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CHALLENGES PARENTS FACE IN LEARNING KENYAN SIGN LANGUAGE: HEARING PARENTS OF DEAF CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

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CHALLENGES PARENTS FACE IN LEARNING KENYAN SIGN LANGUAGE: HEARING PARENTS OF DEAF CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to find out the challenges faced in learning Kenyan sign language from the perspective of hearing parents of deaf learners.

Methodology: This study employed case study design, qualitative research approach adopting the interpretive paradigm. The study adopted purposive sampling technique to come up with a study sample of 177 informants. Data was collected using interview schedules, Focus Group Discussion guides and Document analysis guide. Qualitative data was transcribed, coded and organized into themes and reported.

Findings: Results revealed that parents had three major challenges in learning Kenyan sign language: that Kenyan sign language was too difficult to learn, it was too costly to learn and that the institutions for parents to learn in were not readily available.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: The recommendations of this study were that; hearing parents of children with hearing impairments be given support in the process of learning Kenyan sign language and that parents should make deliberate efforts to learn Kenyan sign language and other modes of communication in order to communicate with their children with hearing impairments.

Key words: *Challenges, Kenyan Sign Language, Learners With Hearing Impairments, Parents, Learning*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education Policy for Deaf Children, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD, 2016) postulated that children with Hearing Impairments (HI) have a right to full access to quality education and that since persons with HI are mainly visual, sign language and visual strategies must be availed to learners with HI as a birthright. This may be interpreted to mean that if quality education is not availed to learners with HI using visual strategies and in sign language, the policies laid down by World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) would have been contravened. It can also be implied that sign language needs to be availed to learners with HI at home with parents, siblings and care givers where they grow and learn before going to school.

The involvement of parents in their children's education process cannot be over emphasized. One of the key factors is for parents to be proficient in the language their children use for learning and general communication. Reviewed literature evidenced that parents of children with hearing impairment in Kenya have problems expressing themselves in and comprehending signed information Kenyan Sign Language. This presents greater problems when parents are required to assist learners with assignments or give instructions. Further, most parents cannot afford the services of a sign language interpreter for daily life. It becomes necessary therefore, that challenges parents face in Kenya be identified and solutions suggested so that parents can be fully involved in the education of their children with Hearing Impairments. This is the thrust of this study.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition, research has shown that some of the communication challenges between parents and their children with HI are because parents would not learn sign language. According to Gray (2011), when parents of children with HI do not learn how to sign, children with HI lag behind in their cognitive development because of lack of a language of communication at home with parents and siblings. Gray (2011) goes further to explain that, a child who does not have a language of communication early in life, grows totally unaware of the ordinary things going on around them. It is not clear how parents of learners with HI perceive the necessity to learn to communicate with HI learners more effectively though communication is important to educational success for learners with HI.

In addition, a report of the proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism held in Arizona State University, U.S.A., Standley (2005) noted that there is need for learners with HI to have proficiency in a First Language by the time that they enter school and to develop communicative competence and literacy in the first language prior to acquiring literacy in a second language. The report revealed that children with HI from hearing families experienced significant language delay which was detrimental to their educational success. The Symposium recommended that in order to facilitate the acquisition of First Language, it would be necessary to introduce a professional who would provide intensive language instruction for the child with HI and their family and review the current role of the educational interpreter. Getting a professional to work with parents and their children with HI on learning a First Language may not be applicable in families in Kenya given the different cultural and economic contexts between U.S.A and Kenya.

In Kenya, the history of education for learners with HI can be traced back to the establishment of the Kenya Society for Deaf Children (K.S.D.C) in 1958 (Ndurumo, 1993;

Kenya Deaf Resource Centre, 2003 and Kenya Federation of Deaf Teachers, 2004). In the same year, the first unit for the deaf was established in Nyang'oma, Bondo (Randiki, 2002). According to Ndurumo (1993), until the mid 1970s, education for the deaf was viewed as a charitable service pioneered by non-governmental organizations and churches.

Adoyo (2004) carried out a study in Kenya in which out of 450 Children with hearing impairments, only 5(1.1%) had Deaf parents. The rest 445 (98.9%), had hearing parents. Hearing parents admitted communication difficulties with their children which they attributed to lack of knowledge in sign language. Parents' lack of or incompetence in sign language becomes a challenge when they need to communicate values and decisions to their Children with hearing impairments. The study adds that parents realized that they had a primary role to play in the education of their children. This would be successful only if they had a positive view and learnt the language their children with hearing impairments could understand (Adoyo, 2004).

In an effort to establish the extent of implementation of both global and National Policies, African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN, 2013) carried out a review of laws and policies affecting education for the HI in Kenya. The review reported that the Kenya Children's Act 2001 guarantees the right of children to live and be cared for by their parents, and that children with disabilities have the same rights as children without disabilities and should be treated with respect, given medical care and education free of charge or at a reduced cost. The review noted that there was a gap because most learners with HI, by nature of their disability, could only attend boarding schools which were too costly for most parents to afford. As a result, some learners were not receiving the care they were expected to receive from their parents. The review also reported that the constitution of Kenya (2010) Article 7(3b) had committed to promote the development and use of Kenyan Sign Language (KSL). There is a gap in the development and use of KSL because learning centers have not been set up and sign language is not yet in use as official language in all public events.

Further, Kimu (2012) conducted a study in Kenya aimed at understanding and describing how parents and educators experience parental involvement from their own perspectives in public primary schools according to Epstein's typology of parental involvement. The study which used qualitative research approach obtained data through literature review, interviews, observations and Focus Group Discussion methods. The study population comprised one thousand three hundred and seven (1,307) teachers drawn from one hundred and forty one (141) public primary schools. Among Epstein's six types of parental involvement, communicating with the school, helping with home work, learning at home and decision making and collaborating with the community for the purposes of helping the learner were relevant. The study found out that, support services were limited to paying of fees and assisting with homework and at the same time limited by financial difficulties and teacher-parent meetings.

The reviewed literature revealed that though there was policy in place concerning the promotion of the development and use of Kenyan sign language, there were still gaps in terms of the establishment of learning centers and general awareness of the importance of Kenyan Sign Language as an official language in public functions. This study therefore proposes to identify specific challenges of learning Kenyan sign language from the

perspective of hearing parents of children with Hearing Impairments and suggest possible solutions.

3. 0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed case study design, qualitative research approach adopting the interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2009; 2013). The study sought to give detailed description of each unit in context and holistically. Case study was used to enable the researcher to analyze the unit of study in details within its context (Rule & John, 2011; Bertram & Christiansen, 2013; Yin, 2011). The study targeted a population of one hundred and seventy seven (177) purposively sampled informants. Case study data was gathered using different research methods such as, Interviews, Focus Group Discussions and Document Analysis (McLeod, 2008; Yin, 2009). Qualitative data was transcribed and organized into emerging themes in an on-going process. The data was analyzed using the six phases of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and reported in prose form.

4. 0 RESULTS

All parents agreed that it was necessary to learn Kenyan sign language in order to communicate with learners with HI. However, they also observed that in order to learn sign language well they needed to sit under an instructor. Finding institutions or individual instructors for sign language was difficult and costly. Further the parents felt let down by the school and the ministry of education. A representative statement from one parent:

Now, I often wonder who to pay fees for? Is it my child or myself? It is very confusing but I need to learn sign language anyway. I am willing to learn and have even picked a few signs from the child, but where are the instructors? What has the school and the ministry done to assist us? It is expensive for me to work in one town and learn sign language in another. So, currently am waiting for someone to establish a college in my town. (IP018)

The parents had also found learning sign language costly because there was a whole family involved. Whether everyone in the family had enrolled for sign language classes or they decided on one person at a time, it was generally an additional cost in the family budget. In addition, this was a cost parents had to pay because they had a child with HI. One parent reported;

Before our child was diagnosed with HI, we thought we were alright with our communication methods and languages. We had hoped that the many tests would give us a different report. When diagnosis was complete, everything changed. We didn't start immediately but after realizing she was in the family to stay and her condition was not passing, I went for sign language classes and the others followed as funds allowed. (IP08)

Many of the parents were of the view that the school or the government should ensure that parents are trained in sign language as parents could not afford this kind of training.

I find it difficult to talk or is it sign? with my child. The government should make sure that all parents with children with HI are trained in sign language. We need the help of the government because we cannot afford to pay the cost of learning sign language. (IP017)

Others differed with this view and suggested that parents try to learn as much as possible from their interaction with the learners without having to incur any costs.

In our family, Tully (not her real name) is the Kenyan sign language 'teacher' so, we all sit and she teaches us. I enjoy those lessons very much and it gives her a sense of success. We take time to ask questions in sign language but where we can't sign, we write down. Our 'teacher' is very understanding. (IP015).

A few parents were learning sign language though with difficulties. They claimed that sign language was difficult to learn. Some parents, however, declared they had given up a long time ago because sign language was too hard and they were too old.

"Learning a new language is easy when you are younger, but at my age it becomes a real problem. The worst part is that, it is not even a spoken language that am used to." (IP013)

Results from teachers' interviews concurred with the results from parents' interviews. The teachers observed that most parents struggled with Kenyan sign language, while a few did not make any efforts at all. Parents intimated to the teachers that they thought the school was not doing enough to assist parents in learning.

"Most parents dread Kenyan sign language and rely on us to interpret for them whenever they visit and want to communicate with their children." (IT07)

Teachers also observed that there were many parents who had given up learning sign language on account of their age. Others had tried to learn sign language but found the language too hard and hands too heavy.

"Some parents say they cannot learn Kenyan sign language because they are too old. We try to encourage them to learn because they need to communicate about school work even at home." (IT02)

In the focus group discussions parents observed that learning Kenyan sign language came with additional costs. They had to purchase learning materials such as books, dictionaries and videos as well as pay instructors. For most of them this was a cost they were not able to pay though they needed to learn sign language. The following is a representative statement from parents in group one:

"I have been learning for a very long time. So far I only know a few words and cannot carry out a meaningful conversation. I hear that there are colleges they teach Kenyan sign language but I know it will be costly, so I have not tried." (PFG01)

Parents in group two said that they were willing to learn but had challenges finding a place where Kenyan sign language was taught. Parents had to pay to learn and pay for every member of the family willing to learn because they believed in learning the language well.

"I have been trying to find a place around here where they teach Kenyan sign language to adults but I have not found. I am still trying. How I wish the school could take it up. It would save us a lot." (PFG02)

Parents in group three contrasted the view that learning sign language was costly to learn sign language. According to these parents there was no need to spend a lot of money paying for sign language lessons.

It is possible to learn Kenyan sign language without having to pay much. Visit the child in school and interact with peers, spend more time with child. In the process you will learn quite a lot. (PFG03)

Parents in group four claimed that it was too costly to purchase all the necessary sign language texts, videos and pay instructors in order to be able to communicate with their children.

Results from teachers' focus group discussion revealed that most parents were willing to learn sign language but were uncomfortable with the cost that had to go with it. Many times they tried to suggest that the government and schools should pay for the sign language training. However, even then, parents would have to travel to the venue of the training at a cost.

"The school and the ministry of education may organize a workshop or seminar but parents may not raise their own transport to the venue. It is impossible to avoid all costs."(TFG)

A few parents held that they would not learn sign language because they were too old and the language too hard.

"Some say they had tried but cannot learn. The language is too hard and they are too old to learn a new language. This kind of attitude is self defeating." (TFG)

In the documents analyzed, there was evidence that learning sign language had costs to it that someone had to bear. Parents in the previous AGMs had requested the school to organize trainings for them in sign language. The school had promised to plan and communicate the cost.

4.1 Discussion

Following the findings it can be deduced that most parents were willing to learn Kenyan sign language in order to communicate with their children but were hindered by the cost of doing so. Instead, parents expected the school and the government to meet the cost on their behalf. This perspective is supported by MoEST (2009) where government policy stipulated that the Ministry of Education Science and Technology would undertake to promote the development and use of sign language, set up Kenyan sign language learning centers, and create awareness among parents and the communities about the needs of learners among others. This finding is also supported by the study of Kimberly (2010) which found out that most parents' motivation for sign language was so that they would communicate with their children. Therefore, most parents had not learnt sign language claiming they could not pay the cost.

However, there was a contradiction among the kparents themselves concerning whether or not to learn Kenyan sign language. While some parents were willing but were hindered by costs, some others felt that sign language was too difficult to learn and they too old to try learning. Therefore, it seems that for some parents, high cost of learning sign language was just an excuse for not trying to learn. According to Adoyo (2004), parents admitted they had a primary role to play in the education of their children with HI but lacked the language with which to communicate with the same children. Though related studies indicated parents' desire to Kenyan learn sign language or their inability to learn, none of the reviewed studies mentioned anything on the cost of learning sign language. Lack of a common mode of

communication between parents and their children with HI was likely to impact negatively on the children's self worth and overall school performance.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study concluded that in the perspective of most parents of learners with hearing impairments learning Kenyan sign language was too costly for them, too difficult to learn and the institutions for parents to learn were scarce. There were more parents willing to learn than there were those unwilling. The perceptions of the parents on learning sign language meant that they could not be fully involved in their children's education and life in general. Most parents felt they could not understand their children with Hearing Impairment and vice versa. As a result, there was often a communication breakdown between hearing parents and their children with Hearing Impairments.

Recommendations

The study recommended that parents of children with hearing impairments be supported by the relevant ministry in terms of awareness creation and provision of opportunities to make the learning of Kenyan sign language a reality in their lives.

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