

EFFECTS OF TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON PUPIL'S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM: KENYAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Despite education being one of the basic human rights and an empowerment prerequisite, there are various factors that affect the provision of quality education in inclusive public primary schools in Kenya. This paper sought to examine the effects of teacher's perception of school environment on academic performance of pupils with special needs in the inclusive classes. The paper adopted a descriptive survey design. The study used simple random to select to select the study respondents. Interview schedule and questionnaires were used for data collection. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.716 and 0.784 was obtained for the teachers and pupils questionnaires respectively. Data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics with aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to establish the relationship between teacher's perception of school environment and academic performance of pupils with special needs in inclusive classes. The findings showed that school environment had very significant effect on the academic performance of pupils with special needs in inclusive classes. The study concluded that teachers' perception of school environment significantly influenced academic performance of learners with special needs in inclusive primary schools. The study recommended that school headteachers to enhance school environment that accommodate all learners for better academic performance.

Key Words: Academic Performance, Inclusive Classroom, Pupils with Special Needs, School Environment, Teachers Perception.

Introduction

Debate of inclusion of challenged people into the society without stigmatization has been discussed internationally at various forums such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Such forums has acknowledged education as a human right and enacted some of the articles to include them in every social sector (Haider, 2008). In 1989 the Convention acknowledged the special needs of children with disabilities and must be guaranteed effective access to education to achieve the fullest possible social integration and individual development. However, the United States Department of Education (2006) noted that approximately 80% of students with disabilities receive special education support in the inclusive classroom.

Internationally, inclusive education is seen as a system which caters for the needs of a diverse range of learners and supports diversity, effectively eliminating all forms of discrimination (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO, 2009). UNESCO (2009) developed a language of inclusion for the disabled into the system of education. They also stated inclusive education as a basic a human right and foundation for a more just society. Generally, inclusive education is considered as a way to create an environment that can give all children access to education (Chhabra, Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010).

Most countries in Africa experience a lot of challenges in the inclusion of learners with special needs in the regular classes. It is noted that majority of these countries lack the appropriate school environment to support inclusion process (Muga, 2011). The gross enrolment rate (GER) for learners with special needs in inclusive classes is lowest in Africa (29%) as compared to other regions (Europe > 100; Asia: 50% with West Asia at 40% and East Asia at 48%). World Bank (2005) notes, Africa to have the lowest level of inclusive education at almost (45%) as compared to other regions (West Asia: 69%; Europe, South America: 100%; East Asia and Oceania > 90%). However, Djangmah (2006) notes that greatest relative difference between enrolment ratios in inclusive classes are found in Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique and Niger, where the ratios are less than one-third enrolment of the learners with special needs. Therefore, successful and effective implementation of inclusive education depends upon teachers having adequate knowledge of pupils learning environment (Ntombela, 2009). This is very true

in the perspective of this paper which sought to clearly assess the effects of teacher's perception of school environment on academic performance of pupils with special needs in the inclusive classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

The goal of inclusive education is to provide the most appropriate education for all children in the most enabling environment. However, in Kenya despite the introduction of free primary education and capitation grant to every pupil with disabilities in special schools, integrated units and mainstream primary schools, there has been a great challenge in academic performance of pupils with special needs in the inclusive classrooms (Ministry of Education Report, Kenya, 2003). The situation is not different in Narok County as statistics show that most of inclusive primary schools had an average of 16% of their pupils with special needs with an academic performance levels that are substantially below average as compared to their peers with no disability (Narok County Director of Education Office, 2016). For example, in Narok North Sub-County from 2011 to 2016 trends show the best pupils with special needs had a score of 243 marks, 230 marks, 232 marks, 232 marks, 240 marks and 228 marks respectively. The reasons behind this low academic performance by pupils with special needs in Narok County have not been well documented. Hence, to fill the research gap the current study sought to effect of teacher's perception of school environment on academic performance of pupils with special needs in inclusive classroom.

Literature Review

The philosophy of inclusive education has been embraced by many governments for its purposeful benefits to learners with disabilities. UNESCO (2005) states that inclusion involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. Different countries have approached the issue of inclusive education in different ways. South Africa set up a commission after the Salamanca conference (UNESCO, 1994) to establish the barriers to learning for learners with special needs. In Zambia, committees to coordinate activities at different levels were established. Inclusive schooling programme (INSPRO) was introduced as a pilot programme in different

schools in different districts of the country (Savolainen et al, 2006). It is important to note that people working towards children's rights in education may lack information about strategies that have been successful in changing education systems elsewhere (Kristensen, Loican-Omagor & Onen 2003). Sharing experience on how schools have become more inclusive in different contexts can help to build confidence that inclusive education has many different realities, and can be pursued in tangible ways. It is suggested by the various researchers that developing countries also need some changes in their policies to implement inclusive education. Similarly, Kristensen, Onen and Loican (2003) noted that developing countries such as Uganda are facing similar challenges in the implementation of inclusive education.

Focusing on inclusive education can be useful in guiding development of policies and strategies that address the causes and consequences of discrimination, inequality and exclusion within the holistic framework of EFA goals (UNESCO, 2008). Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2005) noted that schools that practice full inclusion for all students have no separate special education classes. However, full inclusion of all students, regardless of their particular needs, is a controversial practice, and it is not widely applied (Hastings, 2003). Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2005), further noted that the rapid quantitative growth in formal education in Kenya since independence has focused on promoting access, retention, equity, quality and relevance. Monahan and Marino (2005) indicate that teachers' attitudes towards their work and pupils, their classroom management and their interaction with pupils have a great impact on the pupils' academic achievement and the retention in school of their pupils. In a World Bank report (2002) pupils with special needs are sometimes neglected, abused, miss-handled, and sent out of class during teaching learning periods. Such a kind of atmosphere is not conducive to learning and makes some children hate school leading to absenteeism, poor performance and non-completion of the education cycle (World Bank, 2002).

However, factors that influence the effectiveness of the inclusion process have not been well documented, especially in counties like Narok County, in Kenya. Long, Wood, Littleton, Passenger & Sheehy, (2011) note that a factor school environment if not properly addressed it lead to pupils frustrations leading to low academic performance hence losing their interest in education and eventually dropping out of school.

This paper therefore, sought to assess the effect of the teacher's perception of school environment on academic performance of pupils with special needs in an inclusive classroom.

Research Methodology

The study adapted a descriptive survey design. This design enabled the researcher to collect data on respondent's opinions and attitudes regarding to the study subject (Ghuri & Gronhaug 2005; Mouton & Prozesky, 2005); Mugenda and Mugenda 2003). The study targeted all primary school head teachers, teachers and class seven and eight pupils in public primary schools in Central Division of Narok North Sub County. The study sample was ninety eight (98) learners, hundred (100) teachers from the selected schools and four (4) Quality Assurance and Standards Officers. The study sample was selected using stratified random sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling.

The questionnaire was used to collect data from teachers and pupils while face to face interview were carried out with the management staff. Cronbach alpha reliability of 0.712 and 0.768 for learners and teachers questionnaires respectively were obtained. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics as it helped the researcher to summarize the results, make comparison between responses and interpret it accordingly for appropriate conclusions. Pearson's correlation analysis was also used to establish the relationship between the dependent variables and the independent variables. SPSS was used as a tool to aid in the analysis process.

Results and Discussion

The response rate for the study was 97.2% which was accepted as a suitable representative of the sample size. According to Babbie (2002) any response of 70% and above is considered representative and adequate for analysis. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) on the other hand noted that when a response rate is 70 % and above then it is considered appropriate for a descriptive study. The few questionnaires that were not collected back were as a result of the respondents not being available during the time the questioners were collected back. The results of the study were summarized in form of percentages and frequencies and the significance of the relationship determined by use of correlation and inferential.

The study sought respondents' opinion on how they felt the school environment affected academic performance of pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms. The opinions were based on levels of agreement as follows: 1- strongly disagree,(SD), 2 – Disagree (D), 3 – Not sure (NS), 4 – Agree (A) and 5 – Strongly Agree. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Teachers' Perception of School Environment on Academic Performance of Pupils with Special Needs in Inclusive Classes

Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD
Little attention is given to pupils with special needs as the teacher competes to complete the syllabus	32(33.3)	64(66.7)	0	0	0
Class size makes teachers not to give special attention to the pupils with special needs.	56(58.3)	40 (41.7)	0	0	0
Learning condition in the school makes special needs pupils not to receive help from the teachers.	37(38.5)	59(61.5)	0	0	0
Lack of appropriate number of instructional and testing accommodations affects performance of pupils with special needs.	78(81.3)	18(18.8)	0	0	0

The study findings in table 1 show that majority 64(66.7%) of the respondents agreed that the number of pupils with special needs in the classes is very small hence they dedicated little attention to the pupils as the teacher competed to complete the syllabus, while 32(33.3%) strongly agreed. This showed that the classroom environment did not favour the pupils with special needs because of their numbers in the class. The study findings further showed that the majority 56 (58.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed that most of the primary schools class sizes were very large and hence the teachers were unable to give special attention to the pupils with Special Needs, while 40(41.7%) agreed with the statement. This indicated that, the large class sizes affected academic performance of the pupils with special needs in an inclusive classroom because the teachers were unable to give them special attention. This supported by Long et al (2011), who established that the school environment in terms of classroom size, materials required and the support from other pupils affects the performance of the learners with special needs.

The study findings also showed that most 59(61.5%) of the respondents agreed that learning condition in the inclusive classrooms affected pupils with the special needs ability to receive help from the teachers, while 37(38.5%) strongly agreed with the statement. This showed that the learning conditions in the classrooms were not conducive hence affected learning of the special needs pupils in the inclusive classrooms.

The respondent were further asked whether lack of appropriate number of instructional and testing accommodations affected performance of pupils with special needs and majority of them 78(81.3%) strongly agreed with the statement while 18(18.8%) agreed with the statement. This indicated that the inability of the primary schools to provide appropriate number of instructional and testing accommodations created unsuitability school environment which affected academic performance for pupils with special needs. This is supported by findings from Sifuna (1997) and World Bank (1992) that observed that there was a need for the teachers teaching in inclusive schools to be well equipped so as to improve performance of learners with special needs.

The study further carried out correlation analysis to establish the relationship between teachers' perception of schools environment and academic performance of pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms. The results are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Correlation analysis

School environment and the academic performance of SN pupils	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.167	
Academic performance of SN pupils (DV)	Pearson Correlation	.584**	.416**	.142	1.000**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.167	.000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Findings in table 2 show that the school environment to have had a perfect correlation which was significant on the academic performance of the pupils with special needs in an inclusive class room. This implied that there was a statistically positive relationship between teachers' perception of schools environment and academic performance of pupils with special needs in primary schools. The finding is in agreement with UNESCO (2007), Charema, (2010) and Long,

et al (2011), who established a positive and significant relationship between teacher's perception of schools environment and performance of special needs learners in inclusive schools.

Conclusions

The study established that there was a relationship between teacher's perception of the school environment and academic performance of special needs learners in inclusive classrooms in public primary schools in Narok County. Therefore, from this finding, it can be concluded that for pupils with special needs to perform well academically, additional teachers training is needed on inclusive school environmental setting. It can also be concluded that special needs pupils' learning conditions influence their academic performance in inclusive classroom. Finally, it can be concluded that the provision of suitable school environment can influence academic performance of special needs learners in inclusive schools setting.

Recommendations

The study established that without an effective school environment, inclusion education may not be effective in public primary schools. Therefore, this study recommends that headteachers and County Directors of Education to take the initiative of ensuring that the school environment of learners with special needs is appropriate for the inclusion process. The paper also recommends that the school environment is made conducive for the teachers and the pupils so that the academic performance of the pupils in the inclusive classes is improved.

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