involved from personal grooming and hygiene to caring for clothes and oneself. The teaching of these skills requires a systematic and orderly approach. Tasks must be taught through a step-by-step method known as task analysis especially for young children in early childhood centres. There is need to have a curriculum that is adequately responsive to the different categories of children with special needs and disabilities.

DISCUSSION

Education for children with visual impairments needs an adapted curriculum in order to benefit maximum from learning. In the sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005, the government of Kenya was to integrate ECDE into basic education but unfortunately the policy has not been fully implemented. A study carried out recently in Narok County to find out whether curriculum has been adapted for ECDE centres shows that the pre-school teachers still use the ordinary ECDE curriculum 92.9% of the respondents reaffirmed that the ordinary ECDE curriculum is used with a paltry 7.1% using the adapted curriculum.. This translates to mean that most of the pre-schools have not adapted a curriculum that might enhance the integration process. According to the above percentages, the child who has special needs in education is disadvantaged in terms of the curriculum as it does not favour the children with visual impairment who have special needs in education.

ECDE centres need to provide adaptations to support the curriculum in the integrated classrooms. Some of the adaptations that need to be in place include concrete materials, use of heavy black marking pens, use of books in large print and the use of slate and stylus for learning purposes (Mason, 2003). It is worth noting that the ordinary curriculum is designed

just for the benefits of the normal learners over those with visual impairments. This was also established by other studies such as Vayrynen (2008), UNESCO (2005) and Westling and Fox (2005) who noted that most of the preschools in African countries such as Namibia and south Africa have not adapted to the right curriculum for integrating the learners with visual impairments.

ROK (2012) Policy framework paper states that special education requires appropriate adaptations to curricula, teaching methods, educational resources and the learning environment in order to cater for individual differences. This is important as special needs education leads to human capital development as it prepares those who would otherwise be dependents to be self-reliant. Education for children with visual impairment has faced several challenges in regard to the curriculum development. The curriculum and support materials for these learners come later when their counter parts in regular school set-up are already familiar with the curriculum contents and requirements. These delays make the learner to lag behind in the syllabus implementation and coverage. This in turn has been proven to adversely affect their performance right from ECDE to advanced levels. In some cases, by the time the curriculum is designed for them, new changes may be again taking shape in the same curriculum hence the vicious cycle (ROK, 2009).

Basically the adaptations required for the education of children with visual impairment requires a shift from vision to the auditory, tactual and kinaesthetic senses. McIlden (2003) states that the way a child uses his vision is very important in planning the curriculum for the child with visual impairment. Consequently, when planning and presenting work for children with visual impairment, some adaptations must be made in order for the learner to benefit from the ordinary class. Alternating activities that require close eye work with those that are less visually demanding will increase the likelihood of success in the classroom. The curriculum needs to be adapted such that concrete materials and 'hands on' learning is used. This will improve instruction for the learners who do not have the same background experiences as the other learners (Gearhart and Westhahn, 1988). Lowenfield (1981) as cited in Mason (2003) postulates that children with visual impairment react with all senses to the stimuli from the environment. It is only through touch that they can gain an actual knowledge of the objects surrounding them in terms of the shape, size, weight, surface qualities and temperatures.

The Kenyan constitution provides that every child has a right to free and compulsory basic education. This entails quality services and access to educational institutions and facilities for all persons including those with disabilities. Similarly, the Kenya vision 2030 also recognizes that education and training of all Kenyans is fundamental to the success of the vision. Unfortunately, the implementation of this provision is slow and not much has been done especially now that the responsibility of planning and development of ECDE has been allocated to the county government. The central government retains the responsibility for policy, Standards and curriculum development even where implementation will be undertaken by county governments.

CONCLUSION

An integrated system of education is a complex notion and involves more than providing education for all. It is a celebration of diversity for all who are in an environment that is keen on providing quality education. Integration of children with visual impairment with those who have sight is better since an ordinary school offers the advantages of a broader social contact as compared to a special school. In the early years of a child at this pre-school level, it is imperative that the child works in groups with their sighted peers so long as the materials

are adequate. The teacher's role should be to guide them by use of an adapted curriculum to facilitate a full understanding of the concepts.

Adaptation of the curriculum should include modifications like use of heavy black marking pens for easier viewing by the learner with low vision. Also use of marking pens to delineate lines on writing papers (Mason, 2003). In an integrated system, the children who have sight are obliged to assist learners who have visual limitations by reading reference materials and other assignments to them. This gives them a good and conducive environment for interaction. The teacher as the facilitator should put in place adaptations of instructional procedures and the classroom environment should be favourable for children with visual impairment. Since the child who has visual impairment may be slower in such areas as feeding, walking, talking and socialization, training and guidance must meet and encourage the development of his maturing functions (Lowenfield, 1981).

The learning environment for the learners will need to be appraised in terms of the seating arrangement, lighting in the room, blackboard surfaces and the necessary books and other materials. This will enhance the implementation of the adapted curriculum (Chapman, 1989). Also of importance is that children with visual impairment will need more time for academic areas and learning techniques relating to personal management. It is imperative that time is increased in order to cover all areas of the curriculum. Adaptive skills such as Braille use and activities for daily living, orientation and mobility will require additional time for the children. The learner will be able to move about in the ordinary classroom comfortably with the other children. Gross (2002) states that teachers can modify the curriculum programmes of study purposely to provide learners with relevant and challenging work at each level. He sets out three principles for a more integrated curriculum: setting of suitable learning challenges, responses to learners' diverse learning needs and overcoming potential barriers to learning objectives, teaching styles and accessibility. This entails the teacher to decide on accessibility and outcomes for individual and groups which are different from those of the normal child. The ordinary classroom is the most appropriate facility for children with visual impairment so long as adaptations are done on the curriculum. This is in terms of appropriate instructional materials, supportive services and personnel including the regular and special teachers are prepared for integration. To sum this up, there should be a systematically evaluation and reporting of a program development and adequate additional resources provided for integration purposes.

In conclusion it is evident that the curriculum needs of children with visual impairment are still wanting. This is especially at the pre-school level which is the foundation of the child particularly in the integrated system where teachers are tempted to overlook the individual needs of children with special needs. Integration can only become a reality if adaptations are done on the curriculum to accommodate learners who have visual impairment. The discussion from other scholars has confirmed that the curriculum used for these children is inflexible and therefore should be looked into.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has established the key areas in the curriculum that need to be strengthened if the integration process is to succeed. Evidently, it is clear that in embracing the concept of integration in education, a lot has to be done. Therefore the following aspects of the curriculum need to be strengthening for effective integration of children with visual impairment in ECDE centres. Teachers should modify the curriculum programmes of study to provide learners with relevant and challenging work at each level and include orientation and mobility with activities for daily living.

1. There should be classroom modification that will facilitate the education of learners with visual impairment at the pre-school level.
2. Provision of adapted teaching and learning materials and training in their use should be implemented
3. A comprehensive national policy that categorically defines the education of children with visual impairment in integrated ECDE centres should be developed.
4. A comprehensive national policy that categorically defines the education of children with visual impairment in integrated ECDE centres should be developed.

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