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Educating deaf Children in an Inclusive Setting in Kenya: Challenges and Considerations

Peter Oracha Adoyo, Ph.D.

Abstract

Educators of the deaf have been of the view that placement of deaf students in classrooms with their hearing peers often may not be conducive to their social and academic development. This is because the two groups often experience difficulties in communication with each other and that such difficulties often include loneliness, rejection and social isolation. These experiences as observed by the educators do not promote social and academic development. This paper discusses perspectives on inclusive education in general and the deaf in particular. Challenges encountered in placing the deaf child in an inclusive classroom are highlighted and possible solutions to the administrators and teachers are suggested.

KEY WORDS: special needs education, integration, inclusive education, mainstreaming, deafness, communication, Sign Language.

1. BACKGROUND

Deaf education in Kenya falls under the ministry of education, special education division. This section of the ministry deals with the administration of education of persons with special educational needs, deaf education being one of them. History of deaf education in Kenya dates back to the founding of Kenya Society for Deaf Children (KSDC) in 1958 and the subsequent establishment of the first two schools for the deaf, Nyangoma and Mumias primary schools for the deaf in western Kenya in 1961. Later Vocational and Technical and academic secondary schools for the deaf girls and boys were set up. The number of students in the schools for the deaf according to KSDC (2001) statistics has tremendously increased over the years from 1,710 in 1982 to 6,000 in the year 2001. No empirical study has been carried out to ascertain reasons for the steady rise but it is speculated that it could either be due to the increasingly high prevalence of diseases causing deafness such as malaria, measles, meningitis or could be due to effective campaigns, awareness and establishment of Educational Assessment and Resource Services (EARS) across the country and the subsequent availability of educational opportunities for the deaf. Despite the improvement, there are still about 30% of deaf children not attending school (KSDC (2001)).

1.1 ASSESSMENT AND SCHOOL PLACEMENT

Every district in Kenya has an Educational Assessment and Resource Center (EARC) and before a deaf child is placed in a school for the deaf, he must be screened and diagnostic assessment carried out on him. Upon entry into a special school, there are two groups of children; those from hearing parents who constitutes 97.9% and have no structured language whether signed or spoken except a few gestures acquired naturally. On the other side of the spectrum is a group of deaf children of deaf parents who constitute about 2.1% and who come to school better adjusted, socialized, have positive attitudes due to developed sign language, cognition and socio-emotional skills critical for education (Adoyo 2004).

Most deaf children in Kenya join pre-primary classes (Nursery and Infant Classes) at the age of 5 years for two years. A small percentage is identified late and therefore starts school late. In the third year, they move to class (grade) one, which runs up to grade eight at which they sit for a national examination, Kenya Certificate for Primary Education (KCPE), together with their hearing counterparts in regular schools. The only rebate offered is an extra 30 minutes during the examination period. There are two academic secondary schools for the deaf, one for the deaf girls and the other for the boys who qualify to proceed for secondary education. The universities in Kenya have no interpreting services for the deaf. The few deaf graduates in Kenya studied overseas e.g. in America.

1.2. TEACHER TRAINING, CURRICULUM AND LANGUAGE POLICY

Teachers of the deaf are either holders of Diploma in Special Needs education from Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) or Degree holders in Special Needs education from either Kenyatta or Maseno universities. There is another category of teachers who although trained in general education, have not received special education training and are also “helping” in the institutions. This is due to lack of adequate specially trained teachers in Kenya.

Language of instruction policy in schools for the deaf in Kenya has changed over the years. From 1958 to 1985, Kenya used a pure oral system of Education. From 1986 to date teachers are using Total Communication, which according to Adoyo (2002), is Simultaneous Communication (SC). Although the communication mode has not produced the wide scale expected improvement, there has been a marked improvement in curriculum access and academic improvement. There is still however dissatisfaction on the type of education for the Kenyan deaf graduates as they have continued to lag behind their hearing counterparts in all academic achievements. As away of improving deaf education

suggestions have currently been offered to implement the popularly advocated sign bilingual approach, a strategy in which sign language and spoken (written) language are used complementarily as languages of instruction.

1.3. INTEGRATION

Changes in the education systems in Kenya has been closely linked to tendencies and changes occurring in western countries especially Britain which enacted integration in their education policy way back in 1981 and where most of the pioneers of special education in Kenya took their training. On arrival in Kenya, they pushed for integration policy within the education system. This gave rise to adoption of Educational Sessional papers on integration of deaf children in regular schools. Special units were established in a few regular schools. Pupils in these units were and are taught by specialist teachers. Deaf children in the integrated programmes were and are still provided with education geared towards normalization. There is great emphasis on the teaching of speech and language development at the expense of other academic subjects. Republic of Kenya (1976) on the national evaluation committee report on the educational objectives and policies observed as follows;

The committee would therefore like to see a change whereby the staff of special school considers the residence of handicapped children as a temporary expediency, designed to fit them for return to normal living outside the school or institution. In particular the committee urges that every effort be made to counter a tendency to isolate handicapped persons from their fellows...(pg.75).

After all these years integration has not lived up to the expectations as it only takes care of social and not academic aspect of integration. There are difficulties including lack of proper policy structures/guidelines, poor implementation, inadequate itinerant teachers for peripatetic services and above all negative attitudes towards the programme by the stakeholders. In a further attempt to bring pupils with special needs on board and at par with their hearing counterparts, the Kenyan education policy is currently advocating for inclusive approach.

2. WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The term inclusive education has attracted much attention in the recent years. An examination of the theory and practice has revealed that the term has come to mean different things to different people.

According to UNESCO (2005), the term refers to the diversity of needs of all learners through increased curriculum 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. It is a process of reforming schools and attitudes, which ensures that every child receives quality and appropriate education within the regular schools. In this way, inclusion is more complex than mere physical placement of children with special needs in the regular classroom.

As Jenkins, Pious & Jewell, (1990) put it, inclusion implies that the regular classroom should change to accommodate all different learners and in the process, desirable services be offered to all children within the regular classroom. One major assumption is that in an inclusive setting, the classroom teacher rather than the special needs educator has the primary responsibility for educating all children in the classroom.

How therefore does inclusion differ from the related terms such as mainstreaming and integration? Integration as explained by Jenkins, Pious & Jewell (1990), means that the child adapts to the regular classroom whereas in inclusion, the regular classroom adapts to the child's needs. Conceptually in inclusion deaf children are members of the regular classroom. Antia & Stinson (1999) provide a broad but equally simple definition, which considers inclusion as the practice of educating the child with special needs and the "normal" child in the regular classrooms, while integration refers to the results of such practice.

Friend & Bursuck (1996) have reiterated that in order to make the classroom inclusive for all learners, regular teachers should work in partnership with special needs educators to make adaptations in the curriculum and to structure the classroom in a manner that allows for effective learning by a diverse group of learners. Inclusion means enabling all students to participate fully in the life and work of mainstream settings, whatever their needs. For inclusive education to be effective, governments, schools and all stakeholders have to adapt their approach to curriculum, teaching support, funding mechanism and the built environment. Biklen, Lehr, Searl, & Taylor, (1978) have identified some of the philosophical premises that advocate for inclusion and these include; preparing individuals for life, learning from typical peers, having normal life experiences, changing attitudes of individuals without disabilities, challenging societal rejection and teaching democracy.

Inclusion involves adopting a broad vision of Education For All (EFA) by addressing the spectrum of needs of learners, including those who are vulnerable and marginalized such as the abused, refugees, migrants, language minority, ethnic minority, and children of conflict zones, children with disabilities, nomadic children and HIV/AIDS orphans. Millennium Development Goals (MDG) on Education also provide a framework of reference on making EFA a reality by 2015 while the Salamanca Statement on the principles, policy and practice in special needs education has also provided valuable reference points for inclusive education as it provides a framework for thinking about how to move the policy into practice.

At the core of inclusive education is also the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1949. A logical consequence of these rights is that all children have the rights to receive the kind of education that does not discriminate on any grounds such as caste, ethnicity, religion, economic status, refugee status, language, gender and disability. Specifically the rights include access to free and compulsory education, equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, the right to quality education, content and learning process.

One of the greatest challenges in an inclusive classroom and which is of concern in this paper is managing students with hearing impairments in an inclusive setting.

3. DEAF CHILDREN IN AN INCLUSIVE SETTING

Including deaf children in mainstream schools has been an extremely complex, controversial and contentious issue across the globe. Many deaf adults in deaf communities across the world have campaigned for the rights of deaf children to be educated separately in special schools in which they can access information through their most natural first language, Sign Language, the language of the deaf community.

A pragmatic question that needs an answer is whether special needs educators and regular classroom teachers can work in an equal partnership to provide deaf children with relevant and adequate education within the regular classroom. Further, to what extent can the classroom practice be modified to optimize the deaf child's academic and social integration, considering that the ideal of inclusive education is a student who is well integrated both academically and socially? The basic problems faced

when deaf and hearing students are educated together according to Antia and Stinson (1999), are lack of mutual access to communication.

Arguing against the move to place deaf children in an inclusive class, Kaupinnen (1994) has pointed out that the fundamental goal of educating deaf children is not actually to “normalize” or to be the same but to provide the deaf with the same possibilities of participating in the society in adult life. The then World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) secretary general reiterated that because of the special communicative consequences of deafness, deaf people risk being isolated if they are put together with hearing pupils who do not know how to sign and that a deaf individual has no chance of real participation if he is surrounded by people who do not know how to sign. According to Kaupinnen including a deaf child in a regular system increases his handicap.

Liu, Saur & Long (1996) have reported deaf children in inclusive settings experiencing a number of problems some of which include; rapid rate at which tasks in the classroom are discussed, abrupt and quick turn taking in the discussions, rapid change of the conversational theme or topic, the high numbers of speakers involved in a group discussion. These may create difficulties in the control of the communication cop and may result in the deaf not benefiting from the group discussion.

Although a section of hearing-impaired students (especially the post-lingually deaf and those who are hard of hearing) can be educated with their hearing counterparts in public schools, Antia & Stinson (1999) have empirically documented that the outcomes of the academic and social integration are not satisfactory. It has been pointed out that there are some difficulties that are inherent in inclusive practices such as the regular classroom teachers who possess negative attitude towards inclusion. Further, although the rationale of inclusion is to foster friendship and provide access to full curriculum, Jones (2006), has reported that this only works for some deaf groups of children where there are viable groups to support and befriend one another and where they are nurtured in communicating naturally in signs. It has also been noted that placing a deaf child in a regular classroom requires increased instructional, collaboration and management demands on the part of the regular classroom teacher.

According to Antia & Stinson (1999), there is a dire need for a true culture of collaboration between the teacher of the deaf and the regular teacher. The exact nature of the collaboration as observed by Antia

and Stinson is influenced by the culture of the instruction and can be impossible when collaboration is not valued or actively pursued.

The benefit of collaboration and teaming according to Antia and Stinson (1999) is that both the classroom teacher and the specialist teacher of the deaf can broaden their perspectives and can examine their stereotypes about their students and classrooms. The process develops students' expectations based on their shared abilities rather than their differences. The perceived equality of status between teachers is an essential component for successful collaboration.

Recent research have emphasized the importance of deep meaningful learning that is associated with hypothesis construction, problem solving and conceptual organization as opposed to memorization and retention of facts. This kind of learning has been found to be more effective in in-group activity discussions. The inability of deaf children to discuss and communicate academic issues easily in spoken language in an inclusive setting may make group participation for the deaf, even with an interpreter difficult, a situation, which may affect learning and final academic success.

3.1. THE SITUATION OF INCLUSION IN KENYA

A number of countries in the North have drummed up support for inclusive education and the idea is rapidly penetrating Kenyan education system. The Kenyan government is currently documenting inclusion in its policy framework and has provisionally projected availability of at least one special needs educator in every institution of learning by the year 2015. The question is whether this will be possible in a country where material resources required for this undertaking might be limited, given that inclusion requires adaptations of the structures to fit the learners needs.

There are a few international private inclusive schools in Nairobi. The only known public inclusive programme in Kenya is the Oriang Inclusive Project in western Kenya, which coordinates five regular schools. The pilot project is supported by Cheshire International from the United Kingdom. A recent visit to the project however revealed that 80% of the students included in these schools were physically handicapped. There were a few partially deaf, and a handful of those with low vision and mild mental disabilities. I would have loved to see deaf children with spoken language communication difficulties. According to the project manager, all was well except the news that the Cheshire International would soon be leaving creating project sustainability problem. It was difficult to assess the impact of the

programme on the academic performance, as those who started with the project had not done the national examination.

4.1 CHALLENGES

Curriculum is one of the obstacles or tools that needs to be carefully designed and adapted in order to facilitate the development and implementation of a proper inclusive system. It facilitates the development of more inclusive settings when it leaves room for the center of learning or when the individual teacher makes adaptations to enhance sense in the local context for the individual learner.

Special institutions in Kenya follow the regular curriculum, which is extensive and demanding, centrally designed and rigid, leaving little flexibility for adaptations for teachers to try out new approaches. The timing for the completion of the curriculum is also unrealistic for the deaf people as the teaching and learning processes are slowed down due to the processes involved.

Commenting during a Kenyan television interview on April 27th 2007, one of the leaders from the nomadic Northeastern province of Kenya demanded a curriculum, which takes cognizance of their origin, culture, lifestyle and their values. He further observed that the curriculum should be flexible and be able to facilitate and responds to their children's diversities and that it should provide diverse opportunities for practice and performance in terms of content, methods and levels of communication. Kenya needs to emulate Uganda, which has designed a curriculum for its semi-nomadic cattle keepers living in North Eastern Uganda. In Uganda, the Education Strategic Investment Plan 1998-2003 includes a strategic priority of access and equity in education. It is reported that the introduction of the Universal Primary Education programme in 1996 has led to much higher numbers of learners with special educational receiving mainstream education.

Although there are serious discussions and campaigns towards inclusive education, an interview with the Kenyan Deaf community focus group on March 2nd 2007 at the Kenyan National Association for the Deaf office revealed that they were apprehensive of inclusion and foresaw the following fears and challenges for a deaf child in an inclusive class:

- That a deaf child in an inclusive class may lack attention from the teacher as the number of pupils in the regular classes is normally high due to free primary education.

- That due to the broad regular curriculum, adaptation to fit the needs of those who are deaf might be difficult.
- That because schools in Kenya are ranked according to the mean scores obtained in national examinations, regular head teachers may be uncomfortable with the deaf for fear of lowering their mean scores based on the low expectations also expressed by Johnson et al (1989). The group claims that in the past some schools for the deaf were denied examination registration of candidates by the district education officers for fear of lowering the schools mean scores.
- That although deaf people have now and again cited difficulty in learning a second spoken language there is fear that once a deaf child is placed in a regular classroom he/she will be forced to take Kiswahili, a second language in the national examinations.
- That teachers in special schools have negative attitudes towards learning Kenyan Sign language. This results in incompetence in the medium of instruction and once placed in a regular classroom, they may find it difficult to convey the curriculum content effectively.
- That parents have the rights to choose where their children learn and since many of the parents still view deafness as a curse, they might find it difficult to have their children share classes with their deaf counterparts.
- That Kenya has acute shortage of sign language interpreters. It may be very difficult to supply adequate interpreters in regular schools in Kenya to assist the deaf.
- That lack of social and academic interactions due to language barrier may lead to isolation and loneliness on the part of the deaf.
- That deaf children who would otherwise get educational financial support in schools for the deaf would lose the same because donors do not support regular schools.
- That this is a move towards normalization in disregard to the linguistic and cultural difference that exists between the deaf and the hearing.

4. CONSIDERATIONS

Although the Kenyan deaf community strongly hold the fears as stated in the foregoing, a better job can still be done.

Awareness on inclusive education should be created and benefits of inclusion should be articulated to all stakeholders in Kenya. Personnel involved in the teaching in an inclusive setting with the deaf should be appropriately trained and should be bilingual in spoken (written) language and Sign Language.

Regular and special needs teachers should acquire competence in strategies for effective inclusion for the deaf, which deal with attitudes and behaviors of professional staff, whether hearing or deaf. Additionally, regular teachers should create a healthy communicative environment for the entire class and they should encourage classroom participation as well as be able to control the pace of discussion with pauses in between communication turns.

The specialist teacher of the deaf should be prepared to disseminate information on psychology and culture of deaf people to the regular teacher and pupils. This will assist the regular teacher and may enhance the establishment of effective communication and culture. The information so provided can also promote understanding and will create positive attitudes to other hearing and deaf students. Children in the inclusive settings should have access to deaf adults. Social contact and support to the children and their parents is crucial for the social-emotional and linguistic development. In the absence of an established deaf indigenous sign language, the inclusive process can be very challenging and requires careful facilitation.

Russel-Fox (2001) has observed that for an effective inclusion process, a professional relationship should be developed with audiologist, hearing specialists, sign language interpreters, and speech and language therapists. In addition communication lines should be kept open. Visual and tactile aids should be used as much as is possible, in the classroom. Language in-group activities should be encouraged by allowing time for children to start and finish communication. Further, Kenyan deaf adults should be involved as sign language instructors in inclusive settings as they are often the best teachers in sign language. Deaf and hearing children should be encouraged to use sign language for social interaction and for academic purposes.

Teachers in inclusive classes whether regular or special should recap the lesson through sign language for the deaf students or alternative spoken and sign language during the lessons. Necessary arrangements for an interpreter/teachers of sign language should be made to visit the school on a

regular basis. Deaf adults should be employed in the school to support the deaf child and to facilitate communication between children, teachers and classmates.

As deaf children's language skills develop, serious reading lessons should be introduced as this offers the most important medium of learning for the child and in communicating with others. It should also be ensured that the deaf students receive written copies of lessons from the teacher or their peers. Books and written materials to the level of pupils should also be provided. The schools infrastructure e.g. paths should be made appropriate for training in orientation and mobility, taking care of the architectural barrier that could hamper mobility and that also pose threats to safety especially for the deaf blind.

Strong policies, documented goals and objectives governing the implementation of inclusion process should be put in place. Such policies should address issues regarding language of instruction in an inclusive setting, language with a negative connotation towards the excluded, requirements on competence and quality of teachers in inclusive settings. There should be awareness campaigns/workshops geared towards attitude change by hearing teachers and the hearing society at large towards deafness and language. The change should involve significant changes in conceptions and role behavior. Strong awareness of the need to go inclusive should be created. Stakeholders (parents, pupils managers, communities) should be consulted and involved in the elaboration of the plans.

Social mobilization and development of communication strategies/ materials to support and create awareness for inclusion of deaf people in the communities should be put in place. The curriculum should be flexible to allow for appropriate adaptation with a content that is relevant to real lives and future, taking cognizance of gender, cultural identity and language background.

Categories of children suitable for inclusion should be clearly defined, as not all hearing impaired children can be included in a regular classroom. Children with severe to mild hearing impairment will need hearing aids in an inclusive class. Teachers in the inclusive classes should be able to use the aids and to communicate in Sign Language so as to increase the student-teacher interaction and to facilitate learning. Issues of class size and availability of in-service teacher education programmes should be of prime concern.

4. CONCLUSION

Since communication is the most salient area in deaf education, a focus on the same should provide a good platform from which to build inclusive teaching practices with the deaf. Because deaf children may have poor spoken language skills, clear communication in a language they understand with ease and comfort is of paramount importance for the comprehension of the curriculum content. The policy should consider the value of deaf children to establish a bond with others who speak the same language as an important aspect of the deaf culture as many members associated with the Deaf culture believe that deafness is a difference rather than a disability.

Inclusion is a right and not a privilege. Placing deaf children in an inclusive setting therefore demands the provision of relevant facilities such as teachers' competent in sign language, appropriate hearing aids and interpreters. Deaf learners who can benefit from the inclusive classrooms should be given a chance to learn in regular classrooms while those who may not fully benefit like the prelingually and profoundly deaf, should be placed in special institutions.

Although inclusive education for the deaf is being advocated for in Kenya to enable them feel as members of the same class and school community, there is still a need to be conscious of providing quality Special Needs Education. This means that Kenyans must ensure that all children no matter their difficulty or disability, or severity of disability are given the kind of education that is relevant for them. Such an education must be adjusted to their potentials, and needs and must be given through a relevant system. The special needs educator should not only focus on the particular child's level of functioning, but more on the child's whole world situation including the community where he grows up and develops.

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