

The Perception of Students and Teachers on the Integration Programme of Students with Visual Impairment in Secondary Schools: A Case of Ainamoi Sub County, Kericho County, Kenya

Bornes Chepngetich Korir
P. O. Box 2031- 20200 Kericho, Kenya
Email: bornekorir@gmail.com

Abstract

The significance of blindness for a child's development depends on many variable factors. A blind child who does not suffer from additional disabilities, who is well cared for by parents and is helped to compensate for his sensory loss is able to develop very much as others do. Different people have different perceptions on disability and for this case visual impairment. This study sought to establish the perception of students and teachers on the integration programme of students with visual impairment in secondary schools. The study was carried out in Ainamoi sub county, Kericho County, Kenya. A case study design method was used. The data collecting techniques included questionnaires, focus group discussion and document analysis. A total of 200 respondents participated in the study and data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings revealed that majority of the students had a positive perception of the policy of integration. This is attributed to the fact that some visually impaired students actually excel in class far much better than their sighted peers. However, those who negated this view cited a number of challenges that are experienced by the visually impaired students. Nonetheless, the teachers differ significantly with the student perception and attitudes towards the policy of integration. The reasons given are enormous and it emanates right from the fact that majority of them had not only been sensitized but that they do not have the required skills to handle the students who are visually impaired.

Keywords: Perception, Visually Impaired Students, Teachers, Integration Programme.

1. Introduction

Guilford (1971, p.163) states that blindness does not present such severe obstacles to progress as compared to deafness. Historically, many educators behaved as though they did not believe that the visually impaired students had "The right to be different" (Lowenfeld, 1975, P. 118). The integration later to be called 'mainstreaming', then 'inclusion' of the visually impaired students into regular classroom in great numbers, beginning in the 1950's brought with it an era of belief that, the only need a visually impaired student had was adopted academic material so that he/she could learn in a regular classroom.

The only difference acknowledged by many teachers (indeed the profession itself), was the media and the material used for learning (Lowenfeld, 1975, p. 127). Few, if any changes were made to the curriculum offered to these students. Therefore efforts to include visually impaired students in the regular classrooms sometimes attempted to provide "...the opportunity to be equal..." without recognizing the student's "...right (and need) to be different..." (Lowenfeld, 1975, p. 117).

Lowenfeld further argued that, "the right to be different" clearly implies that there is more to education for the visually impaired students than the exact same curriculum provided to sighted students. The added curriculum that is specific to visually impaired students is also well known, but has not been diligently implemented. Could it be that parents and the professionals have no problem with the "opportunity to be equal", but have difficulty with "the right to be different" in our Kenyan context?

It has not been an easy transition for professionals in education for the visually impaired learners to accept the concept that the visually impaired students have educational needs that are in addition to curriculum required for the sighted students (Ross, 1988; Ndurumo, 1993). Many factors have made this transition difficult. Some professionals are loath to give up the belief that there is any difference between the educational needs of sighted students and visually impaired students. Others have difficulty in accepting the idea that an expanded curriculum is the responsibility of educators. Still others find it impossible to add to their teaching responsibilities because of time and / or size of caseload.

1.1 Perception on Integration

In some instance, it has been found out that mainstreaming may not be the least restrictive environment for children who need the consistent individualized attention possible in smaller groups (Accardo, 1980). Some youngsters are served most effectively in self contained settings when regular classes with appropriate supplemental assistance are not sufficient to meet their needs. Nonetheless, these children should have the opportunity to interact with peers at recess, mealtimes and after school as well as in regular classrooms when

appropriate subjects are being taught.

There are four educational handicapped children who need full time special educational program namely:

1. Those who need help in learning to care for themselves
2. Those who need help in preparing for vocational lives
3. Those who need help in learning social and working skills
4. Those who need to learn basic academic skills

Classification should be based on educational objectives so that specialized service can be directed to the nature of educational handicap. Messick (1976) quoted by Westman, (1990) stated that, in the past, educational response to an individual child has been primarily administrative rather than pedagogical. The earliest method of dealing with individual difference was to fail the student until educational requirement was mastered. While Westman, (1990) noted that the range of individual differences, mainstream classrooms can accommodate varies considerably, the personalized classroom programs based upon the following principles are promising approaches to minimizing learning problems.

1. The importance of how the child perceives what is being done is acknowledged in relation to the environment and program.
2. Each child takes an active role in making choices related to major intervention decisions as a way to increase commitment to and personal responsibility for achievement through contractual agreements.
3. A continuum of structure is provided to ensure communication support, direction and limits including periods which children work either independently or in small groups without adult supervision.
4. Informal and formal conferences are held regularly for communication about enhancing a child's perceptions of options, decisions and commitments.

1.2 Attitude towards Impairments

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 1), attitude refers to 'a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some favour or disfavours'. This definition shows the link between attitude and one's evaluation of a given object or state of being. In the case of visually impaired students, they have the internal self-construct, which makes them have a certain psychological tendency of what other peoples' attitude is towards their state of being visually impaired. This has always influenced the way visually impaired students behave towards the sighted students and vice versa.

Traditionally, the general attitude for the visually impaired people in many societies had negative connotations. There was a social stigma, an attribute which impedes their social and economic welfare (Ndinda, 2005). However, the landmark in changing the philosophy and practices towards such people in the society is engulfed in the Salamanca Declaration of 1994.

In the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, "every child has a fundamental right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning...those with special needs must have access to regular schools, which should accommodate them within child centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs: (UNESCO, 1994, p. iii). The Kenya Integrated Education Program picks-up from this declaration, to shift the paradigm from, the traditional attitude towards visually impaired people as incapacitated beings, to viewing them as people with similar potential as their sighted counterparts.

With the recognition of the potential and capabilities of handicapped children, what is needed is to change the existing attitude or the formation of new attitudes (Zimbardo, et al., 1977). This is important because attitude has been one of the greatest impediments towards the integration program. Those visually impaired students feel ostracized by their sighted counterparts, as manifested in the covert actions of the sighted students. Attitude change should also be holistic, from fellow students to teachers to parents and the society at large towards the visually impaired students.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in Ainamoi sub-county of Kericho county Kenya. A case study design was employed as Kothari (2003, p.142) states that the case study method is a very popular form of qualitative analysis and involves a careful and complete observation of a social unit, be it a person or an institution.

The target population of the study comprised students and teachers in Kericho Tea Boys and Kipsigis Girls secondary schools. The students were further classified into two categories: the sighted and the students with visual impairment. Students were used as they formed the study subjects of the integrated program. The author used a sample size of 200 respondents. All the students with visual impairment in the two schools were interviewed basing their total population which is reasonably small as compared to their sighted counterparts in an integrated school environment. According to the constitution of Kenya Society for the Blind, one student with visual impairment is equated to a class of 40 sighted students.

The sighted students were stratified into various forms and then simple random technique was

employed to select the respondents. The 160 respondents was representative enough given the fact that students in the schools shared the same experiences. There were 32 teachers who were purposively sampled including the principal of the two schools. There were 3 members from education office and one quality assurance officer and other 3 officers from society of the blind in Kericho. The author relied on a sample size of 199 respondents.

Data was collected through the use of the three types of questionnaires. The first type was designed for students both the sighted and the visually impaired. The second type of questionnaire was designed for the head teachers hosting the program in their school. The third type of questionnaires was designed for the teachers in schools hosting the integrated program. The data from the questionnaires were analyzed and presented in tables. Frequencies and percentages were used to compare different variables. Data was subjected to inferential statistics in which the analysis of variance, T-test and chi-square was used to test the hypotheses. This was done using the statistical package of social sciences (SPSS) which is a computer package used in analysis of studies. Data from interviews were analyzed using descriptive methods.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Description of the Study Population

Socio-demographic characteristic of the respondent serves to explain the background information of the respondents. Thus, useful in understanding how dynamic in such variables as gender, age and class influence their responses on issues to do with integrated education programmed in respective school.

Table 1: Numbers and percentage of participants grouped according to responsibility, role and gender

Group	Female			Male			Totals	
	No	Actual Respondents	%	No	Actual respondents	%	No	%
Head teachers	2	1	50	1	1	50	2	1.0
Teachers	60	22	36.7	8	8	13.3	30	15.1
Sighted students	280	63	22.5	97	97	34.6	160	80.4
Paraprofessionals	4	2	50	2	2	50	4	2.0
Supervisors	3	2	33.3	1	1	66.7	3	1.5
Total	349	90		109	109		199	

From table 1 above, the total number of respondents was 199. Out of the 199 participants, 30 (15.1%) were teachers who have direct contact with the students, 4 (2.0%) paraprofessional, 3 (1.5%) supervisors, 2 (1.0%) head teachers and 160 (80.4%) students. Out of 32 teachers 9 (28.1%) were male and 23 (71.9%) inclusive of the head teacher. Paraprofessional female comprise of 7.5% and 7.5% male. There was one female school inspector and two supervisors (1.5%).

Table 2: Age of the participant students

Age	Total	%
14-17	114	71
18-21	41	25.6
Above 21	5	3.1
Total	100	

From table 1, it is clear that most of the students interviewed were male. This was explained by the fact that in both schools that participated in the study, there were more boys with visual impairment that had gone to school than girls. From a focused group discussion with some teachers, the discussants pointed out that the presence of more male than female is a reflection of most of the communities in the areas favoring boys in education than girls, hence it is culturally entrenched.

Despite the fact that there were more male than female students in the study population on average the majority (71%) of the respondents fall within the age brackets of 14-17. (25.6%) is aged at 18-21 while the remaining (3.1%) are above 21 years old. This is also consistent with the fact that the majority (25.6%) of the students interviewed were between form one, two and three which justifies the mean age-range.

3.2 The Perception of Students towards the Integration Programme

The author provided respondents with various question items on perception of students with visual impairment on an integrated system. On a Likert scale, the respondents were to score "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Undecided", "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree".

In this regard, the author's interest was on how each question item was scored affirmatively as "Agree" by the respondents. To that effect, the following table shows a summary of the responses to the various question items asked and the corresponding frequencies and percentages at which they were scored as "Agree".

From the table below, it is true that most 111 (69.3%) of the respondents did agree with the statement. Various reasons were given; first the degree of vision varies from one student to the other. While others have

low vision, there are those who cannot see completely (the blind). The author found that there are students whose sight are deteriorating with time, and would want to associate with the blind so they are always in denial. Then there is another group of students who become blind at matured age and so, such students have a clear picture of their environment than those who were blind from the time of birth. Each of this group differs in their needs and that their cognitive ability also differs due to the degree of vision and the blindness. The assumption that all of them need the same umbrella and subjection to similar learning environment has made them suffer psychologically and mentally. A student with low vision complained that he found strong lights during preps irritating and so he often covered his face to avoid brightness. The author found that those who are losing sight with time do not want to wear spectacles for fear of being associated with the handicaps and so they end up being the losers.

Table 3: Perception of students towards integration

Statement	Frequencies N=60	Percentage
The students with visual impairment and the blind have been made to suffer more by being brought in a regular program.	111	69.4
There is little commitment from the government through the ministry of education to boost the students with visual impairment	90	56.3
Visually impaired student are treated like abnormal students in this school	78	48.8
Mixing the students with visual impairment has generally improved the public opinion about the handicaps people in the society	82	51.3

In situations where there was no induction of the sighted student so as to make them aware of the needs and assistance for the blind students, it has resulted to the sighted students making their fellow peers suffer the more instead of helping them. One blind student explains to the author that, whenever they sit next to their friends in class, they complain that the Braille machine makes a lot of noise, thus the tendency of their peers not wanting to sit next to them while in class. The visually impaired students have equally difficulties in sharing books, since their need is to place a text book closer to their eyes while straining to read the small prints.

When the author presented the statement on the government support, 90 (56.3%) agreed that there is little commitment from the government though the ministry of education to support the program. The students with visual impairment and the blind pay fees like the other students and yet when they run short of Braille papers, the school administration does not handle them as part of the school; instead they rely on the Kenya Society for the Blind to coordinate the program. The author observed that the schools hosting the program do not even have the guidelines / policy on the implementation of the program. Among the staff, a few teachers were once taken for in-service course on special education yet the rest have never been trained at all.

When asked whether the visually impaired and the blind are treated like abnormal students in the school, 78 (48.8%) agreed because their basic needs are not being addressed. While the 82 (51.2%) did not agree. When further asked to explain why, the majority of the respondents said they were just like other (sighted) students and so could still compete effectively as long as all the necessary support is provided.

When asked whether mixing student with visual impairment and the blind has improved the public attitude towards the disabled in the society, 78 (48.8%) agreed. Although 82 (51.3%) were undecided. The author observed that, given the right learning environment, the visually impaired and the blind students would attain social and survival skills in regular school environment. This, in itself would serve as evidence that the disabled can be mainstreamed in to the society.

It is evident from the above findings that the integrated education program has an influence on the performance of the students with visual impairment. However, the findings also imply that if all the necessary measures are taken into consideration to minimize some of the challenges facing such students, then the influence of an integrated education program on performance of students with visual impairment would be positive. This is because they are likely to perform even better in such a challenging environment than in a specially designed learning environment.

3.3 Teachers' Perception on the Integrated Education Program for Students with Visual Impairment

Teachers and the students are the ones that can form the immediate company for the students with visual impairment in a school environment. Therefore, the teachers' perception towards the integrated program, whether positive or negative, was of crucial concern for the author. Accordingly various question items on teachers' perception on the integrated system were set up. On a Likert scale, the respondents were to score "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Undecided", "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree".

In this regard, the author's interest was on how each question item was scored affirmatively as "Agree" by the respondents. To that effect, the following table shows a summary of the responses to the various question items and the corresponding frequencies and percentages at which they were scored as "Agree".

Table 4: Perception of teachers towards integration

Statement	Frequencies N=60	Percentage
The students with visual impairment and the blind have been made to suffer more by being brought in a regular program.	25	78.1
There is little commitment from the government through the ministry of education to boost the students with visual impairment – no trained teaching staff, no special fund, teaching and learning facilities	18	56.25
Visually impaired student are treated like abnormal students in this school	18	56.3
Mixing the students with visual impairment has generally improved the public opinion about the handicaps people in the society.	24	75

From the findings in the table above, most 25 (78.1%) of the respondents said that the students with visual impairment have been made to suffer by being brought into regular school program for the reasons that, the other sighted students felt the Braille machine used by the blind student are a nuisance in class. These students with visual impairment and the blind lack story books, poetry books therefore they can never be at par with their peers in terms of reading and learning.

The teacher also gave an example of a student who due to sickness, she was given drugs that rendered her loss of sight. This particularly student came back to school but she was in denial of her state. She took time to accept her status of being blind due to this attitude she become slow in learning to use Braille machine, she developed hatred towards the others who were active in participation in class while answering question something she could no longer do as easy. The students do not see any illustration on the black board and could not even see the charts being used to teach the others. Since most teachers do not have experience in handling the visually impaired, they usually leave them to venture on their own. These conditions have made teachers feel it is really unfair to mix the students with visual impairment and the sighted ones for it makes them suffer more.

The teachers who did not agree with the statement were (21.8%). As already indicated in the table, they said that the students are the same and there is no problem in mixing them particularly for the purpose of socializing but when it comes to academics, teachers felt that it was not fair. The reason is that, the rate of conceptualization differs knowing that some mathematic concepts are quite technical even for the sighted students.

Asked about the role of the government in supporting the program, 18 (56.2%) teachers agreed that there is little being done to support the program. This is from the point that, even the school administrators said the purchasing of teaching and learning materials for them is expensive and the government does not chip in any financial support for the program. This makes the students go without attending relevant lessons as they wait for the materials to be bought and sometimes it takes more over a month before it is received. Teachers like students were not inducted on their entry to school and noted that much of the students' time is wasted, because the teachers are not available for them during the time for extra coaching.

When asked if the visually impaired students and the blind are treated as normal students, 22 (68.8%) of the teachers agreed. The fact that majority agreed to this, work for the disadvantaged of the visually impaired students and the blind. This is because their personal needs would not be attended in the pre-assumption that they are just like the others. The author thus observes that most of the visually impaired students and the blind have got some reservations amongst themselves due to their visual status. Others do have additional disability stemming from their background including the rejection by parents who still believe that handicap is a sign of bad omen in the society. All these influence their being in school and can affect their social and academic performance in such an environment. Therefore these students need care and attention more than the sighted ones. Where there is no good care, then it works against the policy of integration.

However, they also alluded to the fact that the children with disabilities, not just the visually impaired ones, have been discriminated for long in the society as being abnormal and it is high time that efforts to discourage such mentalities through such program as the integrated education program are facilitated. This could explain why the minority (37.5%) of the respondents said that students with visual impairment have not been made to suffer more by not being brought in regular program. More so, the reason as to why 31.3% of them said that students with visual impairment are not being treated as abnormal students in their school.

In a focused group discussion, most of the discussants said that their initial perception about students with visual impairment and the program was negative and full of prejudices that described such students as having inabilities. However, for the time they have interacted with students with visual impairment through the integrated education program, most of the sighted students and their teachers find students with visual impairment to be like any other students. One of the discussants shared, "in fact some of the blind students defeat us in class". Meaning that, they are as brilliant as the sighted students. In overall, 75% of the teachers interviewed said that mixing the visually impaired students with the sighted ones has improved the public image about visually impaired children in the society.

From the ongoing discussion, it is clear that both students and teachers seem to have a positive

perception towards the integrated education program and students with visual impairment. It is important to note that both the teachers and students are showing a shift of perception from what they hear people say about students with visual impairment and the blind to their own experiences with such students. This has culminated into their redefinition of the situation that has consequently seen them recognize that visually impaired students are similar to any other student at school.

In many cases, perception and therefore, attitude can be influenced by a variety of factors. In this study, the author wanted to find out if gender dynamics have any influence on the teachers' and student's perception towards the integrated education program. Consequently, the author came up with cross tabulations between gender and whether it is unfair to mix visually impaired students with the sighted ones in the same class.

Using the SPSS computer program, a Chi square value of 0.000 was obtained, indicating a relationship between the two variables. However, it was noticeable that majority (54%) of the male respondents disagreed with the statement while only 48% were female respondents who agreed. When interrogated further in separate focused group discussions, the female respondents had no concrete reason for their responses except being sympathetic to the students with visual impairment over the hassles they undergo in an integrated program. They said, it is not fair because by the virtue of their lack of sight, have an obvious disadvantage.

However, the male students were liberal in the whole issue. They said, it is high time students with visual impairment, just like other students with disability, are given a fair playground to explore their potential. They said that such students stand a better chance in life under such circumstances rather than on a specially designed environment where their potentials are limited to comparison with fellow visually impaired students.

4. Conclusion

This paper concludes that it is fair to put students with visual impairment and those that are sighted under the same school environment. This can be best achieved by also incorporating the necessary learning and teaching materials for the different student categories. It is evident from the study that students with visual impairment are not treated like abnormal students in their respective schools. The integrated education program of mixing students with visual impairment and the sighted ones has improved the public image about the visually impaired students in the society.

The teachers however do not perceive the program from a positive view. This could be attributed to the fact that most of them are not trained to handle these students. There is lack of knowledge about the existence of this program. One head teacher came to learn about the program on his transfer to the school. Many teachers are caught unaware by the presence of the students with visual impairment in their classes and often left with no option but to assume them.

5. Recommendations

The Ministry of Education should widen the integrated education program for students with visual impairment to be implemented in more schools, especially in the rural areas. This is because such program is crucial in enhancing livelihood of the visually impaired students, as well as creating a positive public image towards children with disabilities.

The government through Ministry of Education should ensure that it provides teachers with special education on visual impairment to all integrated schools. This will enhance the acquisition of visual efficiency skills by the student, which is an essential element in their education.

From the study it is clear that students with visual impaired can perform better than their sighted counterparts when the resources are made available. Therefore, the ministry of education in conjunction with other government organizations should come up with policies that ensure not only the resources are made available but also involve the local agencies to come up with informative campaigns at the community level with emphasis in the fact that disability is not inability.

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