

Experiences of Learners Living with Disabilities: Policy Implications in Selected Nyanza Counties, Kenya

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Abstract

This paper looks at experiences of learners living with disabilities in selected Nyanza counties Kenya. The study also looks at the policy implications on the implementation of disability policy in the counties. The paper specifically focuses on: assessing the early childhood experiences and school life. To arrive at study findings, the study selected six learners who were; physical, visual and hearing impaired to participate in in-depth interviews. The study was guided by phenomenology research approach. Themes which came out as a result of interviews were used to analyse qualitative data obtained. Findings of the study showed that children in special schools in Nyanza counties faced significant challenges in their childhood and school life experiences. Some of them were often scorned, hated, discriminated, stereotyped and also separated with other community members hence preventing their right to life and education. It was also found out that implementation of government policy on disability was not effectively done as some learners indicated that their institutions had no supportive infrastructure to enable disabled learners education. The study recommends that government should take an active role in the implementation of disability policies in schools.

Keywords: Experiences, Learners, Disabilities, Policy, Implications

1. Introduction

Education is vital to the development of people in society, and therefore ensuring the right to education for persons with disabilities should be guaranteed by governments across the world (Caleb, 2000; Burnett, 2008). However, concerns have been made on disabled learners' access to education in recent times. Moyi (2012) and Crosby (2015) show that most disabled children are not in school and the reason for the majority them not being in schools is because of lack of understanding of their needs by authorities and caretakers. In Kenya problems hindering disabled learners from access education are lack of knowledge in dealing with such children and cultural beliefs. Other studies and reports (Wanjiku, 2012, Muchiri & Roberson, 2000). This calls for research on the experiences of learners with disabilities in schools, a focus of this paper.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the implementation of disability policy through examining the disabled learners' experiences in selected special schools in Kisumu and Siaya Counties, Kenya.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The paper specific objectives area:

1. To assess early childhood experiences by disabled learners in selected special schools in Kisumu and Siaya counties
2. To examine the influence of learning environment on disabled learners experience in selected special schools in Kisumu and Siaya counties schools
3. To determine the influence of policy implementation on disabled learners' education in selected special schools in Kisumu and Siaya Counties

2. Literature Review

Education is, in fact, a necessary ingredient for national unity, stability and development, for it not only prepares an individual citizen for living and personal fulfilment, but also makes it possible to contribute effectively to development (Sifuna, 2005; Mwangi et al., 2014). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights requirements states that "everyone has the right to education and education shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages." This policy also covers the disabled children in the society who also enjoys same right as able bodied ones. In Kenya the enrolment of the disabled in educational institutions is still very low. According to statistical figures (Republic of Kenya, 2007), there were 23, 459 pupils with special needs and disabilities enrolled in primary and secondary schools in 2003; however in 2006 there were 98 special primary schools, with 1341 special units, 7 special secondary schools, and 4 special technical training institutes with a total enrolment of 36,239 disabled learners enrolled.

Disability presents itself in different ways; it can be mobility problems, mental, hearing, and vision health conditions. Some forms of disabilities incorporate many other disabilities (KNSPWD, 2007; Renee, 2015). Policies framework on disability education began in Kenya in 1964 after independence, when the government

formed a committee on the care and rehabilitation of the disabled, and the result was sectional paper No. 5 of 1968, which recommended that children with mild handicaps be integrated to learn in regular schools. In 1976 commission was formed, the national commission on education. This commission recommended various issues in support of disabled children's access to education; coordination of early intervention and assessment of children with special needs; the creation of public awareness on the causes of disabilities to promote prevention; research to determine the nature and extent of handicaps for the provision of special needs education (SNE); and the establishment of early child development education (ECDE) programs as part of special schools. Other policy frameworks followed the 1976 commission: the presidential working committee on education and training for the next decade and beyond; and the commission of enquiry into education systems, and the Task Force on Special Needs Education (RoK, 1964; 1976; 1988; 1999; 2003).

Apart from those policy developments in support of education for the disabled, Kenya has come up with other policies such as children policy, disability policy, basic education policy, infrastructural policy, and constitutional change 2010. All these were aimed at supporting disabled people, more so children. The most notable agenda of those policies are "no pupil shall be refused admission to, or excluded from, the school on any grounds of sex, race or colour or on any other than reasonable grounds" (RoK, 2001; 2003; 2005; 2013). The constitution of Kenya 2010 Article 43 (1) (f) states that education is not just a vital right of children but a central tool for sustained socio-economic development and an important way to exit poverty. This goes along with reaffirming a global framework that all persons with any type of disability are entitled to fundamental freedoms and human rights (RoK, 2005; United Nations, 2006; RoK, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). In the same Kenya constitution 2010, articles 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, and 59 emphasize the provision of free and compulsory basic education for all children as their basic right, and emphasis on the promotion of Kenyan sign language, braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities. In an attempt to realise the constitution requirement on disability, the Kenya government has formulated gender policy which stresses increased participation, retention and completion for learners with special needs and disabilities by providing an enabling environment, creating flexible curricula, training personnel, and the provision of equipment. Further, the constitution stressed much on disabled learners to be provided with required facilities that are accommodative since physical infrastructure is important for them to learn (RoK, 2010; 2011; 2013). Several sections in the constitution assign a great deal of priority to people living with a disability, particularly in relation to access to education. In terms of the environment, the constitution empowers public work to come up with architectural infrastructure, apparatus and equipment which ease the movement in all buildings for disabled people. Regarding sports, the constitution empowers people living with a disability free access to recreation and sports in government-owned institutions. Regarding health the constitution has forged the formation of disability mainstreaming teams, disability medical assessment committees, and the development of assessment tools for guiding the communities, reporting and categorizing PWDs according to their types of disability. In terms of curricula, the constitution empowers the Ministry of Education to adapt curriculum materials that meet the needs of learners with disabilities in primary and secondary schools. The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) has also been called upon to put in place appropriate measures to cater to the needs of different disability groups when setting and administering national examinations (RoK, 2010; RoK, 2013).

On policy implementation front, studies conducted in Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Uganda indicate that the policy implementation in those countries have experienced some challenges despite the good policies they formulated (Najjingo, 2009; UNESCO, 2010; Moyi, 2012). Lack of public awareness, cultural roadblocks, government failure to institute policy by non-collection of donations from organizations and private donors, social cultural factors, big class sizes, lack of supportive infrastructural facilities, low teacher student ratio, poor resources in special and regular schools, and parents and caregivers feigning ignorance about awareness of the existence policies were mentioned as challenges. In Kenya policy implementation for disabled children accessing education has experienced mixed challenges. Muthili (2010) observed poor attendance by disabled students due to a lack of proper facilities, insufficient resources, poverty, stigmatization, and sexual abuse among learners with disabilities. However, a report from KHRC (2014) and UNESCO (2015) revealed that learners with disabilities are at higher risk of dropping out of school compared to able-bodied students due constant absenteeism, noncompliance with school regulations, and poor attention by teachers due to a lack of training on how to handle disabled children. Cultural beliefs and stigmatization were also identified in the same report. More studies (Njeri, 2011; Njiru, 2012; Njagi, 2015) noted perception, few trained personnel, class design, scarce resources, curriculum design, and societal view of individuals with disabilities as punishment and a curse from God. As such, those factors stand as impediments to policy implementation in Kenya.

The theories used to frame this study were mostly from the policy implementation field; namely, top-down, bottom-up and, hybrid approaches. These theories are identified as core to understanding policy implementers' contributions in relation to access to education by learners living with a disability.

The Top-Down Theoretical Viewpoint - assumes that policy goals can be stated by policymakers, and implementation can be carried out given certain mechanisms, emphasizing the role of the policymaker as the one

with overall authority and control over the environment (Palumbo et al., 1990).

The Bottom-Up Theoretical Viewpoint - The creators of this theory found that it dwells on both formal and non-formal relationships in making and implementing policy. Howlett (1995) observes that this concept resonates well with the societal needs more so when it comes to individual contributions to implementation.

Top-Bottom Approach Implementation theorists - Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky claimed that the practice of implementing policy needs to follow strict relationships as laid down in official documents, supported by the idea of linkages at all levels. They further came up with the idea of implementation deficits (implementation to be analysed mathematically) to achieve goals.

The bottom-up Implementation Approach - Michael Lipsky work remains a landmark of the bottom-up theoretical concept, and he did a lot of work on the behaviour of front-line staff in policy delivery, which he referred to as street-level bureaucrats. Hjern (1982) observed that policy implementation depended on the relations between several different organizations and emphasized networks as key to the bottom-up application and advocated for structural formation to be within the pools of establishment. Susan Barrett and Colin Fudge (1980) joined the bottom-up policy implementation debate and supported Hjern's idea on the implementation structure approach that allows compromise between people within an organization in relation to each person's role.

Hybrid Policy Implementation Approach - aims at informing how outcomes of implementation can influence the central and local level (Goggin et al., 1990). This approach is more scientific than the other two. It places more emphasis on Operationalization and the testing of hypotheses (Pulz & Treib, 2007). Above all it focuses on five self-explaining models to approach implementation performance, namely, rational, management, organization development, bureaucratic, and political

3. Materials and Methods

This study used the qualitative research approach since the topic required the exploration of feelings, behaviours, experiences, and perceptions of the respondent in relation to policy implementation and strategies. This study followed the interpretive approach theoretical paradigm. An interpretive approach was key in doing this since it allowed direct interaction with the respondents and acquisition of first-hand information on their childhood experiences and school life. The unit of analysis in this study were disabled learners; physical (3), hearing (3) and visual (3) impaired learners from Nyanza Counties; Siaya and Kisumu special schools. Data collection was facilitated through conducting phenomenological in-depth interviews with the participants. This method allowed the researcher to ask the participants questions, and to respond to their replies so as to obtain ample facts from their stories and perspectives noted. The researcher recorded the responses from interviews in a note book. Analysis of data collected from interview was done through content analysis.

4. Findings and Discussions

This section presents the childhood experiences, learning environment, school life and challenges that disabled learners have encountered in their life.

4.1 Experiences of participant A: Jacky

4.1.1 Overview of the Participant

Participant A, who I called Jacky, was a girl in her early teens. Jacky studies at Nico Hauser Special Secondary School for the visually impaired. The school is situated in Bondo, Siaya County. I interviewed the student in one of the classrooms in the school compound and noted that she was totally blind. We had a detailed conversation about her experiences during childhood, the learning environment, and school life as well as her experiences and challenges with the existing curriculum.

4.1.2 Experiences during Childhood

Jacky narrated her experience growing up as a child living with a disability. She expressed herself openly and gave detailed information on how difficult it was for her and her mother, who was also blind, to access basic needs such as food. She had gathered some of the information from her diary about two months prior to the interview. She narrated the following: "I was born blind; my mother and other four siblings are also blind. The cause of my blindness is not known because my mother never took me to hospital. She however informed me that it was an inheritance from the family gene. I have accepted myself this way and life seems normal to me. My childhood experience was not so good, I had to walk with my mother wherever she was going to look for food. Imagine, two blind people following one another guided by sticks! It was hectic.

Growing up with a disability and in abject poverty was a difficult experience for Jacky. A combination of these two factors denied her a chance to enjoy her childhood like other children. Despite her tender age, she could clearly note the lack of acceptance from the society; "I used to walk with my mother to beg for food. Sometimes we would be given food while other times we would be abused and asked to leave. In some instances, people would just throw items at us like we were lesser beings. We were not shown love at all".

Cultural beliefs about people living with a disability made the situation worse for Jacky and her family. Her father left them when he realized that they were all blind because he feared the community's perception of disability: "In the village I had no friends; no toys to play with like other children, and no one wanted to associate with us. My family was also poor. I saw my father briefly in life before he left us when he found that all of us were blind". Jacky's childhood experiences as a child living with this disability brought out various issues including parental awareness and support, cultural beliefs on disability, and acceptance by society.

4.1.3 Learning Environment and School Life

The trajectory of the conversation with Jacky then took the direction of her school life and the learning environment: "My mother took me to a regular primary school. The idea was good to me because my other siblings were also in school far from home. My mother did not know the required documents for admission into the school, so she just took me to the school and left me there hoping that I would be allowed to learn like the other children. However, the school administration sent me back home to go for documents which we didn't know how to find. My mother tried looking for them but could not succeed. The situation was made worse by the fact that both my mother and I are blind and there was very little or no support from other people. I just persisted and continued going to school without the documents." Here, Jacky presents a situation where ease of entry and access to education, which are a basic human right, were difficult for her as a child living with a disability. Jacky's mother was also not aware of the existence of special schools that could offer a favourable learning environment for her blind daughter. Lack of support from the community and the school system in terms of providing information and guidance were also an impediment.

Jacky's experience in her first school was characterized by loneliness and various challenges resulting from her inability to see: "Inside the school compound was lonely to me. I had no friend and the teachers were not bothered about me. They were busy with their daily teaching activities with very little or no regard to my situation. The curriculum was more centred on normal learners which made it very difficult for me to cope with unlike the other children." The situation made it difficult for her to learn because she was clearly in an environment that was extremely unfavourable for her: "The children on the other hand were interested in abusing and making fun of me. I had a difficult time."

Jacky also narrated how the infrastructure was a major challenge in her first school; the facilities at the school were unfavourable to her condition, as she indicated in the following: "I had nobody to direct or support me. Sometimes, I would miss classes because there was nobody to guide me to the classroom. I could only access the classroom when directed because I could not locate it with my walking stick." The facilities in the school were only favourable to normal learners and therefore Jacky had to really struggle to cope with the challenges.

The turning point for Jacky was when she finally got a chance to join a special school. She recalls how her mother, through a local politician and influential persons supported her to attend. The opportunity was life changing for her. Although she had to adjust to the new environment and a new way of doing things, she noted that life was much better: "I had to learn to use braille and become accustomed to other visual learning requirements. I started getting formal education, could now go to class with others, and be tested through exams. The teachers were good and very understanding. I had many friends whom I could confide in and share my experiences with. Everyone was friendly and the environment was good for me."

Jacky then proceeded to secondary school where she currently studies. She narrated how life is even better there: "I joined Nico Hauser secondary school as a grown-up girl and knew what education is. I found school life enjoyable and I knew how to use learning facilities that are suitable for my condition." Having had a chance to be in a special primary school, Jacky enjoyed a smooth transition into it. Indeed, learners living with a disability can enjoy school life when they have a good support system and a learning environment that is favourable to their situation, as Jacky indicated in the following: "I know how to talk well and make friends, and I also share experiences with my friends and we enjoy life. Given that the school is sponsored by the Catholic Church, so many facilities are provided on top of government provision. I am able to access and use walking canes, braille, typewriters, and be guided by trained support staff. The school takes very good care of us fully and understands our needs. I have also learnt religion in the school and through that I have made many more friends."

4.1.4 Curriculum, Government Participation, and Challenges

I then engaged Jacky on issues to do with the curriculum, challenges faced, and the support they get from the government. On the curriculum, Jacky's description of the challenges points to a gap in the existing curriculum in terms of accommodating the special learning needs of learners living with a disability. This was particularly a serious hindrance in her primary education, as she demonstrates in the following direct script; "I find some part of the curriculum not suitable for learners like me. The routine and the structure of learning does not favour me well because of the timing as well as the delivery of the curriculum content. Most subjects require me to have sight. Testing at the laboratory, mathematical symbols, agriculture, and home sciences practical are difficult to learn when one is not able to see." This is the main challenge that Jacky faces in her current stage of learning (secondary school). Although it is a special school that provides a very friendly environment for learners living

with a disability like hers, gaps in the curriculum and structure of learning are still evident, as indicated in the following statements: “I had a serious problem in my first primary school. Teachers were more concerned with completing the syllabus and gave little attention to ensuring that learners living with disability like me understood the concepts. They strictly followed the normal approach of content delivery and could not make a decision to improvise ways of accommodating the special learning needs to students like me.” When she got a chance to join a special primary school, the situation improved drastically but curriculum-related challenges were still evident: “In my second school, the situation was better given that teachers were caring and paid special attention to our special learning needs. As students, we could also sit and discuss because everyone was friendly. However, Mathematics was a big challenge. There were many mathematical formulas and I could neither see nor understand.”

At Hauser Secondary School, where she currently studies, Jacky noted that practical-oriented subjects, subjects that require demonstrations, and lack of enough teachers, are the main challenges she is facing. It is difficult for her to understand certain concepts because she cannot physically see what the concept is all about. On government support, Jacky noted that there is sufficient support since she is in a special school: “There is total support. School fees and most of my personal needs are paid for. My mom is relieved and happy. I think if more teachers and facilities can be added, then learners living with disability like me will be able to learn well and have a bright future.”

In summary, this is typical case of a child living with a disability who has faced numerous challenges since her childhood owing to a lack of awareness by her mother, lack of support from her father, cultural beliefs about persons living with a disability, an unfavourable learning environment, an unfavourable curriculum, and lack of support from the community. It is also evident that teachers lack the ability to make decisions on how to accommodate the special needs of learners like Jacky. The teachers are simply executing the curriculum as instructed by their employer without the authority to “bend the rules” and attend to special needs of their learners.

4.2 Experiences of Participant B: John

4.2.1 Overview of the Participant

Participant B, who I will refer to as John, is a very young boy in form one. My conversation with John was not very easy due to his uneasiness. In many cases I had to refer to his daily record. John is physically disabled. I was interested in a deep understanding of his experiences growing up as a child living with a disability as well as his experiences in school, and some were indicated in the following statements of his: “My parents are both working as civil servants and therefore life was quite good for me while growing up. They took good care of me and provided for my basic needs. When my parents discovered that my eyesight was not normal, they took me to the doctor who then discovered that my eye’s optic nerve was damaged, and therefore I would not be able to see.”

4.2.2 Experiences during Childhood

John also had his fair share of challenges while growing up. Despite the good support he enjoyed from both parents, John could not enjoy his childhood like other children: “My child life was not good at all. I was unable to do what other children were doing and could not participate in childhood games like the other children. I felt out of place and therefore I spent most of my time in the house to avoid the embarrassment.” John also narrated his constant encounter with abuse from other children and the adults that he came across: “I could hear people blaming my parents for loss of my sight. They used to say that my father went to a magician to make me blind so that he could acquire wealth. No one in the society wanted to be associated with me. Generally, my childhood was full of challenges despite the love and support I received from my parents.”

4.2.3 Learning Environment and School Life

John’s parents took him to a normal school despite his disability. This was probably due to a lack of awareness on their part. John stated the following in connection with this school: “I found myself in school because of my parents’ initiative to take me to school. However, the regular school they considered to be very good for learning was not favourable for me. I could not fit in the daily routine.” John explained how he was asked to find another school because the teachers were unable to attend to his special needs. Due to the numerous challenges in the school, John had to find a special one: “I was told to look for another school because the teachers were unable to attend to me due to their training background. The children were also very unfriendly and could not offer me the support that I really needed from them. They made fun of me and abused me. Others even misled me whenever I asked to be guided to a particular place in the school.”

John’s parents wanted to keep him at the school and therefore they tried to persuade the teachers to allow him to continue there. However, it was difficult for the school to allow John to continue learning at that institution because they lacked special facilities to support learners living with a disability. In addition, the teachers were not trained in how to handle learners like John, and were also not empowered to make decisions on how to attend to John.

Eventually, John’s parents found a special school for him, as described by John: “Due to the challenges in my first school, my parents took me to a private special school. Life in the new school was much better and the learning environment was favourable for me. Teachers were well trained to attend to my special learning needs, facilities were available, and learners were friendly, supportive and happy to accommodate me given that they were also blind or partially blind.” The new environment enabled John to study well and he was able to sit for his final examinations in Standard Eight, which enabled him to join Nico Hauser Secondary School, as he indicated in the following: “I am now comfortable and have a future. I can use brail comfortably and I understand many concepts in life as a result of the education that I have acquired here. This secondary school has made learn to love everyone and has made me a better person. The school is sponsored by the Catholic Church and is headed by a Catholic Sister.”

4.2.4 Curriculum, Government Participation, and Challenges

The study also sought to understand John’s experience related to the curriculum and government support. On the curriculum, John noted that the subjects, timing, and examinations in the three schools he had attended were similar: “I realised that the curriculum is the same except that the teachers are different. The facilities were also different. In my first school, the mathematics class was too difficult because it involved many formulas and symbols which I could not see. English and Kiswahili classes were also hard due lack of references after class. Other subjects were equally complicated because the teaching methods did not favour learners with physical disability like me. The second primary school was a special school and therefore although the curriculum was the same, the teaching was tailored to suit learners with disability. I was able to understand most of the concepts due to the availability of trained teachers, enough facilities and a friendly learning environment in general.” However, despite the favourable environment and availability of facilities in John’s second primary school, the subjects that involved the use of many symbols and those that involved physical demonstrations were a major challenge. This was because John could not see what the teacher was demonstrating and had to rely on braille.

About the experience in his current secondary school, John stated the following: “I find the curriculum unfavourable for me in most science subjects. I have no problems with languages or arts-related subjects. I also don’t have a problem with the school routine in this special school. However, teachers are not enough to teach effectively.” John also noted that there has been little government support for him: “I have been supported all through by my parents. My hospital bills, primary school fees and other basic needs were all paid for by my parents. However, in this secondary school, I get government support like other learners living with disability here. The support from the government is complemented by support from the Catholic Church.”

The discussion with John shows how all schools need to have trained teachers in special education to enable them to attend to learners living with a disability like John. Other issues that came out of this discussion included the insufficient number of trained teachers in special schools, lack of awareness, unfavourable curricula, especially in the sciences, the perceptions about people living with a disability, parental and community support, as well as decision-making at the lowest level of the education system.

In conclusion, the experiences of these two learners highlight the situation in which learners with visual problems find themselves in the society. Their early childhood and school life are not fully supported by policymakers or implementers given the way that the curriculum is structured, there are few infrastructural facilities available, and the human resources are inadequate. Only teachers see them through most of their problems but cannot make serious decisions concerning serious matters that are outside their scope under government regulations. The government provision at the early stage of their lives is not well structured in terms of support procedures. Other critical factors such as lack of awareness, societal beliefs, and lack of support from parents and teachers greatly hinder their access to quality education. The magnitude to which they are humiliated by fellow children and adults, including some teachers, is worrying and requires urgent intervention.

Table 1 Visual disable learners views on a sorted theme

Themes/ Names	Jacky	John
Nature of (VI)	Total blind	Total blind
Type supportive gadget	Walk stick	Walk stick
Cause disability	Inheritance	Glaucoma
Parental support	Minimal	Full
Society Acceptance	Not fully	Not fully
Parent awareness of school	No	Yes
Who give most support	Teacher	Teacher
Any other group support	Catholic	Catholic
Govt intervention	Early	Late
Experience with curriculum	Unfavourable	Unfavourable
Infrastructure / facilities	Inadequate	Inadequate
Learning challenges	A lot	A lot

4.3 Experiences of Participant C: Norbert

4.3.1 Overview of the Participant

Participant D, whom I will refer to as Norbert, is a deaf learner at Fr. Ouderaa School for the Deaf in Siaya County. Throughout my conversation with Norbert, I was supported by a sign language interpreter. Here are his words about his early life: “My early childhood was very difficult for me. I was born in a hospital in Kisumu city. My mother told me that I was born before time, and therefore she had to stay at the hospital for many months taking care of me. The doctors tried to correct my deafness during that time but could not manage to reverse my inability to hear.”

4.3.2 Experiences during Childhood

I engaged Norbert in discussing his experience growing up as a deaf child. I was interested in understanding the level of support from his parents and the community and his awareness among other factors. Here is further information from him about the society in which he grew up: “The society was not kind to me at all. I was forced to live with my grandmother since my father was against me living together with them. My father wanted me to go far away from them and did not want to be associated with me in any way. My mother decided to take me to her mother where I got a new home. I am told that I started living with my grandmother when I was about one year old. My mother had nothing to offer but kept on coming to support me. As I grew up, I came to learn that I could not talk unlike other children who were talking and laughing. I was unable to utter any word so I only used my hands to communicate through sign language. Outside, people were hostile. I could clearly tell that they were abusing me even through the signs that they made at me. Both children and adults were disrespectful to me and could even throw stones at me as a way of getting my attention. It was a terrible experience. My grandmother was however very supportive. She was the only person I could run to for support. She always defended me and sacrificed many things to make sure I was comfortable and happy. Being serious member of the Catholic Church, she introduced me to church where I felt welcomed and loved. The church treated me well and supported me.”

4.3.3 Learning Environment and School Life

Norbert's early school life was very difficult since he was deaf and finding a special school that could suit his special needs was a challenge: “The school befitting me was difficult to find in my locality. In fact, no one believed that such a school could exist. However, my grandmother always had me in mind and kept on inquiring for a special school that I could join.” Norbert narrated how in one of his mother's weekly Catholic Church group meetings, called “Jumuia,” his mother got information from a Catholic Sister (nun) about a suitable school for him: “My grandmother consulted my mother, who then rushed to the nearest Ministry of Education offices to ask about the school. I found myself in the school system after some process involving the Ministry of Education, children office, and the Catholic Church. I feared school life during my first days because I was used to the village life. I was surprised to find out that all the children in my school had some form of deafness. I was relieved because I could associate with them and would no longer be stigmatized. The next problem was how to cope up with the routine of school life. Adjusting to the new life full of rules and regulations was a challenge but the teachers and fellow children were supportive.”

Norbert gradually got used to the strict school routine and its rules and regulations. He noted that the teachers were very understanding and supportive. However, the number of special teachers was inadequate to handle the special needs of all the children. He stated that the “[c]hildren were respectful to one another and the general environment was very good. Each learner had at least one assistive device to support them in the learning process. I passed the national examinations after studying for eight years in that primary school and got selected to this school. Here I find school life favourable just like in my previous school. However, I think the learners here are fewer compared to my primary school. In addition, interaction at personal level is high. There are sign language translators, and the teachers are very committed to attending to learners although they are inadequate in number.”

4.3.4 Curriculum, Government Participation, and Challenges

Having been to special schools at both primary and secondary levels, Norbert explained his experience with the curriculum and how supportive the government has been: “Teachers are very important for my learning. However, some subjects are totally abstract to me. For instance, when it is time for English or Kiswahili, life sometimes becomes difficult because I cannot talk nor hear. I rely on a translator or a sign language interpreter. Languages are very difficult to learn. I am always comfortable with practical subjects including sciences and Mathematics provided teachers explain and demonstrate them well. I am good in using my eyes and I can remember and understand better when lessons involve charts, formulas, and drawings.” On government support, Norbert noted that the government has been quite supportive throughout his education. Through the Ministry of Education and the Catholic Church, he was able to join a special primary school, albeit after a long search. Through this support, he managed to complete primary school and was admitted to his current secondary school. Other groups such as the Children's Office have also provided some support, though minimal: “I know that the

government employ teachers and develops the curriculum. The government also provides facilities to support our special learning needs.” On challenges, Norbert noted that the lack of adequate facilities and equipment is still a challenge. The number of specially-trained teachers that can adequately support the learners is also inadequate. This hinders optimal access to quality learning by learners like Norbert.

In conclusion, Norbert’s experience shows how learners living with a disability seem to waste away in villages due to a lack of information and lack of concern and support by parents and the community. Norbert was disowned by his father due to the fear of community perceptions and cultural beliefs about persons living with a disability. His experience also shows the importance of religious bodies in supporting children living with a disability and how their networks can be useful in disseminating information about support structures and opportunities for learners living with a disability.

4.4 Experiences of Participant D: Edward

4.4.1 Overview of the Participant

Participant E, whom I will refer to as Edward, is a deaf learner at Fr. Ouderaa School for the Deaf in Siaya County. During the entire interview, a sign language interpreter supported me. Here is Edward on the cause of his illness and other related matters: “I am not certain what caused my deafness, but my grandmother tells me it was due to an auditory processing disorder which could not be treated in the hospitals she visited. I am not fully deaf, I can hear you if you shout, I can also read your lips to understand what you are saying. I was born out of wedlock and my mother had to leave me with my grandmother so that she could get a husband. I think she feared that no man would marry her if he discovered that she had a disabled child.”

4.4.2 Experiences during Childhood

Edward’s experience while growing up was also full of challenges. He faced abuse and discrimination by his fellow children and the community in general, as can be seen in the following statement from him: “As a child I was not loved by my fellow children at all. I also felt out of place because I could not do things at their pace. I could not hear them well whenever they talked. I had a frustrating experience while playing with them until I decided to withdraw from their company. Some children knew about my disability but they still abused and made fun at me. The adults also treated me as a useless person who could not even be sent to deliver any message. Life was so hard but my grandmother continued showing me love and support. Hatred was all over my surrounding. I remember my grandmother would follow me wherever I went because she feared that I would be abused or even beaten.”

When Edward reached school-going age, his grandmother took him to a regular school: “Once I joined the school, I remember other children would wait for me on the way just to abuse me through abusive traditional songs. I had a rough time in school also because the teachers and school administrators could not understand my language well. The learning environment was extremely unfavourable for me. I ended up opting out of the school due to the unbearable conditions. After being persuaded by my grandmother, I decided to go back to the school. However, the school administration did not allow me back. I was therefore forced to stay out of school for about one year. Later, a certain organization that I can’t remember clearly, visited my grandmother’s house to try and trace me. Through the organization together with the Children’s Office and the Ministry of Education, I joined a special school.”

4.4.3 Learning Environment and School Life

I further engaged Edward in a detailed conversation about his school life and what his learning environment has been like: “I was very unstable in my first school; the surrounding community influenced my school life. Teachers were so unfriendly that they could not stop other learners from making fun of me. My everyday attempt to sit in front of class in order to hear the teacher well or read their lips at a closer range was thwarted by learners who never wanted to see me in front of them. Learners were very abusive. I found all teachers to be the same in this school, none of them was interested in asking me how I was fairing on with my studies or whether I was facing any challenges. They all treated me like other normal children. The school even lacked assistive devices to support me. For instance, there was no loud speaker in the classroom. I could go back home without learning anything. Life in that school was very difficult.”

Having dropped out of his first school due to the unfavourable learning environment, Edward’s second school was a great relief for him, as he indicates in the following: “In my second school, life changed to the better. Nearly all children had some issues with either their ears or could not speak. We would use sign language among ourselves to communicate effectively. Teachers were friendly and at least here, the official language for communication was sign language. Though my grandmother was not aware of existence of such a school, she could not believe how comfortable I was when she came visiting. I was very encouraged by the availability of assistive devices in the school. I could use speakers to mediate my speech and was also given earphones. In my current school, I find life to be even better because there is personalised attention from teachers and the school administration for all learners. Despite the fact that teachers are few, I am quite comfortable because we have all books and most of the equipment are available especially for deaf learners like me. The teachers are also very

committed and supportive.”

4.4.4 Curriculum, Government Participation, and Challenges

Edward then described the curriculum-related challenges he has faced and the intervention/support he received from the government. On the curriculum, he pointed out some specific challenges, especially with language subjects: “Learning English and Kiswahili have never been friendly to me. I don’t understand these languages when the teacher speaks unless when translated well with sign language. There should be away of writing sign language so that we don’t learn one language in another; let books of sign languages be provided too. I am good in maths because there is no much speaking. I enjoy reading but at times don’t understand because of poor translation. I think that is what makes me fail in some subjects. I enjoy subjects that involve demonstrations such as Agriculture although sometimes the explanations given by the teacher are not very clear to me so I end up doing something wrongly. In general, I can say that the main challenge with the curriculum for me is the language barrier.”

On government support, Edward noted that there are major gaps that still need to be addressed: “The government to some extent has failed; I recall not getting accommodated in a regular school because of teachers’ inability and poor understanding of learners like me. The teachers lacked training in special education. I think my staying out of school for one year was too much if the government was serious about me. I wondered why at the age of my grandmother, she was not aware of special schools for the deaf. On the other side, I can say that the government has supported me a lot, without Human Rights Groups and education officers; I would have been at home now. My school fees, personal needs, and even the teachers who teach me are provided by the government and the Catholic Church.”

Edward however expressed serious concern about the high turnover rate of specially-trained teachers. He noted that he develops a very good relationship with his teachers but they leave after a short while due to salary issues or transfers. This is very disruptive for learners because getting used to a new teacher and forming a good bond with him or her take time.

Edward’s experiences bring out some fundamental issues that are important for this study. Clearly, lack of acceptance from the society, discrimination, cultural beliefs about disability, lack of awareness and support, lack of adequate facilities, unfavourable curricula, inadequate teachers and inadequate government support are evident. It is also evident that the government is not doing enough to be in touch with the grassroots and has not empowered the school administration officers at the grassroots level to make decisions regarding the treatment of learners living with a disability. Therefore, it takes time before the problems facing learners living with a disability can be addressed. For Edward, it took a whole year.

The experiences of the two deaf learners paint a picture of how negative cultural beliefs and perceptions about people living with a disability greatly affect the lives of learners living with one. The stigmatization of learners living with a disability, lack of support from parents, and lack of awareness by parents is also key impediments to accessing quality education by disabled learners. The experiences also expose some teachers’ intolerance of disabled children. Teachers, especially in normal schools, lack basic training in special education and therefore they are unable to attend to the needs of learners living with a disability. The experiences also revealed the need for policy implementers to think of structuring the curricula with different types of special learners in mind and create a good platform for citizens to get information about available government support.

Table 2 Deaf learners’ views on a sorted theme

Themes/ Names	Norbert	Edward
Nature of (deafness)	Totally deaf	partially deaf
Type support	Interpreter	Interpreter
Cause disability	Premature birth	Auditory
Parental support	Minimal	Minimal
Society Acceptance	Not fully	Not fully
Parent awareness of school	No	No
Who give most support	Teacher	Teacher
Any other group support	Catholic	Catholic
Govt intervention	Early	Early
Experience with curriculum	Unfavourable	Unfavourable
Infrastructure / Facilities	Inadequate	Inadequate

4.5 Experiences of participant E: MERCY

4.5.1 Overview of the Participant

Participant G, whom I will refer to as Mercy, is a physically-handicapped young girl in Saint George Special School in Kisumu County. Mercy stated the following about her background, and particularly her early life: “I was not born crippled. I got sick at a tender age and developed a boil which was not properly attended to. My

parents took me to hospital when they realized that the condition was getting worse. However, it was too late. My leg had to be amputated which meant that I could no longer walk normally. This was a very sad moment for me. My parent's ignorance caused my disability by I have learnt to live with it."

4.5.2 Experiences during Childhood

Mercy's childhood experience was good until her leg was amputated, and she discussed how she was treated by others in the following: "Disability is not good; I was only loved and visited by other children when I had both legs to play and run around with them. When I lost my leg, my friends no longer wanted to associate with me. The friendship and love diminished. I felt isolated most of the time; I was lonely in my wheelchair. I had to depend on other people to help me move to places I wanted to go. Clearly, my freedom was curtailed. People looked at me with sympathy and helplessness. Going to toilet or taking birth was always difficult because I had to ask for assistance which took away my much-needed privacy. In addition, using the wheelchair brought a lot of complication into my life; I needed a spacious path to move, and larger doors to get into a room. Due to by inability to walk, I had to be left out of many places because moving around with me was cumbersome. The community isolated me and treated me like a reject. I was a victim of abuse and discrimination by the society. However, my parents later bought a prosthetic leg for me which greatly improved my situation. I gained some of my dignity back and felt freer."

4.5.3 Learning Environment and School Life

My conversation with Mercy then focussed on her school life: "I could not attend school at the right time. I delayed due to the circumstances surrounding my disability. My parents took me to a regular school near our home in order to monitor my leg and to attend to me fully. They feared that the other leg could also be infected. The Head teacher of that school and the teachers were against my admission to the school citing lack of facilities, skill and manpower to take care of me. My father had to request the area education officer to intervene and that is how I managed to get my primary education. The facilities within the school were not favourable; there were no proper paths for my wheel chair. My father used to take me to the school in the morning and picked me in the evening. I had to survive within the day especially when it came to movement to and from classrooms, toilet, and the field. Sometimes, I would be left alone behind when other learners were moving from one place to another. I used to carry my lunch to avoid bothering others to take me for lunch. I was also lucky that the school administration exempted me from doing manual work such as cleaning. I was also permitted to go for games at will since I had to get my fellow learner to push my wheelchair."

Having been admitted to the school through the instruction of the County Education Officer, Mercy received support from teachers and the school administration. She also impressed the teachers due to her outstanding academic performance. She recalled how she used to be the best in her class in mathematics. She used to spend most of her time reading because she preferred being in one place to avoid a lot of movement. She worked hard despite all the challenges she was facing. In her current school, Mercy noted that life is much better, and the environment is conducive to her learning needs. Facilities are available, and the students are supportive of one another. In addition, the teachers are well trained to attend to their special needs. She also informed me that she is able to make her own decisions and that life in the school is enjoyable.

4.5.4 Curriculum, Government Participation, and Challenges

According to Mercy, the current curriculum is still not favourable to learners living with a disability. She believes that the curriculum is rigid, and the lessons are structured in a way that only favours normal learners, as can be seen in her following statements: "I can't move fast from the assembly to class or move quickly from one class to another because the facilities are far apart. I think the curriculum and the facilities do not match. I have no problems with the subjects, but I have a problem with the facilities. I can read, write, understand all subjects and can express myself very well in both English and Kiswahili. I think my disability requires special learning facilities, adequate teaching and support staff as well as spacious rooms."

On government support, Mercy indicated the following: "The government supported me to join primary school through the area education officer. My school fee is also paid for and the teachers are provided by the government. I think that is the participation I have seen from them." On challenges, Mercy cited the movement between facilities that are far apart, the unfavourable design of the school infrastructure, inadequate facilities, and the shortage of teachers.

Mercy's experiences highlight the plight of physically-handicapped learners in schools. The infrastructure design in schools does not take into account the difficulties of learners with disabilities, such as the inability to walk normally. Parental support, acceptance by the community, government intervention, and support from teachers as well as decision-making involving learners living with a disability at the school level also emerged from the discussion.

4.6 Experiences of Participant F: STANLEY

4.6.1 Overview of the Participant

Participant H, who, I nicknamed as Stanley, is a learner at Saint George Special School in Kisumu County, and

he discussed his condition with me, stating the following: “I have no lower limb as you can see me seated on this wheel chair. I think I was born this way. I had no one to ask about the cause of my disability because I have never seen my parents since birth. I was told that I was dumped on the streets. The police found me on the streets and took me to a Catholic foster home”.

4.6.2 Experiences during Childhood

Stanley then took me through his experiences while growing up in a foster home. He had no father or mother; the catholic home was all he had: “I had a very difficult experience while growing up. I had to rely on others for nearly everything; I had to be assisted to bath, wash my clothes, and other activities. I was helpless and depressed. At the foster home, most of the children were normal and they would make fun of me because of my condition. They did not understand what I was going through. I could not play the childhood games like the other children, so I stayed indoors most of the time. It was a lonely life. The only people I could rely on for support were the Catholic Sisters who were technically my parents. Other children would be visited by their relatives except me.”

Stanley underwent various challenges despite being in a children’s home. There was very little support from the older children that had been assigned the role of helping Stanley. He got into trouble with the other children many times because he used to report them to the Catholic Sisters whenever they engaged in activities that were not allowed in the children’s home. His humility and honesty made him get along very well with the Catholic Sisters, however, who in turn supported him to the best of their ability.

4.6.3 Learning Environment and School Life

Here is a narration by Stanley on his school and the friends he made there: “I learnt in a regular school next to the foster home where I lived. The place was convenient for me because of my condition. The Catholic Sisters wanted a place that was near the home so that they could easily monitor and support me. The other children in the school were also from the neighbourhood. The learning environment in the school was completely unfavourable. Moving from one place to another within the school was a big challenge because there were no facilities to aid my movement. The design of the infrastructure in the school did not consider learners living with disability like me. I relied heavily on the help of a few fellow learners who were kind enough to push my wheelchair around the school compound. These few friends that I made were really useful and made life better for me.”

Stanley’s school life took a positive turn when he found some good friends who understood his situation: “I think I started enjoying learning in school after making friends. Although the school lacked environmental infrastructural facilities befitting me, other learners made me feel comfortable. My friends treated me with love and respect. I got protection from all corners though there were some abuses from a few children. The teachers were also supportive though they lacked special training on how to handle learners living with disability like me.”

In Stanley’s current secondary school, the learning environment is supportive of his condition, especially because it is a special school. I asked him about his experience in the current school and he indicated that his life is more comfortable than it had been: “life is comfortable for me; facilities are available even though they are not enough. The learners are friendly and supportive. I think I have been lucky because everywhere I go I am treated with a lot of empathy and love. I am happy and grateful. The learners here have different kinds of disability and we all understand and support each other. The teachers are trained to attend to our needs even though their number is inadequate.”

4.6.4 Curriculum, Government Participation, and Challenges

About his experience with the curriculum, Stanley indicated the following: “I am a good student and there is no subject that I find difficult. I think the subjects are favourable for me especially because most of them involve reading. However, I have a challenge with the structure of the school routine. In my previous school, I often got late for assembly or for lessons because I was unable to move swiftly from one place to another. Changing class venues in between lessons was difficult because of my disability. The teachers were also not well trained to attend to the needs of special learners like me.”

In Stanley’s current school, the situation is much better. Teachers are well trained in special education and the environment is generally friendly. However, Stanley cited challenges to do with the curriculum structure: “In this school I have encountered problems with practical-based subjects. Laboratory lessons are challenging because of the physical activity involved. I think special labs should be designed for disabled learners like me. Agriculture is also a challenge. I cannot go the farm like the other students because I am on a wheel chair. I hope something can be done to better accommodate students like me in such subjects.”

In terms of government intervention/support, Stanley stated the following: “I think the government has been quite supportive. I am here today because of the government and the Catholic Church. They provide me with food, accommodation and education. The only areas of improvement are infrastructure and increasing the number of specially trained teachers.”

In conclusion, Stanley’s experiences bring out some key thematic areas that are in line with the objective of

this study. Lack of parental and peer support, lack of proper awareness by guardians, infrastructure-related challenges in schools, lack of adequate facilities, unfavourable curricula, and inadequate numbers of specially-trained teachers have been identified as some of the major impediments to the access to quality education by learners living with a disability like Stanley.

In conclusion, the experiences of the two handicapped students point out that one can be disabled for several reasons. The experiences further indicated the role of parents and explain why parents normally react positively to support their children. The experiences also tell of some unfortunate cases in the society and without government policies, such instances could end up in loss of life. They also suggest the need for adequate facilities to enable handicapped students to access education, which is a basic human right. Government-provided curricula were also identified as not as considerate of the needs of handicapped students as they should be. More teachers should also be employed in special schools.

Table 3 handicap learners' views on a sorted theme

Themes/ Names	Mercy	Stanley
Nature of (handicap)	Has one leg	No lower limbs
Type support	Prosthetic leg	Wheel chair
Cause disability	Boil developed	Born premature
Parental support	Full	Non
Parent awareness of school	Yes	No
Society Acceptance	Sympathy	Sympathy
Who give most support	Teacher	Teacher
Any other group support	Catholic	Catholic
Govt intervention	Late	Early
Experience with curriculum	fair	fair
Infrastructure / Facilities	Inadequate	Inadequate

5. Conclusions

In conclusion to this study, it was found out that lack of disability policies awareness to community members influenced disabled child experiences during childhood. This made it impossible for majority of disabled learners to access schools since a couple of them did not know whether special schools existed. Some parents even made attempts to enrol their children in regular schools. The study found out that that there was mismatch in policy implementation with regard to provision of infrastructural resources and facilities in schools to meet the needs of disabled learners in the two counties. Teachers were also found to be ignorant on government policy hence affecting enrolment of learners in schools. The study found out that cultural beliefs and practices made it difficult to implement the policy of disability in Kisumu and Siaya counties. For instance, some learners who were albino were often scorned and others received death threats because of community beliefs. This showed how community practices were cruel to implementation of disability policy in Nyanza counties. Curriculum being implemented in schools was found to be rigid and therefore failed to adequately cater for the needs of disabled learners. From the above observations, it is concluded that for policy of inclusion of disabled learners in schools to succeed, the Ministry of Education and other government needs to take an active role rather than passive. Moreover, all stakeholders; teachers, parents, school management, county governments, non-governmental organisations and other private entities need to work together to see the full implementation of disability in schools.

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