

Education as a Tool for Enhancing Social Adjustment for Students with Mental retardation

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Abstract

Mental retardation is a condition characterized by a combination of deficits in both cognitive functioning and adaptive behaviour. The severity of mental retardation is determined by the discrepancy between the individual's capabilities in learning and the expectations of the social environment. While the term mental retardation is widely used in special education, many advocacy groups feel that this label has a negative connotation. The newer label of intellectual disability is becoming more accepted and prevalent within the field of Special education. Special education for learners with mental retardation is an educational program designed to meet the unique needs of students with intellectual disabilities. Holding students with disabilities, including those with Mental retardation to the same high expectations as all students leads to an improvement in the learning and educational outcomes of these students. This study was designed to investigate how the educational needs for students with mental retardation were met at the Meru school for the mentally challenged and in particular paid attention to factors other than direct instruction that influenced the education of learners with Mental retardation, teacher's role as a promoter of advocacy and the instructional resources available in the school. The study used a descriptive survey design. Data was collected from 17 teachers and 20 parents were interviewed over the telephone. 80% of the teachers reported that there is a tendency to emphasize traditional instruction and cited challenges such as lack of instructional materials and the severity of mental retardation as the major contributors. The findings may be useful to the planners, policy makers and teacher educators of learners with mental retardation. The study recommends a paradigm shift from education for support to education for development and social adjustment. Exposure to a challenging curriculum will lead to improved learning and educational outcomes for these learners.

Key words: Mental retardation, Social adjustment, Advocacy.

Introduction

Special education is a programme of instruction designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities. The learners who are eligible for special education include children with visual impairments, the physically handicapped, those with hearing impairments, language and speech disorders, learning disabilities and those with mental retardation among others. These impairments interfere with regular education unless modifications and related services, equipment and specially trained teachers are provided. The goal of special education is to provide equal opportunities for all children regardless of the handicapping conditions. According to Ndurumo(1993)early initiatives for provision of services to persons with special needs were undertaken by faith-based organizations such as the salvation army, the catholic, the Presbyterian, the Anglican and the Methodist churches. Other initiatives include the Kenya society for the blind (KSB),Association for the physically disabled in Kenya (APDK) Kenya society for the mentally handicapped (KSMH),and the Kenyan society for the deaf

children (KSDC).The government has supported the efforts of these players through provision of financial, technical and human resource support together with an enabling environment. Provision of special education services is hampered by a number of challenges. According to a report by UNDP (2005) these challenges include among others; inadequate data on children with special education needs, lack of proper guidelines on mainstreaming special education at all levels in the country, lack of appropriate tools and skills for early identification and assessment. Inadequate physical infrastructure and teaching/learning materials appropriate for learners with special needs together with inadequate skilled manpower. This paper focuses on education for children with mental retardation.

Mental retardation is a condition of substantial limitations in intellectual functioning that impact on performance in school and daily life. Learners with mental retardation vary depending on the degree of limitations and also on the services and support received. Most people with mental retardation are capable of achieving self sufficiency with proper instruction. Initially, learners with mental retardation suffered greatly prior to the introduction of special education. In the 1800s to the 1960s there was widespread building of institutions to house individuals with mental retardation. During this period individuals with low intelligence were sterilized under the assumption that the population would be improved (Luckasson, 1992). When education for all the handicapped children act was passed in 1975 and special education was required some students with mild mental retardation attended school. Those with severe mental retardation remained at home. The numbers of students with mental retardation however declined substantially because of the stigma in the label mental retardation. The primary goal of education for this group is to increase self sufficiency by teaching functional academics and other skills needed in everyday life in the community. Although the label mental retardation brings services, it also brings stigma and low expectations. This was evidenced by a reduction in students labelled as mentally retarded with a corresponding increase in those with learning disabilities from the 1970s to the 1990s (Kirk,2003). Special Needs Education advocates for learning in the least restrictive environment with appropriate services and support. Educators need to understand better how to teach these students and equip them for transition to adult life.

Causes of mental retardation

There are a number of possible causes of mental retardation. These include infections and intoxicants, trauma or physical agents, nutritional disorders, prenatal diseases, chromosomal abnormality, presence of psychiatric disorders, environmental influences as well as other unknown causes which have not yet been discovered. According to Kirk (2003) the more severe the level of mental retardation, the more likely it is that a cause can be pinpointed.

Learning characteristics of children with mental retardation

Children with mental retardation have deficits in cognitive functioning and their learning styles are characterized by poor memory, attention deficits, difficulties in generalizing what they have learnt and lack of motivation. According to Hewart(1990),they have difficulties remembering information. They are unable to recall and use information received in a short time. They require more time than their non disabled peers who recall information automatically. However children with mental retardation can be taught to recall and organize information by being exposed to memory related and problem solving tasks by their teachers. The learning rate of students with mental retardation is below that of typically developing children. For instance while the typically developing children will need two or three times to try a new task, the child with mental retardation may need twenty to thirty trials. As a result

of this, some educators have assumed that their instruction should be slowed down to match their lower rate of learning. However McGrew (2004) reports that children with mental retardation benefit from opportunities to learn fast.

Generalizing is another learning difficulty experienced by learners with mental retardation. They have problems using their new knowledge and skills in settings or situations that differ from the context in which they learnt the skill. However educators should not be satisfied by the fact that learners with mental retardation can acquire new skills or information but should instead search for strategies and tactics for promoting generalization. Kirk (2003) found out that repeated failure may lead to lack of motivation and it is therefore important that these children are taught self determination skills which are critical in helping them to become self-reliant.

Problem statement

Special education for learners with mental retardation is an educational programme designed to meet the unique needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. Traditionally however there has been an overemphasis in providing support for learners with mental retardation at the expense of providing individualized instruction to help the students access a challenging and interesting general curriculum which may lead to an improvement in their learning and educational outcomes .The study was therefore carried out to investigate how the educational needs of these students were met.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate how the educational needs for students with mental retardation are met. It was aimed at establishing factors other than direct instruction that influenced the education of learners with mental retardation, the role of the teacher and the instructional resources available.

Objectives of the study

1. To determine other factors other than direct instruction that influence education for learners with mental retardation
2. To establish the role of the teacher as a promoter of advocacy for learners with mental retardation
3. To find out the instructional resources available for learners with mental retardation.
4. To recommend teaching strategies for learners with mental retardation

Methodology

The study used a descriptive survey method. Notably surveys are the most common forms of research involving asking large numbers of people questions about particular issues; and are useful in describing exactly what the situation is (Parkash, 2009).

The survey design was preferred for this study as it enabled the researcher to reach all the teachers within a very short time using the same questionnaire. Telephone interview was used for the parents since it was the most convenient way that enabled the researcher to get important information. The target population was all the mentally retarded learners in Meru School for the mentally challenged.

Data collection instruments

Questionnaires are the heart of survey researches (Orodho, 2005). A researcher designed questionnaire was used to collect information from the respondents. The questionnaire consisted of two sections A and B. Section A elicited background information while section B of the questionnaire mainly focused on questions that elicited information on factors other than direct instruction such as memory, generalization, interpersonal skills, personal life skills, sexuality among others that affected learning, availability of instructional resources like assistive technology and the role of the teacher in promoting advocacy and establishment of a positive and productive learning environment.

Validity

Validity refers to whether an instrument is measuring what it is supposed to measure. Orodho (2005) maintains that validity is the degree to which results obtained from the analysis of data actually represents the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher sought expert opinion in assessing content validity.

Reliability

Reliability of an instrument is the degree to which a particular measuring procedure gives equivalent results after repeated trials. Reliability is also the accuracy or precision of a measuring instrument (Kerlinger, 1969). The researcher carried out a pilot study where the questionnaires were administered to five (5) identical subjects in Tuuru special unit for the mentally challenged. The pilot study enabled the researcher to assess the clarity of questionnaire items so that those items found to be inadequate or vague were modified to improve the quality of the research instruments. Because of the problems associated with repeated trials, the researcher used Split-half technique of reliability testing whereby the items in the pilot questionnaires were divided into two halves putting the even numbered items together and the odd numbered items together. A correlation coefficient for the two halves was computed using the Spearman Brown prophecy formula. The coefficient indicates the degree to which the two halves of the test produce the same results and hence describe the internal consistency of the test. The calculated reliability was 0.82 which was within the limit of 0.8 and 1 as advocated by Mugenda & Mugenda (2003).

Data Collection and analysis Procedure

After discussing her research intentions with the head teacher, the researcher then created rapport with teachers and administered the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to the teachers who were purposively sampled and the seventeen (17) of them responded. Learners could not participate in the study due to such problems as incoherent speech and lack of coordination among others. The parents who were purposively sampled were interviewed over the telephone.

Data was analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences. Frequency counts and percentages were used and the results of the findings discussed.

Results and Discussions

The following table shows the level of qualification of the teachers handling learners with mental retardation in the school.

Table 1: Level of Qualification of the Teachers

LEVEL OF TRAINING	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Diploma in SNE	17	100
Others	0	0
Total	17	100

Study findings in Table 1 revealed that all the teachers (100%) had training in Special Needs Education. The teachers had the skills and knowledge on how to teach these learners and equip them with skills for social adjustment in order to be useful members of the society. Teaching learners with mental retardation requires adequate skills because teachers need to understand the psychosocial implications of mental retardation on the learner. Training equips the teacher and this has a great impact on student motivation. Kirk (2003) found out that learners with mental retardation are demotivated due to repeated failures. A trained teacher would serve to give the learner the much needed motivation. Regarding education for support and education for social adjustment and development the teachers gave the following responses. Figure 1 shows the teachers' responses.

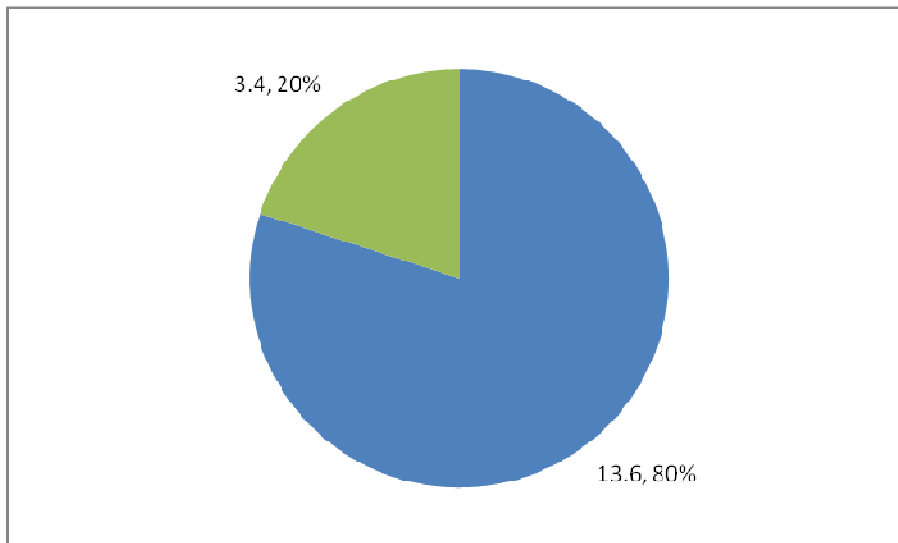


Figure 1: Teachers' response on education for support or education for development

Study findings in Figure 1 shows that (80%)of the teachers reported that the education for learners with mental retardation is mainly for support while (20%) reported that education was for social adjustment and development. According to the teachers, learning for children with mental retardation is hampered by other factors other than direct instruction. Teachers of children with mental retardation need not be satisfied by offering education for support but rather should devise teaching strategies that enable them to retain what they have learnt. This was supported by McGrew(2004) who found out that holding these students to same high expectations as other typically developing children would lead to their improvement. The study sought to find out how the teachers rated other factors other than direct instruction that hamper teaching for children with mental retardation. Study findings in Figure 2 show the way teachers rated other factors affecting the education for learners with mental retardation.

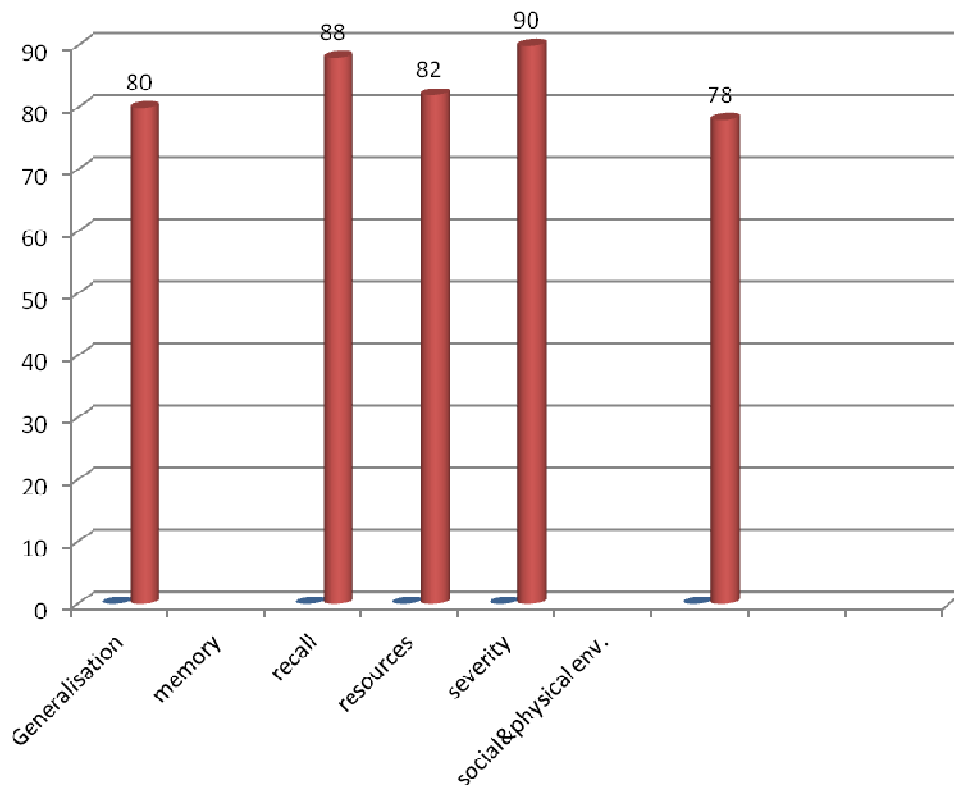


Figure 2: Factors other than direct instruction affecting learning for student with Mental retardation

Majority of the teachers (90%) reported that that the severity of the mental retardation greatly affected the rate at which the learners learnt. Individuals with mental retardation differed in the range of severity of the mental handicap. The educable mentally retarded have an ability to master numeracy and literacy skills as well as adjust well to the community setting and become economically useful. The moderately mentally retarded have the ability to acquire some literacy and numeracy skills as well as adjust to the home. They can also master some economic usefulness. However the severely mentally retarded are only able to master activities of daily living for instance eating, toileting and dressing. In cases where the mental retardation is so severe, the child requires twenty-four hour surveillance as they may not be able to master activities of daily living.

A further (88%) of the teachers reported that most of the learners had problems with memory while (82%) of the teachers reported that the learners had problems with recalling. Recall is when a learner is required to reproduce material learnt earlier. Learners with mental retardation are unable to reproduce learnt material even with external cues. According to Thungu(2008) Memory is the mental capacity to store and later recall or recognize events that were earlier experienced. Teachers reported that learners had problems remembering earlier events.

Study findings in Figure 2 clearly indicated that (82%) of the teachers reported that learning resources were available and that they were mostly provided through donations. These included toys, balloons to enhance speech, blocks for pre-number activities, beads to make necklace for eye-hand coordination, skipping ropes for eye-hand coordination and books. Play is very important for this category of learners. The study established that there were

swings, slides and balances to stimulate physical growth. The study further established that there were chairs for toilet training provided in the classrooms with (78%) of the teachers reporting that the physical and social environment was conducive for the learners. There was in place a perimeter wall and security in and out of school was tight with a watchman at the gate throughout to ensure that learners did not walk out of the school compound. There were cleaners to keep the environment clean and in the classes there were teacher aides to support learners who had not mastered toileting.

The study sought to find out the role of the teachers as promoters of advocacy. Study findings are shown on figure 3.

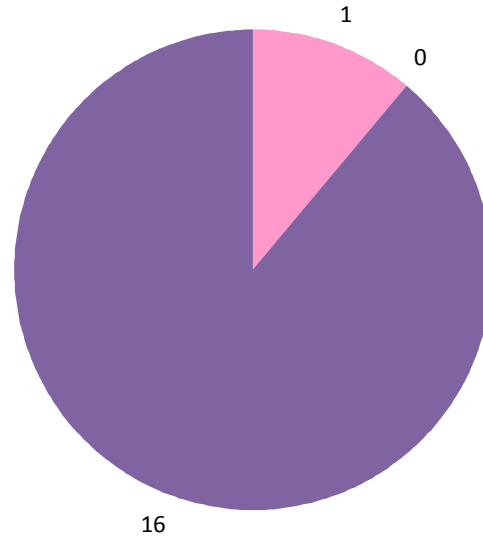


Figure 3: Teachers as promoters of advocacy

Study findings on figure 3 showed that majority of the teachers 16(94%) reported that teachers promoted advocacy by offering guidance and counseling to parents in order to empower them to become advocates for their children. Counseling was done both for adjustment and for information. Adjustment counseling helped the parents to accept the child with the mental retardation while information counseling helped the parents to access any information that could be helpful to their children. Teachers also promoted advocacy through advocating for the children's families and for educational change. Teachers responded promptly in cases of neglect, physical and or sexual abuse. Although the school environment was safe(5.8%) of the teachers reported that some children were sexually or physically abused during school holidays in which case they felt frustrated about their role in advocacy.

Conclusions

Education for learners with special needs is an important programme that ensures children with special needs exploit their potential to the fullest. Every possible mechanism should be put in place to ensure that these learners are not just kept in schools for support services but rather adaptations should be put in place to ensure that they learn and become useful members of the society.

On other factors other than direct instruction that affect the instruction of learners with mental retardation, the study concluded that the severity of mental retardation influenced instruction as reported by 90% of the teachers. Memory and recall was also a great hindrance as indicated by 88% and 82% respectively of the respondents. Learners with mental retardation

were unable to reproduce material learnt earlier and this made transfer of knowledge very difficult.

That learning resources were available as reported by 82% of the respondents .the teachers can utilize these learning resources to make a paradigm shift from education for support to education for development

On teachers as promoters of advocacy, the study concluded that teachers promoted advocacy as indicated by 94% of the respondents. The teachers offered counseling services to both children and their families. However some 5.8% reported that the advocacy was not very effective as some children were still sexually abused especially during school holidays.

Recommendations

Arising from the discussions above, this study recommends a shift from the traditional education for the mentally retarded for support to education for social adjustment and development by ensuring the following. Study findings reveal that children with mental retardation can benefit from fast learning.

That though the learning of children with mental retardation is affected by other factors other than direct instruction, educators can adopt strategies that mitigate against these e factors so that these learners benefit more from instruction.

Learners with disabilities have a variety of different needs. The instructions of children with mental retardation require certain instructional materials and enhancement strategies. The severity of the mental retardation, and the individual personality traits come into play when discovering the best way to teach a child.

Teachers of children with mental retardation should be a bit more proactive and vigilant in advocating for these children. This will ensure that they are enrolled in and stay in school as well as minimize cases of abuse.

Learners with mental retardation need content that is broken down into simple and easier to manage steps. This serves to keep the frustration levels down as well as enabling learning to take place. Providing concrete learning experiences for these learners helps them to understand new ideas in a physical hands-on approach. The hands-on experience may include such aspects like providing manipulative when teaching maths, taking field trips for instance to the grocery store or to the post office for a meaningful experience for the mentally retarded learners. Immediate and positive feedback encourages the learner to keep on trying. Teachers need to constantly reward or applaud a learner immediately if he/she masters a concept or meets a goal.

Music for learners with mental retardation is a wonderful motivator. Teaching a simple catchy song to go along with a concept is a fun way to engage the learners and to help them remember the information.

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