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IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS FACING EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT RESOURCE CENTRES IN FIVE SELECTED COUNTIES IN KENYA

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Abstract

Purpose: Educational Assessment Resource Centers play a pivotal function in increasing the educational prospects of children with special needs. Nevertheless, a marked insufficiency in funding, constricted number of personnel, lack of proper tools and traditional obstacles reduce the efficacy of services availed by EARCs. Therefore, the goal of this study was to delineate and analyze the problems affecting Educational Assessment Resource Centers in Kakamega, Baringo, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Elgeyo Marakwet counties.

Methodology: The study used a descriptive survey approach. The study involved 15 County Education Officers and 80 Special Needs Teachers selected through purposive sampling. Open and close ended questionnaires were employed to collect quantitative data from the County Education Officers and Special Needs Teachers. Interview guides and observation schedules were also applied to gather qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data which was then presented in tables.

Findings: The selected EARCs, pursuant to information gathered from 100% (15) County Educational Officers, suffered a sustained lack of resources within the last 10 years. This was reinforced by 85% (68) SNE teachers. The study also found out that EARCs rarely instituted educational programs specifically designed to cater to special needs children. Additionally, the study deduced that 9 (60%) County Education Officers did not fully understand the role of the EARCs in their counties. Thus, the findings indicate that EARCs were unable to dispense their duties as well as they ideally should have.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: The theory of this study is robust and feasible because it advocates for and indicates that better and revitalized measures would help in facilitating the realization of the objectives of EARCs. The recommended measures include but are not limited to enhanced training of special needs teachers, supply of enough and up-to-date tools and equipment to the EARCs, and the implementation of awareness-creation drives to educate as well as combat the negative connotations associated with special needs children in the selected counties. Also, the study postulates that refined teaching programs are necessary to lend relevance to the function of EARCs in the studied counties. The study also recommends for a marked policy shift to better address the plight of SNE learners in the focus counties and elsewhere in the country.

Keywords: *Educational Assessment Resource Centers, identification, analysis, problems, assessment*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education is regarded globally as one of the fundamental rights that should, by law, be accorded to every child regardless of any and all impeding conditions (Hornby, 2015). To ensure compliance, nations across the globe implement legislative policies aimed at facilitating access to education for all. A major focus of such policies is the sustained emphasis on inclusion. According to Jorun and Sujathamalini (2016), inclusion, from a learning perspective, is the act of offering unrestricted learning opportunities whereby special needs learners are encouraged to intermingle with their non-challenged counterparts. In this regard, the term Special Needs Learners denotes children with learning challenges emanating from physical debilities and/or behavioral challenges.

Despite education being a basic right, access to equitable education for special needs children is marred with various problems. The most noticeable cause of this disproportionality of access is brought about by the nature of physical or behavioral disability possessed by an SNE child (Hornby, 2015). Nevertheless, it is possible to the education prospects of SNE learners and facilitate effective and equitable access to education by relying on the sectors' best practices. For instance, according to Fish (2019) education for special needs children in the United States has realized significant improvements within the last decade. Fish (2019) further asserts that this is largely because of the existence of holistic policies which ensure zero rejection of SNE children, effective participation of parents and students, and advanced non-discriminatory methodologies of identifying and evaluation children with special needs.

According to Chukwuemeka and Samaila (2020), similar but slightly muted successes in inclusive education have also been realized in Nigeria. Like in the case of the United States, the Government of Nigeria introduced a radical policy to address discrimination against special needs children in the country's system of education. Omuruan and Bamidele (2019) identify the National Policy on Education (NPE) as the primary enhancer of inclusive special needs education in Nigeria. This policy, coupled with streamlined teaching methodologies, enables Nigeria's system of education to better meet the needs of the country's significant percentage of children with special needs.

In Kenya, special needs learners also form a significant portion of overall school-going students. More often than not, the educational prospects available to such learners are severely limited. According to Odongo (2018), most special needs children in Kenya, more so those living in rural communities, do not go to school. Not only does this infringe on the SNE child's right to education but also contributes to underdevelopment brought about by untapped academic potential of SNE learners. To combat this drawback, the Government of Kenya, through the Ministry of Education, sought to create the Educational Assessment Resource Centers. The primary objective of the Educational Assessment and Resource Centers is to alleviate this problem by ensuring that special needs learners have as much educational opportunities as their other non-challenged counterparts (Moyi, 2019). Also, EARC's are tasked with the responsibility of aiding in the process of identifying children with specialized education needs in order to facilitate better inclusion into appropriate learning programs.

As noble as these objectives are, their attainment is negatively impacted by a number of factors. As such, the degree of inclusion of SNE students in the identified counties as well as countrywide is quite wanting (Adoyo & Odeny, 2015). Consequently, the education of special needs learners in Kenya is not only inadequate but also disproportionately designed and implemented (Bruce & Venkatesh, 2014). As a result, a number of negative impacts arise.

One of the ramifications associated with this inadequacy include the sustained facilitation of a skewed education curve whereby special needs learners possess lower educational progression capacity and academic skills while the non-challenged learners have better chances of continuing with their studies and improving on their educational skills. Another consequence emanating from this disproportion is a higher prevalence of unrealized potential among special needs learners. Over time, these factors impede the development and realization of social, political, and economic growth, not only in the selected counties, but also throughout the country.

Moreover, according to McKenna, Solis, Brigham, and Adamson (2018), the widespread disproportionality associated with conventional teaching programs serve only to further entrench the level of exclusivity accorded to special needs learners. Hence, with time, persons with special needs become less important in a society where disability is not only frowned upon but also presumed to be a significant drawback. Moreover, the disproportionate distribution of functional EARCs in Kenya hampers the equitable access to educational facilities for children with special needs. Consequently, some areas, more so those with closer proximity to the capital, end up having better resources at the expense of the traditionally marginalized localities in Kenya.

In the bid to thwart exclusivity and ensure access to basic education, the Kenyan government instituted the Free Education Program (FPE) in 2003. As a result, there was an upsurge in the number of new learner enrollments in primary schools in Kenya (Njura & Njeru, 2019). With this uptake, the number of special needs children also increased. Consequently, the Ministry of Education sought to institute new categories which would help to address the issues facing special needs learners. According to Kiru (2018), the new categorizations of special needs included children with loco-motor challenges, down syndrome, autism, maladjustments, and multiple-handicapped as well as gifted learners.

Although the identification and inclusion of these new categories was long overdue, their inculcation into the operational frameworks of the existing Educational Assessment and Resource Centers served as a catalyst for infective disbursement of their core mandate. Makanya, Runo and Waire (2014), posit that the lack of proper transitional as well as follow-up programs were and still remain constituent factors impeding the improved effectiveness of the functions conducted by Educational Assessment Resource Centers in Kenya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Special needs education often necessitates specialized interventions. In Kenya, the intervention dedicated to the propagation of special needs education is the Educational Assessment Resource Centers. Ideally, EARCs are supposed to assess special needs learners by screening for and identifying possible cases, developing individualized education programs (IEPs), providing instructional plans, and directing placement. Also, EARCs are responsible for supporting schools with special needs learners and providing guidance and counselling services to parents as well as offering training services to SNE teachers (Juma & Malasi, 2018).

Despite being the primary facilitators of special needs education in Kenya, EARCs remain largely inept in the dispensation of their duties. According to Bonjo, Kochung, and Nyagara (2017), EARCs in Kenya perform very little in terms of fulfilling their cardinal objective of assessing special needs children. Similarly, EARCs rarely develop effective individualized education programs to enhance the learning experiences of children with special needs (Zigler,

Lusweti, Macmbinji, Jumba, Kaggi, & Namirembe, 2017). Furthermore, despite the Government of Kenya having recognized new classes of special needs learners, their degree of assimilation into specialized education programs is severely wanting in the selected counties. This is mainly because EARCs in Kenya do not implement effective placement measures (Nyakundi, Awori, & Chege, 2016). Based on this study, these shortcomings are evident in the lackluster performance of EARCs in Baringo, Kakamega, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Elgeyo Marakwet counties.

The subject and function of EARCs as well as the factors impeding their efficacy in Kenya have been extensively tackled (Makanya, Runo & Wawire, 2014). However, there is insufficient empirical data to explain why EARCs fail at the county level. Therefore, the focus of this study is to pinpoint the problems from a county-level perspective.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The impetus for this study was to identify and analyze the issues affecting Educational Assessment Resource Centers in Baringo, Kakamega, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Elgeyo Marakwet counties.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Empirical Review

There exists a general consensus amongst both educational and non-educational practitioners that special needs education programs are necessary to improve the relevance, equity, and access to education and related facilities for all learners (Bettini, Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, Choi, & McLeskey, 2016). In this regard, special needs children are those students who have one or disability causing them to have elevated complexities in learning or in carrying out extracurricular activities in comparison to other children. More often than not, conventional educational programs are designed to cater for the larger percentage of students with no specialized requirements. According to Majoko (2019), such programs renders SNE children incapable of learning or lowers their propensity to comprehend the subjects taught in school. This, in turn, leads to poor performance being posted by special needs students. Sustained low performance may cause a special needs student to lose interest in education thereby making them drop-out of school prior to completing their education.

According to Smeets and Roeleveld (2016), identifying special needs learners is a critical step towards realizing their education. The process of identification entails the pinpointing of a child with apparent or suppressed special educational needs. Often, the effectiveness of the identification process is determined by the mode of identification used as well as the competency of the identifier. Although there are various means of identifying special needs students, empirical research and evidence directly addressing the identification process itself is virtually nonexistent (Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016). Nevertheless, certain approaches have been deemed quite effective when carrying out the identification process. Pursuant to Frankel (2012), one of the most effective methods of simplifying the task of identification is the formulation of a dedicated entity designed to cater for special needs children.

For instance, in the United States, schools are by far the leading entities entrusted with the task of ensuring that special needs children are identified quickly and correctly (Frankel, 2012). To ensure compliance, both the Federal and State governments enforce the rules and regulations governing the access to education for all. In the United States, the primary law dealing with

education for special needs learners is the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). This law provides the basis for punitive measures for schools in case of breach and also provides parents with a legal option of holding the school accountable if a they justifiably feel that a constituent law was not observed for their child (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015).

However, despite having advanced mechanisms for identifying and defending special needs learners, schools in the United States, by virtue of being the primary providers of special needs education, also face a number of challenges. According to Cruz and Rodl (2018), special needs education is negatively affected by minority representation, bullying, classroom space, and parent involvement among other factors.

In South Africa, radical strides have also been made to ease the identification and eventual inclusion of special education needs children. The marked success realized with special needs education entities in South Africa has been as a result of considering education not as an option but as a strategy for development (Pather, 2019). This approach is similar to the one employed in the United States whereby education is perceived as a core determining factor in shaping the course of community, regional, state, and nationwide development. Like in the case of the United States, special needs education entities in South Africa also face a number of problematic issues. Pather (2019) asserts that tell-tale instances of racism, underequipped facilities, and inadequate supply of funds are some of the major issues affecting special needs education facilities.

In Kenya, EARCs personnel are tasked with, among other things, the duty of identifying special needs learners. According to Moyi (2019), this process may be carried out by administering tests, conducting visual observations, or developmental screening procedures. Often, the tests may involve either or both oral and written examinations, whereby the student being tested is required by the EARC personnel to complete a specially prepared oral or written test. The option of visual observations encapsulates the act of scrutinizing the behavior of students by the EARC personnel to determine whether or not a student qualifies as a learner with special needs. Some of the factors considered when using this approach include gross as well as fine motor skills, overall activity level, oppositional behavior, and nervousness (Mwangi, 2016). Developmental screening entails the assessment of developmental stages during immunization to establish whether a child is suffering from a special needs condition.

Although EARCs are fairly functional in the selected counties, research suggests that they are all faced with similar challenges (Elder, Damiani, & Oswago, 2015). These challenges include inadequate funding, acute lack of personnel, evident lack of tools and equipment, insufficient knowledge and skills, and lackluster approach towards special needs education. These barriers impact the National Government's Education for All initiative, which pursuant to Adoyo and Odeny (2015), is deigned to cater not just for the unchallenged children but also for the children with special needs.

To operationalize the Education for All policy, the Kenyan Government introduced the Free Primary Education (FPE) program countrywide. Under this program, all children eligible to join primary schools, irrespective of their prevailing socio-economic, mental and/or physical conditions were required to enroll in primary schools. Pursuant to Raymond and Towett (2015), the FPE initiative yielded positive results in terms of the number of new enrollments of special needs children in primary schools. Nevertheless, this upsurge was not matched by any meaningful increase in resources or formulation of better practices for handling SNE learners.

For example, according to Raymond and Towett (2015), the process of identifying SNE children remained very much the same. This, in turn, led to general categorization and placement of learners in conventional classes. Only a handful of SNE children manage to attend specialized schools in the country. As such, integrated and conventional schools in Kenya rarely implement SNE specific policies. Hence, SNE specific curricula in Kenya are incapable of meeting the needs of SNE learners in totality. Because SNE students often do not learn at the same pace as their un-challenged colleagues, their being placed in general or conventional classes may further impede their ability to understand the material being taught to them.

A major ramification emanating from the above is the increased likelihood of dropping out of school among children with special needs. In Kenya, research has shown that this is evidentially true based on the weak retention and transition patterns observed in learners with special needs (Muhombe, Rop, Ogola, & Wesonga, 2015). Nevertheless, it is possible that the inefficiencies in student retention and transition emanate from factors outside the control of EARCs. Despite this, there exists no uniform consensus of the role played by external factors in influencing how EARCs in the selected counties identify and mitigate the ramifications of external factors. Consequently, this study endeavors to identify the external factors as well recommend possible methodologies of overcoming those factors.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study was based on holistic education theory. The primary tenets of this theory encapsulate the need to provide equitable, inclusive, effective, and accessible education to all children regardless of any pre-existing conditions (Nowak-Łojewska, O'Toole, Regan, & Ferreira, 2019). The holistic education theory, according to Agha and ELDaou (2018), is well suited in expressing the efficacy of special needs educations. To measure the worthiness and overall relevance of EARCs in the focus counties, the Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model was applied.

The primary objective of EARCs in Kenya is to propagate the academic prospects of special needs students. To do so, EARCs must provide accessible and equitable educational opportunities for special needs children. Also, the opportunities must be effective enough to guarantee the inclusion of special needs children in the school system. Consequently, by basing the study on the holistic education theory, the researcher was able to gauge whether the selected EARCs are fulfilling their core mandate as stipulated by the tenets of the theory as well as the primary objectives of the EARCs.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The target population was 47 EARCs in Kenya whereby, through purposive sampling 5 EARCs in the counties of Kakamega, Baringo, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Elgeyo Marakwet were selected. Out of a total of 130 County Education officers, 15 were selected using convenient sampling. Also, 80 special needs education (SNE) teachers were selected from a target population of 150 through convenient sampling. To gather the information, open ended and close ended questionnaires, interview guides, and observation schedules were applied. Statistical package for social science (SPSS) software was used to code and organize the data while open-ended questions were analyzed thematically and presented in form of tables.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Inadequate Funding

Of the 15 County Education Officers sampled 100% (15) of them confirmed that their respective EARCs faced a sustained lack of funds during the last 10 financial years. When presented with the same question, 85% (68) SNE teachers affirmed that their EARCs suffered insufficient budgetary allocations. 15% (12) teachers could not attest satisfactorily to the adequacy or lack thereof of enough funds.

Table 1: Funding Responses

	Period (years)	County Education Officers	Special Needs Teachers
<i>Adequate Funding</i>	10	0	0
<i>Inadequate Funding</i>	10	15	68
<i>Unaware of Funding Situation</i>	10		12
Total Respondents		15	80

The above table indicates the distribution of funding according to the responses collected from County Education Officers and SNE teachers. This funding trend confirms the assertions of Kiru (2018) that Educational Assessment Resource Centers in the selected counties, as well as in other parts of the country, are significantly underfunded.

4.2 Insufficient Personnel

Out of the sampled County Education Officers, 100% (15) held the view that the SNE teachers under their charge were not enough. Similarly, 100% (80) SNE teachers agreed that the number of personnel in their EARCs was insufficient as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Adequacy of EARC personnel

	Period (years)	County Education Officers	Special Needs Teachers
<i>Sufficient personnel in EARCs</i>	10	0	0
<i>Insufficient personnel in EARCs</i>	10	15	80
Total		15	80

Again, this data lends plausible credence to the findings of Juma and Malasi (2018) that the number of special needs personnel is markedly inadequate in EARCs.

4.3 Inadequate Training

60% (9) County Education Officers said that their staffs had the requisite training, while 40% (6) officers pointed out that their staffs required more training. 100% (80) SNE teachers attested that they had enough training as indicated in the following table.

Table 3: Level of training possessed by EARC Staff

	County Education Officers	SNE Teachers
<i>Exceptionally trained</i>	0	0
<i>Adequately trained</i>	9	80

<i>Insufficiently trained</i>	6	0
Total	15	80

The data gathered correlates to a study that pointed to a lack of proper training and skills possessed by SNE teachers. Incidentally, the study indicated that most of the queried SNE teachers felt qualified enough to carry out their job roles despite their educational officers posting reservations with regard to their skills (Carew, Deluca, Groce, & Kett, 2018).

4.4 Lack of Proper Tools and Equipment

All (15) County Education Officers confirmed that their EARCs did not have the correct and modern tools and equipment. Likewise, 100% (80) of SNE teachers affirmed that they lacked the proper tools and equipment. EARCs in the selected counties rarely received new teaching and assistive tools or equipment from the Ministry of Education.

Table 4: Distribution of tools and equipment in EARCs

	County Education Officers	SNE Teachers
<i>Surplus tools/equipment</i>	0	0
<i>Sufficient tools/equipment</i>	0	0
<i>No tools/equipment</i>	15	80
Total	15	80

Furthermore, 100% of the County Education Officers attested that the available tools and equipment were often shared disproportionately among special needs learners.

4.5 Cultural Barriers

All 15 County Education Officers said that there were strong cultural impediments affecting their EARCs. 77.5% (62) SNE teachers confirmed the prevalence of strong cultural barriers hindering their EARCs. 22.5% (18) SNE teachers could not confirm whether cultural barriers were hindering the functioning of EARCs as shown in the table.

Table 5: Presence of cultural barriers

	County Education Officers	SNE Teachers
<i>Strong cultural barriers exist</i>	15	62
<i>No cultural barriers exist</i>	0	0
<i>Not aware of any cultural barriers</i>	0	18
Total	15	80

The data gathered supports Gongera, Muigai, and Okoth (2013), assertions that cultural practices such as belief in curses occasioning the birth or development of disabilities, familial discrimination leading to social stigma, and cultural taboos are impediments to the effective functioning of EARCs. The results strongly point to the prevalence of these beliefs across the communities living in the selected counties.

4.6 Discussion

The results pointedly reveal that EARCs in the selected counties are struggling with financial shortcomings. However, the presence of disputing answers (12 SNE teachers) suggests that County Educational Officers may be withholding budgetary information, thereby causing some

teachers to assume that there were financial deficits. The overall agreement by parents that the EARCs had inadequate fund suggests that the information available to them regarding EARCs budgets is one sided and most likely politically motivated.

In terms of insufficient personnel and training, the findings collected from the County Education Officers suggest that there may be discrepancies in the mode of training used to teach SNE teachers. In terms of training, the totality of agreement displayed by SNE teachers points to the high prevalence of gratuitous justification among teachers thereby suggesting that they would not be welcoming of any and all changes in the EARCs. The fact that most parents did not know whether the SNE teachers had the relevant skills, as indicated by the findings, implies that there are unaware of the who or what an SNE teacher is or should be. The uniform agreement by County Education Officers on the presence of cultural barriers suggests that the communities being served still practice negative connotations towards special needs children.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusions

The literature reviewed in this study show that dedicated institutions dealing with special needs children are vital in enhancing the academic prospects of such students. The literature also identifies the task of identification as one of the most critical in effectuating the correct SNE programs. Also, it indicates that laws and regulations are necessary to ensure that all educative organs operate according to the best practices required by special education initiatives. The study also highlighted the existence of critical challenges which affect the operational capability of EARCs in the counties of Kakamega, Baringo, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Elgeyo Marakwet.

According to the study's findings, these hindrances include restrictive cultural tendencies, inadequate financials, insufficient personnel, lack of proper training, and lack of the necessary tools and equipment. These findings prevent the proper functioning of EARCs in Kakamega, Baringo, Elgeyo Marakwet, Trans Nzoia, and Uasin Gishu counties. The study findings correlate to results availed by Carew, Deluca, Groce, and Kett (2018). According to Adoyo and Odeny, (2015), these problems are not restricted to the focus counties because similar issues have been identified in EARCs located elsewhere in the country. Therefore, the study findings are applicable in directing corrective measures by stakeholders not only in the focus counties but also in other EARCs in Kenya.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher makes the following recommendations: -

- I. That the Ministry of Education in Kenya should reinvigorate the function of EARCs by instituting policies to facilitate further training of SNE teachers. This could be achieved through the implementation of specialized learning programs for SNE teachers on a continual basis. Moreover, the methodologies of training should be harmonized.
- II. That the Ministry of Education and all concerned parties should advocate and also lobby for increased budgetary allocations to the EARCs to facilitate the effective dissemination of services to all children with special needs in the selected counties and elsewhere in the country.

- III. The National and County governments, through the Ministry of Education, should put in place appropriate accountability as well as punitive measures to curb misappropriation of EARC funds.
- IV. The Ministry of Education should empower the EARC teams and other concerned organizations to carry out effective awareness-creation drives be conducted to thwart the continuation of dated beliefs with regard to special needs children.

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