IMPLICATIONS OF SCHOOLING ON SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PERSONS WHO ARE DEAF IN NYERI COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

While social participation is a fundamental human right, persons who are deaf face barriers in achieving meaningful social integration. This study sought to determine the contribution of schooling as an enabler to social participation for young persons with deafness. Within a qualitative design, life narratives of six (6) young persons were documented by using semi-structured interviews, an observation guide, visual images and a focus group discussion. The six (6) accounts were complemented with interviews of significant others. The study establishes that largely, schooling is a significant enabler to social participation, with the greatest contribution of schooling being communication and social skills. Subsequently, levels of participation vary with quantity of schooling. This paper concludes that even when other determinants of social participation may be influential, schooling is certainly essential to facilitate social integration of young persons who are deaf. However, even with the same level of schooling, social organization and family background emerge as key factors of influence to social participation.

Key Words: Education; Social Participation; Disabilities; Deaf Kenya; World Federation of the Deaf; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Discrimination.
Social Participation and Deafness: A Global Perspective

International human rights standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, all point the way towards overcoming discrimination and recognizing the right to full participation of children with disabilities—in the home and community, in school, health services, and recreation activities and in all other aspects of life. A UNICEF (1999) report uses vignettes of experiences of youth across the globe that are deaf to highlight their lack of participation in education, employment, their increased risk of substance abuse, sexual exploitation, social isolation, prejudice and inappropriate care. It raises significant concerns regarding the opportunities available for participation and development of capabilities and the resultant transitions that young people with deafness make into adulthood.

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD 2007) in its policy guidelines stipulate that the main goal of educating deaf children is to give them the same possibilities of participating in the society as adults as everyone else. Ill-defined policies, objectives and an ambiguous position on the part of national governments often exclude or fail to ensure the provision of welfare services for youth across different regions of the world. Different definitions of disability and poor coordination between departments of health, social services and education are reported in many developed countries and have serious implication on the extent to which deaf youth enjoy their rights to services and support. This also makes it difficult for parents and youth to determine the benefits to which they are entitled, creating wide variations in the availability and quality of support and services for children and their families (UN Standard Rules on Equalization of opportunities, 1993).

Kiyaga and Moores (2003) point out that, education of deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa began as a component of the European missionary movement in the 19th century. Roman Catholics and members of various Protestant denominations established schools for the deaf as part of evangelization efforts in many countries. In other countries, royalty, wealthy philanthropists, charitable institutions, and teachers of the deaf also established schools. As a whole, these schools reached only a small proportion of the deaf population of the region. They tended to serve children from relatively affluent African families in urban areas, while most deaf Africans lived in poor rural environments. The majority of schools, following the examples of schools for the deaf in Great Britain and France, were strictly oral/aural and did not allow the use of any kind of manual communication, either signed or finger-spelled. However, there were some exceptions.
Kenya National Association of the Deaf (KNAD, 2009), contends that it is likely that deaf people are the least educated of all people with disabilities considering their poor communicative domains with teachers, the low competency of teachers to sign, and confusion as to whether to use Kenyan Sign Language as a language of instruction in the education of deaf children, which ultimately provides access to curriculum content. Lack of the use of sign language in education leads to negligence of deaf pupils/students by teachers and poor monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. As a result, deaf education in Kenya has not lived up to its original expectations as the graduates with disabilities have continued to lag behind their counterparts in academic achievements.

Access to schooling in Kenya is generally determined by identifying those who are most likely to produce positive economic outcomes for the family and the nation in general (Oloo, 2006). There lack policy frameworks which focus on persons who are deaf, especially youth. The Children and Persons with Disabilities Act do not address the position of youth and this is worrying. According to Disability Kenya (2006), for many youth, a disability leads to rejection, isolation and discrimination, hindering their psychological and emotional development. The policy adopts a developmental approach where human rights, participation and inclusiveness are promoted.

Kenya National Youth Council (KNYC 2000) is based on the premise that; Young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implication of those choices, make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of that action. Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. The mandate of KNYC (2000) visualizes a society where youth have equal opportunity and can realize their fullest potential, productively participating in economic, social, political, cultural and religious life without fear or favour.

Alade (2003), points out that the development of education of the hearing-impaired in Kenya can be traced back to the establishment of the Kenya Society for Deaf Children (KSDC) in 1958. The first Special Unit for the hearing impaired, Dagoretti Unit for the Deaf was established in 1960 and the Aga Khan Unit for the Deaf in Nairobi was established in 1961. There was growth of schools for the hearing-impaired between 1964 and 1980 (from 13 programmes with an enrolment of 444 learners in 1968 to 23 programmes with an enrolment of 1400 learners in 1980).
Unable to hear or speak, the deaf are thought to be cut off from language and therefore from social life and from the knowledge and culture transmitted from previous generations (Perlmutter, 2007). Lack of effective communication with parents and peers negatively impacts on the social development of young persons who are deaf. They receive inadequate explanations for causes of social and emotional behaviours in other people. Young persons who are deaf cannot understand others’ reactions towards them.

Schooling for Young Persons who are Deaf

Across Africa, concern has been expressed that persons who are deaf to a large extent continue to rely on their non-disabled counterparts for economic support. This is largely due to the fact that the education they receive is largely irrelevant and insensitive to the uniqueness of their needs both in school and in life after school. With little or no access to education, discrimination on the grounds of disability in the job market, lack of access to credit facilities, infrastructural challenges, disability and the fact that a majority of persons who are deaf are born from poor families; a seed for extreme exclusion and poverty is often sown (UN Convention on the Rights of PWDs 2006).

A study by Nortey (2009), points out that in Ghana, the deaf are part of the marginalised individuals. They are often relegated to the background and therefore face barriers to participation in society.

Ndurumo (1993) identifies national objectives for special education which include academic achievement, preparation for employment, personal development, creative abilities and moral values. Kinyashi, (2006) asserts that, empowerment stands to be a pillar in the participation process while Ngao, (2005) reiterates that school communicates to the child the natural demands for achievement, pro-social behaviour, co-operation and morality.

Sahaya International (2003) notes that, with only three secondary schools for the deaf available to graduates of primary schools for the deaf in Kenya, a very low percentage transit to secondary or post-secondary education. Hence the establishment of vocational programmes such as carpentry and sewing to cater for those who do not make it to secondary school. Of the few individuals who do attend secondary and post-secondary schools, some struggle to join the work force. Many end up unemployed or end up returning to the schools for the deaf to teach there. Others involved with the churches of the deaf.

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Primary and Secondary Socialization:  
A Theory by Selznick

The tendency of individuals towards segmental or core participation begins quite early in their development. Enduring values and dispositions begin to form through the primary socialization influences of family and other consistent caregivers. Secondary socialization, such as occurs within neighbourhoods, churches, schools, and youth organizations, may sometimes dislodge the influence of primary socialization if it is intense and powerful (Selznick's 1992). If the norms of secondary socialization are in line with the norms of primary socialization, they are likely to persist into and through adulthood (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987). When such persistence occurs, individuals have translated behavioural norms into enduring values. Selznick (1992) suggests that participation is a process that starts at the primary level where the key players are primary caregivers/parents. During primary socialization, young persons with who are deaf are groomed for secondary socialization where they are expected to get involved in church activities, community organizations, sporting associations, civic and political affiliations and relationships and other activities by youth groups.

Schooling as Relates to Social Participation

A certain hidden discrimination seems evident in the Kenyan education system. While special schools may be doing well in providing specialized education to learners with disabilities, those with profound and severe disabilities (like the blind and the deaf) seem to fall through certain curricular and pedagogical cracks. Evidence also suggests that the focus of this education seems more driven by notions of charity and care rather than equipping young people with disabilities to take their rightful place in society (Mugo, Oranga & Singal 2008). The National Youth Policy provides a foundation and mechanism for youth participation in socio-economic development whilst taking cognizance of the fact that young people should be protagonists of their own development and not merely recipients of State support.

The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) notes that 'inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and the enjoyment and exercise of human rights'. In the field of schooling, this is reflected in bringing about 'genuine equalization of opportunities'.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design and used life stories captured by way of semi-structured interviews with young persons who are deaf, their significant others and important stakeholders in the community. Also used were an observation guide,
visual images taken by respondents, and a focus group discussion employed during analysis of the visual images. Interview questions were open-ended. Observations and triggers were used to capture non-verbal communication and additional and in-depth information. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to sample three male and three female young persons who are deaf aged 14-25 years, with or without schooling, and five significant others. The locale of the study was an informal settlement in Nyeri urban, and Nyaribo which is a rural semi-arid site of Nyeri south in Nyeri County, Kenya. Piloting of the study was done in Kiganjo location in Nyeri south. Coding of data was facilitated by Atlas.ti qualitative software package which provided tools that let the researcher locate, code, annotate findings in primary data material, weigh and evaluate their importance and visualize their complex relations. Atlas.ti helps one to explore the complex phenomena hidden in your textual and multimedia data. For coping with the inherent complexity of the tasks and the data, Atlas.ti offers a powerful, intuitive environment that keeps you focused on the analyzed materials. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret findings, utilizing insights from available literature and researcher reflections.

**Schooling levels of young persons who are deaf in Nyeri County**

According to the Itinerant Connection (2006), the history of educating persons who are deaf dates back long before Thomas H. Gallaudet and Alexander Graham Bell. Each of these men believed that deaf people could and should be educated.

The findings revealed that low levels of schooling of young persons who were deaf were brought about by low parental expectations. Schooling had enhanced social participation for young persons who were deaf but the level of participation was also pegged on the level of schooling. There was a noticeable difference between young persons with higher levels of schooling and those with limited schooling in terms of their personality, the kinds of groups they were affiliated to and how they interacted with the community. Four out of the six young persons who were deaf had schooled up to primary eight and were all trained in one vocational skill or another. Anthony had trained as a carpenter while Brenda had trained as a tailor. George who was currently working in a quarry was undertaking a training course in carpentry in Thika town. Eddie had training in carpentry and tailoring. The researcher learned that Eddie had failed to secure a place in secondary school so he joined the vocational class in Tumutumu primary school for the deaf. Brenda had completed her primary schooling in Tumutumu School for the Deaf and trained as a tailor in the school's vocational unit. Karen was a class six dropout due to lack of school fees, money for her upkeep and for buying assistive devices, and also due to a hostile learning
environment by school teachers and what she termed as underfeeding at school. She also had an unsupportive mother and an alcoholic grandmother who was her guardian.

Table 1 Schooling Levels of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Level of Schooling</th>
<th>Type of Vocational Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Primary eight</td>
<td>Carpentry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>Primary eight</td>
<td>Carpentry and tailoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Primary eight</td>
<td>Carpentry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Primary eight</td>
<td>Tailoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Secondary four</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Primary six</td>
<td>Knitting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Low levels of schooling of young persons who are deaf are caused by low expectations of their parents and guardians. However, despite these low expectations, they aspired to further their schooling or areas of vocational training. The significant other to Anthony felt the schools in place for young persons who were deaf were not enough.

'...Yeah, I will look for it (The Daily Nation Newspaper) it was saying that the problem is -- even in our country; how do you excel -- for these children? [25:08:2008].

Influences of Schooling on Social Participation of Young Persons who are Deaf

Beetham (1992) asserts that while participation may be a vague term, its advocates often rely on two key arguments about its value: - It makes for justice in decision making -- people have some say in, influence on collective decisions -- and it has an educative value -- through participation people learn.

It is framed by article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 2006), which requires that the child's education be directed to the development of their personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; to the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society (UNESCO, 1990). To the deaf, school becomes their first home as it is the only place they communicate with each other freely and meaningfully using sign language, finger spelling and lip-reading.

This study establishes that schooling had helped the participants to acquire positive values like positive socialization, learning how to read and write and acquiring different types of skills like tailoring and carpentry, among others. As noted earlier, being clean and neat are virtues Brenda had learned in school a strength she said was helping her a lot as people always looked for her to plait their hair. The researcher observed that Brenda had acquired several values in school which were helping her to have independent decisions in life.
It is hard to learn sign language at home. At school everybody understands sign language but at home they don’t,’ she said [26:08:2008].

The significant other to Anthony had also cited the same strength about school saying;

‘At least school teaches them conventional signs unlike in situations when they have not been to school and rely on local and natural gestures. Anthony is well socialized and he does his shopping independently.

Another dimension of schooling was brought out when Carol said her knowledge of Mathematics had helped her so much in shop keeping. Schooling had also enabled her to get formal employment although she had resigned from the job out of frustration with her boss. She was aware of the law and felt her rights as an employee had been violated, hence she decided to resign. The researcher observed the joy of George’s mother knowing that despite her son’s deafness, he could communicate with extended members of her family and people within the community using other avenues other than sign language.

All the study participants had been involved in one co-curricular activity or the other while in school except Karen who by the time she dropped out of school had not taken part in any sporting or creative activity.

George appreciated his years in school saying he had learned carpentry and made many friends. The researcher also noted that schooling had also developed his leadership skills as he had been a school prefect. This had also inculcated in him positive values in the society.

’School was sometimes good and other times bad. The big boys were rude. I liked the small boys’ [25:08:2008].

Brenda participated in dancing, volleyball and athletics. Eddie said he loved running and was always number one in athletics. He also participated in volleyball and football but found dancing very hard since he could not listen to music. He loved English and always scored high marks. He had also learned social skills in school and this was evident from the way he welcomed us, from the friends he said he had within the community, his good grooming and general cleanliness. The findings from the visual images depict that Eddie was well-groomed and particular about his dressing.

**Positive behaviour change**

Schools for the deaf are fertile grounds for social interaction of children who are deaf. They offer them relative uniformity in what they experience there. They introduce the child into his/her natural sub-culture and communicate to the child the natural demands for achievement, pro-social behaviour, co-operation and morality (Ngao 2005).

Ngao’s assertions were confirmed by the study participants except for Karen who had gained very little. Eddie had the following to say
"I was rude. I always used to fight but I changed".

This change of character was reflected in the kind of activities he did at home and the way his father had praised him.

'Being in a boarding school I had to do cleaning myself' [Carol].

Her significant other had also narrated to the researcher how Carol loved doing house cleaning chores. In response to the researcher's question which asked; 'some people say that schooling can help people with disabilities to live a better life, what is your view?' A key informant was of the view that

'School helps them very much. Using the knowledge they can derive skills - super skills that are not to the side of the handicapped'.

**Social interactions**

Marschark, (1993) asserts that because young persons who are deaf cannot understand others' reactions towards them, they often retreat into isolation which is an insurance against social failure. Out of the six young persons who were deaf, five socialized with the hearing people to some extend although they all noted limitations in socialization mainly due to communication problems. Anthony said it was hard for a person who is deaf to have friends who are not deaf, as noted in Marschark (1993). He said he occasionally told stories with some neighbours who had learnt basic sign language but others found it very difficult. His significant other said Anthony hated mingling with the people who are not deaf as he believed they wasted a lot of time on gossip and had asked her to sack some workers who were hearing.

Eddie shared with the researcher that most of the time he stayed with his mother at home but he had a few friends in the village. From the way he had narrated his schooling experiences, it was evident he had good socialization skills. As noted earlier, Carol narrated that when she was transferred to a school for the deaf she learned sign language and made friends. Her mother also said she socialized with other young persons who were deaf within the community who visited her from time-to-time.

George said he had a few friends among his workmates but he interacted very little with them as they could not understand sign language.

'He is much known here and loved. The people who know him at times send me to greet him and some of them I do not know them' [George's S.O].

This was an indication that he was able to make friends despite his challenge in communication. Brenda pointed out that she had friends who would come home to pass time with her, and who helped her in taking care of the baby and doing some of the house chores.
The researcher observed that young persons who were deaf were able to navigate social relationships using different avenues of communication acquired during their schooling. This meant that schooling positively impacted on social participation of young persons who were deaf.

**Religious participation**

Religious participation did not come out strongly in this study. Among the six respondents, some were involved in religious participation while others were not. For instance Karen said she went to church every Sunday. George's mother said she used to take him to church in the past but had not gone for quite a while. Carol was involved in church youth groups while the other three respondents did not go to any church. This was interpreted by the study that schooling did not strongly influence religious participation.

**Job access and retention**

What stood between young persons who were deaf and accessing and maintaining jobs was communication. As the study revealed, schooling helps them to learn conventional signs but when they come back to the community, they are unable to interact with people who are hearing since such people are not conversant with sign language.

Haris (2001) posited that deaf adolescents who lack social skills among peers in the hearing world will suffer trauma. George had the following to say about his place of work.

'I am very lonely. I rarely have someone to talk to. I am always quiet, just working'

**Conclusion**

The study revealed that schooling for the deaf enhances their participation. However, limited chances for them to join secondary schools and low expectations by teachers and parents were noted. Since the inclusion policy discourages special schools, the government should focus on scaling up human and material resources that will support inclusion of young persons who are deaf in all social processes.

**REFERENCES**


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