

Quality of education offered to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the era of free primary education (FPE) in rural Kenya: Perspectives of educationists, teachers and parents

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Abstract

The education of children with special educational needs (SEN) has been a focus of international inquiry. There is a strong advocacy for the inclusion of children with SEN in regular schools although this remains contentious and challenging. Despite an emphasis by the Kenyan government that children with SEN should be included in regular schooling, there has not been substantial investigation especially in rural settings on how these children can receive quality education. This thesis seeks to address this issue by exploring the perspectives of educationists, teachers and parents on the quality of education offered to children with SEN in the era of free primary education in a rural setting. A qualitative interpretive approach to research was used to generate data through interviews with government officials, teachers and parents, focus group discussions with regular teachers and observations in three schools spread over three rural districts. Thematic analysis was employed in analysing the data. A critical theory approach focusing on social justice and rights of children as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was used as a lens. The findings revealed that despite policy articulation, children with SEN occupied the role of “others” in schools and the society and were described in negative terms. Participants, especially regular staff and parents were emphatic that children with SEN required “experts” and “special” resources both of which were not available in regular schools. The participants felt that the available curriculum was relevant for “normal” children and therefore could not meet the educational needs of children with SEN. The broad conclusion drawn from this study is that there is need to distinctly define the terms inclusive education, special education and mainstream education in a way that the core stakeholders can understand, interpret and implement within their contexts. Designing a means of progress monitoring other than national examinations may help motivate both regular teachers and parents to see the need to have children with SEN in regular schools. There is need for further investigation on how regular teachers can be persuaded from existing beliefs that they are not qualified to teach children with SEN and how to convince parents that their children are worthy of an education.

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