

Good on Paper, Weak on Implementation

Delayed Gains of the Sector Policy for the Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Kenya

Introduction



The 2018 sector policy represents a significant progress in the inclusion of children with disabilities in Kenya. It integrates learners with disabilities into regular schools and enhances the provision of specialized resources, teacher training, and improved infrastructure. The policy promotes full participation and accessibility, emphasizing inclusivity beyond physical access.

Additionally, it fosters integration of health, education, and social services, addressing the holistic needs of learners. If fully implemented, the policy can promote inclusion by ensuring that all learners receive quality education in an inclusive environment and are fully involved in all aspects of school life. The prevalence rate of children with disabilities in Kenya is approximately 11.4%,¹ and their enrollment in schools is uneven. While many of these learners attend regular schools, often in special units attached to mainstream schools, others are enrolled in one of the 338 special schools dedicated to various disabilities.² Even with these efforts, only about 24,000 children with disabilities are in public funded special schools, with many more still out of school or in need of inclusive education opportunities.³

Kenya's commitment to inclusive education is evident in its adoption of progressive policies designed to ensure that all children have access to quality education.

¹ Kenya Institute for Special Education. (2018). *National Survey on Children with Disabilities and Special Needs in Education*.

² Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Education, 2018

³ UNICEF, 2013

⁴ Inclusion and Education GEM Report, 2020

⁵ Ngumbi, E. (2019). *Challenges Facing the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Public Primary Schools in Kenya*.

However, the journey from policy formulation to implementation has proven to be complex and demanding. Despite the framework in place, the practical implementation of inclusive education faces several hurdles such as limited resources, such as inadequate funding, insufficient special education teachers, and a lack of accessible infrastructure, remain significant barriers to implementing inclusive education effectively in Sub-Saharan Africa^{4 5} all these among others impact the ability of schools to meet the diverse needs of all learners. These obstacles contribute to disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for children with disabilities, highlighting a gap between policy aspirations and everyday educational realities.

Part of the findings from a recent stakeholder engagement workshop in Kajiado County highlighted stigma, limited resources, and poor infrastructure are among the hurdles that hinder full implementation of the policy. Statistics show that only 43% of boys and 35% of girls in integrated primary schools are assessed before admission, compared to higher rates in special schools.¹ This policy brief therefore explores opportunities that may realize the recommendations of the 2018 sector policy by examining challenges in implementing inclusive education from various stakeholder perspectives. Additionally, it highlights opportunities that can aid the full realization of the policy to give equal learning opportunity to learners with disabilities.

Challenges Facing Inclusive Education Implementation

Below are some of the challenges identified during stakeholder engagement in Kajiado;

Budget constraints: Inadequate funding hinders schools from providing essential resources like braille books and hearing aids, affecting the quality of inclusive learning. Teachers in most public schools often depend on donations and volunteers to address these shortages.

Ill-equipped Educational Assessment Research Centers (EARCs): Inclusive education requires early assessments and a robust referral system for all learners with disabilities. Kajiado County has only one Educational Assessment and Resource Center (EARC) serving the entire region. Unfortunately, this center is under equipped and lacks experienced specialists. The limited access to well-equipped assessment centers exacerbates the challenges faced, resulting in frequent misdiagnosis and inadequate interventions for children in need.

Lack of awareness and sensitization: Many communities remain unaware of the rights and needs of learners with disabilities, leading to stigma and resistance to inclusive practices. This limits support for inclusive education initiatives and hinders efforts to integrate students with special needs into mainstream schools.

Late diagnosis and intervention delays access to essential support and resources for learners with disabilities hence hindering their development and ability to reach their full potential. This challenge often stems from a lack of early assessment services and awareness, particularly in marginalized areas.

Cultural Beliefs and Norms: Cultural beliefs and norms significantly hinder the inclusion of Special Needs Education in marginalized communities, depriving children with disabilities of educational and social opportunities. A special needs teacher from Kajiado highlighted that many parents in these communities are reluctant to expose their children to society, as disability is often viewed as a curse or bad omen. This societal perception has led parents to hide their children, thus denying them the chance to receive an education. In the Maa community, educating a child with special needs is often seen as a waste of resources. Viewed as a curse in many African societies, disabilities lead to profound social stigmatization, causing families to hide children out of shame.

Poor Infrastructure: Schools in Kajiado lack the necessary facilities and safe environment to accommodate learners with disabilities. “Inadequate access to accessible classrooms, restrooms, and transportation hinders the participation of learners with special needs, resulting in increased dropout rates”, said one of the teachers. Moreover, the absence of supportive resources and assistive technologies limits the effectiveness of teaching strategies aimed at fostering an inclusive environment.

Inadequate Number of SNE Teachers Trainees: Having one or two Special Needs teachers in an entire school is not enough. This shortage limits the capacity to effectively support and teach students with disabilities, leading to under-resourced classrooms. Without enough trained SNE teachers, students with special needs face barriers to quality education, hindering the full implementation of inclusive education policies.

Lack of regular capacity building for SNE Teachers: Another major challenge is the inadequate ongoing training for SNE teachers. Without ongoing professional development, teachers lack the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support learners with diverse needs. This gap hinders the quality of inclusive education, limiting the success of students with disabilities. This knowledge gap, combined with unawareness of relevant policies, often results in schools denying admission to special needs learners, undermining inclusivity efforts.

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In the whole school we are only two teachers who has training in special needs education. It is a burden because after classes I have to go back to teach the special need learners in other classes

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~Study participant

Recommendation

Timely identification and intervention will enable early support tailored to individual learner's needs. Implementing robust screening processes ensures that learners with special need receive appropriate help and services, their needs are well understood for proper placement, therefore fostering academic and social development.

Establish a well-equipped EARCs with a multidisciplinary committee: A diverse committee, including government, education, and health representatives, would lead the strategy, ensuring accurate diagnosis and placement of learners. Strengthening EARCs in every county under a 'Huduma center' model and investing in a robust referral system are crucial for early assessment and intervention.

Adequate funding and resources are crucial for implementing inclusive education, including infrastructure upgrades, specialized materials, and teacher training.

Government and stakeholder investment is vital to ensure accessibility and support for all learners, making resource prioritization essential for success.

Awareness creation and sensitization: Raising awareness is key to inclusive education. Training educators on diverse teaching methods and sensitizing parents and communities dispels myths, promotes support, and ensures a collaborative approach to effectively implement inclusive education.

Community engagement: Shifting societal attitudes toward disability in marginalized communities are crucial to encourage early intervention for children with special needs, countering harmful cultural norms that view disability as a curse. Engaging religious leaders and community gatekeepers can help shift societal attitudes. Cross-sector collaboration and partnerships are essential to overcoming barriers in inclusive education, ensuring support for all children in Kenya.

Improved infrastructure: Sometimes conducive environment just needs minimal modification and adaptation; the governments and educational institutions





should prioritize investment in accessible facilities and resources. This includes retrofitting existing schools to meet accessibility standards, constructing new buildings with inclusive designs, and providing assistive technologies to support diverse learning needs. Additionally, training staff on the importance of an inclusive environment can enhance the effectiveness of these infrastructural improvements.

To increase the **number of Special Needs Education (SNE) teachers**, it is essential to enhance training programs and provide incentives for prospective educators. This can be achieved by increasing funding for SNE courses, establishing scholarships, and creating partnerships with universities for specialized curricula. Additionally, raising awareness about the importance of SNE careers among high school students can attract more individuals to the field.

Regular capacity building: Ongoing professional development programs should be implemented, focusing on inclusive teaching strategies and effective classroom management. Collaborating with educational institutions and NGOs to provide workshops and mentorship can enhance teachers' skills. This continuous learning approach will ultimately benefit learners with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms.

Conclusion

While Kenya's inclusive education policies are commendable, effective implementation requires addressing the identified bottlenecks. By increasing resource allocation, enhancing teacher training, raising awareness, improving infrastructure, and strengthening policy implementation and monitoring, Kenya can bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education.

Call to Action

For successful inclusive education in Kenya, coordinated efforts are needed. Collaboration among stakeholders to address stigma, improve assessments, and allocate resources is vital. The government should waive taxes on essential SNE materials, ensuring accessibility and bridging the gap between policy and practice.

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