

The Role of Social Workers in Education for Children with Special Needs in Nairobi City County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Education is a critical tool to liberate the mind from shackles of poverty and ignorance because it helps an individual to evaluate a problem and come up with alternative solutions. The main aim of this study was to examine the role of Social Workers in education for children with Special Needs in Nairobi County, Kenya. Specifically, role in elimination of education biasness; influencing development of relevant curriculum; advocating for the educational rights of children with special needs and the role of Social Workers in special education awareness creation. Ecological Systems Theory by Allen & Tracy, 2004 directed the study. A systematic review was conducted particularly with a focus on the role of Social Workers in education of children with special needs. This desktop analysis utilized search engines to obtain data from various data bases and e-libraries which was guided by the purpose of the study. It was recommended that Social Workers should be included in decision making relating to special education needs; more empirical research should be conducted, regarding how Social Workers as people conversant with special needs, could continue to work effectively with stakeholders to achieve positive outcomes for special students' education.

Keywords: *Special needs; education; Social Workers, intervention*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

Education is also frequently considered to be one of the basic mechanisms through which people can be lifted out of poverty, and hence a matter of social justice (Terzi, 2010). The notion of education as a basic human right has been articulated in a number of declarations and treaties, with many governments progressively signing up. The first reference to education was in 1948

through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since then, numerous other treaties emerged: the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1981); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989); the World Conference on Education for All (EFA, 1990); the Dakar Framework for Action and more recently the Jakarta Declaration in 2005. Many countries have also domesticated these treaties and education policies have been put in place all over the world (UNESCO 2000).

The recently launched Special needs education (SNE) policy in Kenya clearly points out on the need to implement inclusive education as a viable means of achieving Education for all (EFA) goal (Ministry of education in Kenya - MoE, 2009). In the history of special needs education, there is a controversy in terms of the distinction between human nature and its social environment. It is debatable whether special needs are primarily caused by the child's psycho-medical body or by cultural concepts of normality and deviance. Settlements of this controversy govern whether the pupil or the educational institution becomes the main point of intervention. There are concerns as to who are the actors in this even though this has originally been the work of teachers particularly in the school setting. Social work is a profession that promotes social change, problem-solving in human relations, empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing social work methods and guided by social work theories, Social Workers intervene at the point where people interact with environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (International association for schools of Social Workers - IASSW and International Federation of Social Workers - IFSW, 2001). In 2014, Kang'ethe asserts that Social work is an important humanistic profession recognized as a respectable discipline to address different vulnerabilities that people in society face. Social Workers play a vital role in nurturing a child's social-emotional development. School Social Workers collaborate with teachers, administrators and parents to provide optimal support for students to remain in school (Huang, 2017).

The Social Workers have a multifaceted role and there are ways school Social Workers can utilize their knowledge, skills, and values to improve the lives of students. There is need to incorporate social work skills into the school system on an individual, group, and community level and particularly while dealing with children with special needs. Schools employ Social Workers to address the needs of at risk and special needs students. The precise social work role in connection with these students varies from school to school and from County to County. Some schools employ school Social Workers to serve multiple schools or to work with a single broad population. School social worker play many roles and have a number of responsibilities but four basic tasks have been identified as common to all school Social Workers. They include but are not limited to: Consultation with others in the school system as a member of a team. They carry out Assessment applied to a variety of different roles in direct service, consultation, and program development. They intervene directly with children and parents in individual, group, and family modalities and also they assist with program development (Constable, Kuzmickaite, Harrison, & Volkmann, 1999). Social work, though a very old profession, it's not a very vibrant discipline in Kenya. What Social Workers do is not clear to the public and systems that deliver social services. Some students undertaking social work profession are not aware of their responsibilities after graduation either. One key responsibility of Social Workers is the role of advocacy. This

entails representing the vulnerable groups in our society. Little research has been published on the role of Social Workers in special needs education in Kenya. The researchers found relevant information from the basic education field only. This paper seeks to suggest an empirical study to be carried out to bridge this gap.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory

The study was anchored on the ecological systems perspective. The pioneer of this theory was Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory is based on the premise that each system contains roles, norms and rules which may shape psychological development of its members. This is explained by the five environmental systems with which an individual interacts. They include:

- Microsystem*: institutions and groups that most immediately and directly impact the child's development including: family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers.
- Mesosystem*: Interconnections between the microsystems, Interactions between the family and teachers, Relationship between the child's peers and the family
- Exosystem*: Involves links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual's immediate context.
- Macrosystem*: Describes the culture in which individuals live. Cultural contexts include developing and industrialized countries, socioeconomic status, poverty, and ethnicity.
- Chronosystem*: The patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course, as well as sociohistorical circumstances. For example, researchers have found that the negative effects of divorce on children often peak in the first year after the divorce.

Social work involves, at its core, work with interconnected transactional networks. The ecosystems perspective provides a framework for thinking about and understanding those networks in their complexity. A fundamental purpose of all professional practice, including social work, is to individualize the case. (If all cases are to be treated in the same way, there is no need for professional judgment.) In the case of social work, this individualizing process applies to individual persons, families, groups, and communities. Because no person can be understood apart from his or her defining social context, the ecomap presents the field of elements in which the person is embedded. The use of the ecomap makes it virtually impossible to separate the person and his or her environment in one's perception of the case phenomena. It guides one to see connectedness and to eliminate the hyphen between the person and his or her environment. Social Workers are equipped with skills necessary for identifying and using social work methods and theories to help solve human problems together with other important stakeholders and specifically learning for the children with special needs. Children with special needs need these five different environmental systems to be equipped fully in their psychosocial development and problem solving capabilities. The theory can also be used by Social Workers to evaluate deficiencies in child's learning process.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature was reviewed thematically guided by the areas of focus by the researchers on the roles Social Workers play in schooling of children with special needs within the school and circumstances arising outside the school particularly home.

The roles of Social Workers

2.1 Interdisciplinary Teams

Social Workers serve as members of interdisciplinary teams to assist in placement, review, and dismissal of students with special needs. As set forth in Standard 9 of the National association of Social Workers – USA (NASW) Standards for School Social Work Services, “school Social Workers shall work collaboratively to mobilize the resources of local education agencies and communities to meet the needs of students and families” (NASW, 2002, p13). Team members may include teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and diagnosticians. Social Workers must understand how to work effectively as a member of the interdisciplinary team and how to add to the work of the team. “The unique contribution of the school social worker to the interdisciplinary team is to bring home, school, and community perspectives to the interdisciplinary process” (NASW, 2002, Standard 9). Membership in interdisciplinary teams requires interdependence, the ability to perform newly created professional activities and take on new tasks as necessary, flexibility, collective ownership of goals, and reflection on the processes (Bronstein, 2003).

In the US, School districts employ an array of professionals who strive to welcome and educate children. The professionals who spend time with children at school are teachers, administrators, counselors, nurses, school Social Workers, psychologists, diagnosticians, vocational counselors or transition specialists, teachers’ aides, speech therapists, and physical therapists. Teachers have the primary responsibility for educating children. Sometimes students will be placed in special education classes with teachers who have training to assist with both behavioral and educational modifications. Most special education teachers are assisted by a teacher’s aide. Teachers must have at least a bachelor’s degree and certification from the state in which they teach.

School psychologists and diagnosticians help screen children to determine if they have learning or psychological problems. Their reports assure that children are provided with the programs and adjustments that will ensure success at school. These programs range from gifted and talented programs to special education programs. School psychologists must have a master’s degree in psychology. School diagnosticians are an emerging profession. Certification for this position usually requires teaching experience and a master’s degree. Speech therapists diagnose and treat speech, voice, and language disorders. Most states require a master’s degree in speech–language pathology for licensing. Physical therapists help children with severe physical problems remain comfortable at school. Vocational or transition specialists help students plan for effective careers. They frequently provide follow-up services for those students with special needs after they leave the public schools. School Social Workers assist children so they can be successful in school. The goal of school social work should be to give all children the opportunity and resources to help them succeed academically and socially in a safe and healthy school environment. Social work in a public school setting plays a vital role in developing students and linking them to the resources and support necessary to maximize their potential in the educational process (O’Donnell, 2000).

Most states in the US require one to have a master’s degree in social work in order to practice as a school social worker. School social work is one of the most rewarding and interesting areas of

social work practice. School Social Workers can have a life changing impact on their young clients in a way that those who work with adults rarely experience. The school social worker and the other professionals described above form an interdisciplinary team that work together on behalf of children and adolescents (NASW, 2012). In Kenya, there was no existing literature as far as interdisciplinary team and its role in the education of children with special needs. In practice however, organizations and especially those involved in the education and development of children with special needs have employed social workers and volunteer Social work students who help in many ways including but not limited to the following: Needs assessment of the child at the family level, training on basic life skills, training family members on therapeutic processes related to the child, capacity building and empowerment of the guardians, organizing for their basic needs provision, organizing for their scholarships if needed, among others. From this, social workers are more involved than any other person in the development of Children with special needs and therefore the need to realize their contribution. .

2.2 Elimination of education biasness

Praisner (2003) determined that principals with positive attitudes about students with special needs were those who took a variety of special education courses in their preparation program. The principal's impact on the academic performance of students with disabilities is crucial for these students' success. Today's schools are challenged with an increase of Hispanic students who enter school with dissimilar personal histories, different economic circumstances, diverse health needs, and a wide range of educational needs. In the United states of America, numerous Hispanic students and their families are in need of assistance from their local school, health agencies, and social services providers (Herrity & Glassman, 2010).

UNESCO (2007) in a report on Priority Issues for Inclusive Quality Education in Eastern and Western Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in Kenya, noted the following as important in biasness elimination:- Addressing needs of all learners equitably, Elimination of bias in the educational system, Developing diverse curricula in education, Use of 3rd channel approaches, all children to have a right to be educated together regardless of learning difficulties, a social and educational responsibility In curriculum development process, all stakeholders in the community be involved to ensure needs of all children in the society are met.

Another study carried out by the Leonard Cheshire team led by Al-Ghaib, Andrae and Gondwe on Pathways to inclusive education for girls with disabilities published on June 2017 in Kenya recommended the following for all-inclusive education of the girl child in Kenya: -

- (i) The development of gender- and disability-sensitive indicators which will provide a more consistent picture of educational inclusion and allow for comparison across programmes.
- (ii) The application of an equity-focused gender and disability lens to budgeting and resource allocation will support (hidden) costs that disproportionately affect girls with disabilities.
- (iii) Greater efforts to embed gender equality principles in teacher training on inclusive education will promote more positive attitudes towards girls with disabilities.
- (iv) Donors and other development partners that invest in education programmes should ensure programmes are both disability inclusive and gender sensitive.

- (v) Governments should develop national education policies to protect children from abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation both within and outside the school setting.
- (vi) The integration of research and documentation of good practice on education interventions for girls with disabilities into education plans and robust processes to monitor the impact of interventions on girls with disabilities will help build a much needed evidence base.
- (vii) Greater collaboration between mainstream and disability-specific organisations and Disabled People's organisations (DPOs) is indispensable in order to bring all relevant expertise together towards greater impact.

After thematic review of related literature, scanty information was found on how school Social Workers eliminate biases among the children living with different abilities.

2.3 Influencing development of relevant curriculum

Previous studies have revealed that there are a range of curricular and pedagogical difficulties that need to be overcome in Indian schools (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Das, et al., 2012). Bhatnagar & Das (2014 and 2013) point out that Indian teachers have a wide variety of concerns and reservations about implementing inclusive education practices including: lack of preparation and training for teachers in aspects of special education; negative attitudes of teachers and other students towards pupils with SEN; lack of funds and suitable materials; lack of support;

Previous studies have identified that the attitudes and practices of classroom teachers is fundamental to the success of inclusion and to the quality of education that children with SEN experience (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Das, et al., 2013a; David & Kuyini, 2012). In particular, the self-belief of teachers in their own efficacy is seen as being crucially important in teachers meeting the needs of students with special education needs (Bangs & Frost, 2012) and thus the successful implementation of inclusive education relies on addressing teacher concerns effectively (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; David & Kuyini, 2012). Bhatnagar & Das (2014) suggest that there is a need for more research on teacher concerns about inclusive education practice in India and in particular, they point to the need for qualitative studies to complement the existing quantitative studies. Further, training paraprofessionals to facilitate social interactions were found to improve the social participation of pupils with Special educational needs (SEN) in general education classrooms in India, Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, there is need for more intervention studies implementing a variety of strategies and including different groups of pupils with SEN.

Patius (2014) on factors influencing implementation of curriculum in public primary schools in Ukwala Division of Siaya County, Kenya, noted that, development of curriculum for learners should be based on facilities and materials availability. He further established that the exercise should be participatory as well as needs based. There was no adequate literature on the role of Social Workers in the development of education curriculum for children with special needs in Kenya.

2.4 Advocating for the educational rights of children with special needs

School Social Workers often are required to assist in the implementation and delivery of services to students with special needs. These services may include assessment, early identification, or actual provision of direct services. School Social Workers in rural communities struggle with the implementation of special programs. Limited resources and cost are two of the major obstacles to the provision of services. Rural school systems face a host of barriers to quality service delivery that urban schools do not. Rural schools usually have less tolerance for diversity, more homogeneous populations, more traditional moral values, and an expectation that the community can take care of its own members (Caudill, 1993). Where areas of need are not being addressed by the local community or education agency, school Social Workers should work to create services that address these needs (NASW, 2002, Standard 14). An important role for the school social worker is that of advocate. Standard 8 of the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services recognizes that the School Social Workers' role in advocating for students and their families in a variety of situations (NASW, 2002, Standard 8). Social Workers act as advocates for the parents when they help them understand their rights. Often, Social Workers must seek out parents who are unwilling to become involved with the school system and help them understand that someone in the school supports them. There is a significant group of parents for whom involvement necessitates outreach and recruitment. Many parents are intimidated by the school system. The school social worker can reach out to them and assure the successful outcome of their interactions with the school (Banchy, 1977).

Policy about education of children with special needs in Kenya is very clear. For instance, the inclusion policy in education though advocated for and recognized from human rights based approach; it was yet to be implemented. School fees for instance present an all-too-often insurmountable barrier for families trying to access inclusive education for their child (GoK, 2009). Teacher attitudes are also a main factor influencing the inclusion of CWD at school. The lack of financial incentive is a large contributor to this. However, limited resources to teach a child with disabilities, a rigid curriculum, little or no skill in teaching children with different learning needs and no class-room support all culminate challenges for the child in learning. There is limited literature on Social Workers' role on education of children with special needs.

2.5 The role of Social Workers in special education awareness creation and intervention

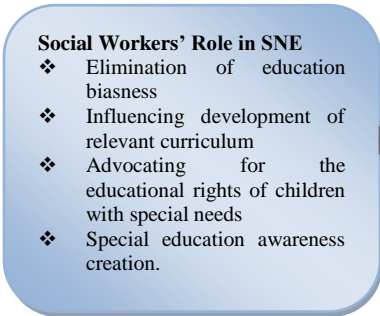
Parents of students with disabilities often receive support from special education advocates, who may be trained through a variety of programs. The future of children with Special Education depends on the intervention and the quality of education service that they receive. Quality education not only impacts the children's educational experience but also on their holistic growth as a person (Hussain, 2017). According to Levinson and Palmer (2005). School is the best place to engage and support these students by helping identify their strengths and interests and providing them with the skills (or a plan for gaining them) they need to succeed in the workplace. Effective school social work practice consists of collaborating, consulting, developing behavior plans, and training others to work with difficult children in the context of a child's daily school experience (Frey & George-Nichols, 2003). School Social Workers are involved in training and resource-building activities such as staff development, community education, and grant writing.

A report done by the African Union of the Blind (AFUB) in collaboration with Kenya Union of the Blind (KUB), Centre for Disability Rights, Education & Advocacy (CREAD) on “The State of Disabled Peoples Rights in Kenya (2007)” concluded that, Systemic roots of discrimination for children living with disabilities were the social, political and economic factors that can be the root causes of abuse and discrimination. Throughout the interviews, respondents reflected on their experiences and some commented on the broader social, economic and political factors and contexts that contributed or reinforced the discrimination that people with disabilities faced in Kenya. Further, on responding, a number of valuable suggestions to improve the situation of people with disabilities in their country were suggested:- raising awareness 48.4% , improving respect 44.2%, social support 34.7% legislation 29.5% economic support 26.3% political representation 13.7% and peer support 12.6%. Literature was limited on the Social Workers role in education awareness for children living with disabilities.

Little research has been published that is specifically relevant to the professional social work in particularly the role of Social Workers in special education in Kenya. This paper seeks to fill this gap. Most scholars have concentrated on the profession of social work particularly training and challenges, developmental social work and social work ethics in Kenya. There are researches on special education but very little mention on the role of Social Workers in special education in Kenya. There is also a gap in empirical studies relating to social work activities and special needs education among children in Kenya.

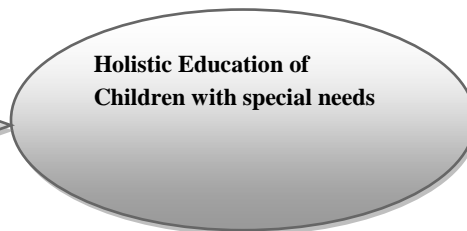
3.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Independent variables



Source: Researchers (2017)

Dependent variable



Intervening variable

4.0 METHODOLOGY

In this study a systematic review was conducted particularly with a focus on the role of Social Workers in accessing education for children with special needs in Nairobi City County, Kenya. This paper used a content analysis on literature available through search engines thematically to obtain data from various data bases and e-libraries which was guided by the purpose of the study.

Thematically, literature sources were reviewed to identify the extent to which various interventions were achieved. Those that did not have relevant literature were excluded. Much as there is empirical literature this was secondary data because it did not involve data collection in the field.

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the study. The rationale for this study was to examine, understand, and analyze the role of Social Workers in education for children with special needs in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The main goal of school social work is to enable students to function and learn in the school environment. School Social Workers practice in a school setting the primary purpose of schools is to educate students, not to provide social services. The school social work practitioner will often be the only social worker in a school. School Social Workers play a vital role nurturing a child's social-emotional development in all grade levels. School Social Workers collaborate with teachers, administrators and parents to provide optimal support for students to remain in school. Also not much attention has been paid on the role of school Social Workers in education of special needs education.

Teachers in Kenya have minimal formal training in respect to the implementation of inclusive education from pre-service or in service. The number of teachers trained in special education is minimal. The teachers trained in special education lack confidence in their ability to instruct students with exceptional needs or generally handle them and this calls for a helping hand from school Social Workers. Teachers do not feel adequately prepared to understand and cope with the multitude of demands required to handle learners with special needs. They have to deal with academic matters as well as other special needs of the learners. This is because of lack of adequate and effective training. Successful implementation of an inclusive system requires that educators are committed and supported within-service training. Thus, change needs a long term commitment to professional development.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a general lack of professional recognition of Social Workers in Kenya and by extension in Africa. This is due to the fact that most people do not understand what social work is, even among some government officials. The role of Social Workers is not sufficiently recognized. The average social worker, especially in the African context, lacks credibility. She/he has yet to demonstrate that she/he is a trusted and helpful friend. The non-recognition of Social Workers may explain why so many social problems are taken to the courts, Provincial administrators, police, priests and witchdoctors. Needless, that is the reason why in countries like Lesotho and Zimbabwe and Kenya people with no training sociologists and political scientists are employed as "Social Workers". This makes it difficult to recognize and appreciate the importance of social work intervention even in special education in African countries and in Kenya. Most empirical studies have concentrated on the role of Social Workers in health related settings and occupational interventions and not much has been done with a focus on special needs education. The study concluded that Social Workers have a role together with actors in social service delivery to address learning disability related challenges faced by children in particular special needs education.

It was recommended that Social Workers should be included in decision making relating to special education needs. The study also recommended the need for empirical research on the role of social work and social work related interventions in addressing special needs education in Kenya since not much has been researched on the same. It is also recommended that more research should be conducted regarding how school Social Workers could continue to work effectively with school administrators and parents to achieve positive outcomes for students including those with special needs.

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