Correlates of Behavior Management Strategies Among Learners With Autistic Spectrum Disorders In Primary Schools In Western Kenya

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Abstract

Practitioners handling learners with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) often feel ill-prepared to effectively manage this disorder. Quite often, when faced with cases of challenging behaviour, teachers use coping strategies which may be counter-productive. This paper reports the findings of a study that sought to determine factors that influence practitioners' choice of behaviour management strategies among learners with ASDs in primary schools in Western Kenya. An exploratory analysis set out to determine the practitioners' perception of challenging behaviour and its influence on the choice of management strategies. The findings of the study revealed that practitioners training, work experience, collaboration and networking with other professionals, staffing levels, and support received from parents of children with ASDs played a significant role in the choice of strategies in management of behaviour presented by learners with ASDs.

 Key words: Challenging behavior, Practitioners, Teachers, Autistic Spectrum Disorder

1. Introduction

Learners with ASDs engage in behavior often perceived as challenging resulting in undesirable consequences. Hastings (1997) posits that in many instances, such learners are physically and socially excluded from school services or neglected by practitioners. Challenging behaviour can have a wide variety of personal and social consequences for the learner who engages in it and for other members of the school society. It may hinder effective learning, endanger the learners' lives and cause great strain to practitioners. Rose and Rose (2005) advance the view that there is a small but steadily growing body of knowledge on correlates of management strategies with respect to challenging behaviour among learners with ASDs. Emphasis has been directed to practitioners' training, experience, knowledge, and terms of employment, remuneration and development of partnerships as advanced by Simola, 1997; Nesbit, 2000 and Kaikonen (2001).

The number of professionals with knowledge of ASDs in Kenya, especially teachers, is steadily rising with the introduction of autism training programmes by Kenya Institute of Special Education and local universities (KISE, 2008). The government of Kenya is cognizant of the fact that capacities and skills of the staff at all levels within Special Needs Education should be commensurate with the tasks that they perform (Republic of Kenya, 2009). However, there are still many teachers, support staff and parents who require training and sensitization. The unfortunate fact is that people who have most contact with the learners are those with least training and experience (Nesbitt, 2000). It has been demonstrated that practitioners with high levels of behavioural knowledge or who have attended a behavioural training course are more likely to adopt causal beliefs and favour interventions that are behavioural in nature (Williamson, 2008).

Sometimes Special Needs trained teachers have been posted to schools where their services are not required and more importantly, lack an established promotional structure of service and which perhaps could account for the rising trends in attrition after training (Republic of Kenya, 2009).

2.0 Problem statement

Few empirical studies have attempted to explore the relationship of staff training and its impact on management of challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs as observed by Simola (1997); Kaikonen (2001); Hastings and Brown, (2002) and McDonnell (2008). These studies however, raise many issues that need to be addressed in order to offer effective services to learners with challenging behavior. Research indicates that their limited scope fails to specifically address the concept of behaviour management in terms of exploring practitioners' perception of challenging behaviour and factors that influence the choice of challenging behaviour management strategies. This paper thus reports the findings of a study done on analysis of correlates of behavior management strategies among learners with ASDs in primary schools in Western Kenya.

3.0 Literature Review

Research suggests that training of practitioners has little positive impact on management of challenging behaviour among these learners with ASDs without additional emphasis on organizational change in schools and homes, including clear staff incentives, staff-learner ratio and shorter working hours as pointed out by Hastings and Brown (2002); Wanless and Jahoda (2004) and McDonnell et.al., (2008). The growth in demands for equal educational rights for all strengthens the demands for developing each teacher's skills in meeting the individual needs of learners (Kaikonen, 2001). If teachers have the intention of addressing all the individual needs then this necessitates radical change in teacher education. One paradigm shift that is needed in teacher education is to stop perceiving special educational needs as pedagogical problems but rather as a product of poor school organization (Simola, 1997).

This shift is likely to give teachers adequate knowledge and understanding in recognizing or addressing the individuality of learners that arise from their diverse and complex life situation Hasting and Brown (2002) study vividly demonstrates that when staff are faced with cases of challenging behaviour, they mostly use mal-adaptive coping strategies, which in addition to the risk of strengthening the challenging behaviour portrayed, are likely to lead to burn out and emotional exhaustion among the staff. These factors have led to some researchers to call for radical changes in organizational structures of schools to make them responsive to the needs of children with special needs in order for the schools to act as potential basis for holistic development for this group of learners. The Mansell Report (Mansell, 1993), though with a limited scope to children with ASDs and challenging behaviour in UK, provides key areas of challenging behaviour management. It recommends good resource management and creative deployment of school resources with awareness of other resources outside the school and professional active staff development. The report also highlights the importance of collaborative work with recognition that helping people with challenging behaviour is a responsibility of the whole community.

McDonnell et. al (2008) found no significant difference in training effects of staff coping, support or perceived control of challenging behaviour. It also demonstrated that staff training increased confidence in the managing aggression in learners with ASDs. Though study results on challenging behaviour management show that training leads to better management styles and more evidence based explanation to challenging behaviour, there seems to be no research evidence on whether these training gains are maintained over long term. Also there seems to be no research in this area investigating the impact of training and perception on the causes of challenging behaviour. Werner's model (Markham and Trower, 2003) suggests that more appropriate causal attributions would lead to better challenging behaviour management strategy, however, limited research evidence to support this model brings this supposition into question.

The success of training interventions to improve the quality of practitioners interactions in the management of challenging behaviour has been equivocal (Whitaker, 2009; Hastings, 2008). Some of this could be due to lack of precision in defining success or indeed failure of practitioners training. Outcome measures that have been used are subjective in terms of what the practitioner reports. In addition, the nature of services and effects on behavior raises more questions than answers as Markham and Trower, (2003) point out. Attempts to improve practitioners' understanding of challenging behaviour, change practitioners negative perception of challenging behaviour and increase their job satisfaction have had mixed and predominantly short term results (Hastings & Brown, 2002; Jones & Hall, 2005). For instance a study by Jones and Hall (2005) demonstrated that even after relevant training, practitioners showed increased tendency to use physical intervention relative to other socially acceptable methods such as behavioural intervention strategies. Jones and Hall (2005) in particular, suggest that all training which aims to change staff behaviour should demonstrate some form of effectiveness before time and money is invested or wasted in the training.

4.0 Methodology

A survey design was used to select participants for the study.106 teachers and 40 teacher aides who worked in primary schools in western Kenya that have learners with ASDs were selected using stratified random sampling.

4.1 Results and Discussion

Table 1 Choice of Challenging Behaviour Management Strategy by Teachers

Choice of challenging behavior management strategy	SD	D	U	A	SA	MEAN	SD
Trainings, seminars & workshops that I have attended have equipped me with adequate skills to manage challenging behavior	7(6.6)	7(6.6)	10(9.4)	50(47.2)	39(36.8)	4.14	.844
Work experience gives me confidence in managing challenging behavior	2(1.3)	5(4.7)	6(5.7)	43(40.6)	50(47.2)	4.26	.91
Support I receive from my colleagues gives me confidence to manage challenging behavior	5(4.7)	7(6.6)	14(13.2)	49(46.2)	31(29.2)	3.89	1.05
My collaboration with other practitioners make me feel that I am in control of challenging behaviours	3(2.8)	8(7.5)	6(5.7)	58(54.7)	31(29.2)	4.00	.96
Staffing level at my work place enables me to select the best challenging behavior to manage the behavior of learners	5(4.7)	5(4.7)	5(4.7)	61(57.5)	30(28.3)	4.00	.98

Table 1 reveals that there were no significant differences between teacher aides and teachers rating of factors that influence the choice of challenging behaviour management strategies. This finding is consistent with those of Male (2004) who found no significant differences in challenging behaviour management strategies among different professionals. The finding indicates that both practitioners were very positive towards factors that determine the choice of challenging behaviour management strategies. They highly rated trainings, seminars and workshops that they had attended as having equipped them with adequate skills to manage challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs as evidenced in the table.

This resonates with what McDonnell et.al (2008) found in relation to the effect of training on the management of challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs. It also demonstrated that staff training can increase staff confidence in the managing aggression in learners with ASDs. Practitioners also cited their work experience as a factor that had given them confidence in managing challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs teachers 50(47.2) with a mean of 4.26 and standard deviation of .91 and teacher aides 50(47.2) with a mean of 3.95 standard deviation of .82 a finding that is consistent with other researchers (Wanless & Jahoda, 2002; Rose & Rose, 2005) which identified practitioners working experience and training as major factors that determine the individuals response to challenging behaviour.

Practitioners also rated support that they receive from their colleagues significantly teachers 49(46.2) a mean of 3.89 and standard deviation of 1.05; teacher aides 25(62.5) a mean of 3.88 and standard deviation of .85 indicating that there was considerable collaboration within the practitioners. Quite a significant number of practitioners agreed that staffing levels at their work place was sufficient thus enabling them to select the best challenging behaviour management strategies to manage behaviour presented by learners with ASDs teachers 61(57.5) a mean of and standard deviation of .98; teacher aides 23(57.5) with a mean of 3.80 and standard deviation of 1.09.

Out of 106 teachers who participated in the study 60(56.6) a mean of 4.09 and standard deviation of .92 agreed that the support that they received from parents of learners with ASDs had equipped them with sufficient knowledge about the challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs. In the same vein, out of 40 teacher aides 25(62.5) with a mean of 4.1 and standard deviation of .778 agreed that they had received sufficient support from parents of learners with ASDs that they received

To establish strategies used in the management of challenging behaviors portrayed by learners with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in schools in western Kenya, a correlation analysis was carried out between management strategies and the preferred management strategies used in managing challenging behavior by practitioners. The relationship was established using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. A small, negative correlation between the two variables [$r=-.149$, $n=146$, $p<.0005$], with high levels of management strategies associated with low levels of choice of the management strategy. The low level of choice implies that the practitioners were conversant with the strategies, tested them and were using them whereas high level of

management of the strategies meant that the management as per the factors influencing the choice was highly ineffective.

Table 2: Cross Tabulation Professional Qualification and Trainings

		Disagree	Undecided	agree	strongly agree
professional qualification	Certificate	1	3	15	6
	Diploma	7	7	35	30
	Degree	0	2	18	11
	Masters	0	1	4	6
Total		**8**	**13**	**72**	**53**

From Table 2 the number of various the professionals who agreed that they utilized challenging behavior strategies was high, hence showing that the methods for the choice of the management strategies that they used were functional. The study further sought to establish whether age was a factor in the choice of the strategy used to manage the challenging behavior. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3: Age of the Respondent Against the Choice of the Strategies Used

ANOVA					
mean strategies					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.850	5	.170	.477	.793
Within Groups	49.886	140	.356		
Total	50.736	145			

From the ANOVA table 3, it is clear that there is no significant difference in the choice of the strategies used on learners with ASDs. It was therefore important to investigate other factors such as gender and its influence on the choice of challenging behaviour management strategies. Data on influence of gender had a significant value of .715. This value is still above .05 and therefore it can be conclude that gender does not influence the choice of the management strategies. The descriptive means are [Male=2.45; SD=.58 and the female; M=2.48; SD=.61].According to the model, there is no significant difference in the choice of the management strategies. Other factors such as experience of working with learners with ASDs therefore needed to be considered.

Practitioners also cited their work experience as a factor that had given them confidence in managing challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs a finding that is consistent with other researchers (Wanless and Jahoda, 2002; Rose and Rose, 2005) which identified practitioners working experience and training as major factors that determine the individuals response to challenging behaviour.

Practitioners rated support that they receive from their colleagues significantly indicating that there was considerable collaboration within the practitioners. Establishing support systems in schools, working together, generating a policy statement and finding out about relevant resources would go a long way in assisting learners with ASDs. To a large extent teachers agreed that there collaboration with other practitioners made them feel that there were able to control challenging behaviour presented by learners. It implies that teachers greatly valued the concept of collaboration which needs to be encouraged among the practitioners so that there is mutual respect, complimentary expertise and willingness to learn from each other.

Pitfalls that hinder collaboration like those identified by Lacey (1999) such as unclear objectives, inefficient working relationships, confusion over responsibility, withholding information from each other under the mask of confidentiality and lack of well-defined roles of each team member need to be identified and eliminated so that all practitioners can work as a team to enable learners with ASDs who also present challenging behaviour realize their potential. The rating of staffing level being sufficient is not consistent with earlier research by Aziz et. al. (2004) on practitioners working environment and its impact on challenging behaviour which revealed that the length of duty had a significant detrimental effect on the quality of care in terms of practitioners activities. This study provided some evidence to suggest that practitioners are exploited as workers; they are overloaded with administrative responsibilities and have long working hours, factors that make them to be insensitive to challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs.

Both teachers and teacher aides rated highly the support that they received from parents of learners with ASDs. This is indeed a significant number which is strongly supporting the recommendation by DfEE (1994) that school-based arrangements should ensure that assessment reflects a sound and comprehensive knowledge of a child and his/her responses to a variety of carefully-planned and recorded actions which take into account the wishes, feelings and knowledge of parents at all stages. It states that learners' knowledge would be diminished if their parents are not seen as partners in the education process with unique knowledge and information to impart. Professional help can seldom be wholly effective unless it builds upon parents' capacity to be involved and professionals take account of what they say and treat their views and anxieties as intrinsically important. The likely benefits of this partnership would be that objectives would be understood, accepted and related to local circumstances. This relationship between the parents of children with ASDs and the school in which the learner is attending has a crucial bearing on the learner's educational progress and the effectiveness of any school based action.

The finding on practitioners who believed in sociological causes of challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs supports a study carried out in USA (Perry *et .al.* 2008) which indicated that sociological approaches such as social stories when used to manage challenging behaviour presented by learners with ASDs are likely to lead to reduction of challenging behaviour by half standard deviation and improvement of social skills by one standard deviation.

The study found a relationship between this finding and Literature searches and analyses that have demonstrated that interventions which are based on psychological principles derived from learning theory are currently the most effective intervention for reducing incidences of challenging behavior (British Psychological Association, 2004; Allen,2009).. In particular this finding supports Meta analyses by Allen et. al., (2009) who cites a number of literature that demonstrates reduction of challenging behaviour through the use of systematically applied behaviour approaches and concludes that the impact is much more effective than demonstrated use of medication. For this strategy to succeed, practitioners need to involve learners with ASDs in reflecting on their own behaviour, setting up individual targets for learners and monitoring them. They should strive to provide learners with strategies to self-regulate their own behaviour like use of visual clues and verbalization.

In the study by Porter and Lacey (2009) more staffing, smaller classes and more space and equipment were mentioned by teachers as means of improving provision for pupils with challenging behaviour; training and increasing staff skills were also considered important when dealing with behaviour that is ecologically based.

For this method to work, practitioners need to be aware that learners challenging behaviour may be as a result of unconscious conflict arising in early childhood. Learners who may not have received enough care may have attachment anxiety. Practitioners need to consider what unconscious pattern of behaviour is being portrayed by challenging behaviour. These would help them in choosing intervention that may help the learners to process unresolved unconscious emotions in a safe way such as therapeutic story telling..

Conclusion

It emerged from the study that factors that determine the choice of challenging behaviour management strategies were professional qualifications held by practitioners, training and workshops attended, years of working and perception of the causes of challenging behaviour. Other factors such as age and gender of respondents were investigated but there was no significant relationship between these factors and choice of challenging behaviour management strategies.

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