

Group Work as a Determinant for Academic Progress of Learners with Hearing Impairment in Early Childhood Education in Turbo Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract

The requirement by the Kenyan government to have equity in provision of education services has led to a paradigm shift towards inclusive education. Existing evidence however tends to suggest that children with Hearing Impairment (HI), on average are not socially or emotionally comfortable in mainstream settings. Besides, although progress in the teaching and learning of children with HI exist, other evidences of the relative lack of academic improvement among this group of children still emerge. This study therefore aimed at establishing the effects of group work offered to children with HI in the inclusive context on their academic progress. It specifically sought to establish the effects of group work on academic progress of this category of learners. The study was conducted in Turbo Sub-county of Uasin Gishu County in Kenya and adopted casual comparative research design. Both stratified random and simple random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 117 ECDE teachers and 59 head-teachers from the 76 ECDE centers in the sub-county. Mean response scores together with associated standard deviations were used to examine prevailing levels of identified support services in the centers. Multiple regressions were used to determine contributions of the support services on academic progress of children with HI. The study established that support services offered to children with HI in the regular classroom, positively and significantly affects their academic progress. The study however revealed that inclusion of children with HI in regular classroom is a major challenge to teachers who were not trained to handle this category of learners together with lack of group work to support them academically.

Key words: Group work, academic progress, hearing impairments

Introduction

Hearing impairment can be defined as hearing loss that prevents a person from totally receiving sounds through the ear. If the loss is mild, the person has difficulty hearing faint or distant speech. A person with this degree of hearing impairment may use a hearing aid to amplify sounds. Group work provides a context in which individuals help each other; it is a method of helping groups as well as helping individuals; and it can enable individuals and groups to influence and change personal, group, and organizational and community problems (Brown 1992).

Access, equity and quality remain key elements of the educational component of

social pillar of the Kenya Vision 2030. The objective of this pillar is investing in the people of Kenya in order to improve the quality of life for all Kenyans by targeting a cross section of human and social welfare projects and programs. The concern placed on children with Hearing Impairment (HI), is underscored by the many past and recent studies focusing on language, and literacy development in children with mild to severe HI. These studies reveal that children with hearing impairment differ from children with normal hearing in the quality and extent of the auditory linguistic experiences. In addition, the studies often report wide variability in the performance outcomes for children with HI (Chimedza & Peters, 2003).

Despite the variations shown in experiences between children with HI and those with normal hearing in auditory linguistics, studies by the researchers cited above provide contradictory findings about possible sources of individual differences among children with HI. This then raises the question of type of intervention or support that ought to be given and at what time.

The bottom line of the concerns raised globally in relation to children with HI is that such children are at risk for delays in communication and language development, poor academic achievement, delays in critical thinking skills and problems with social and emotional development. Several findings have pointed to the positive impact of early identification and intervention on better language, speech, and social emotional outcomes on children with HI (Calderon & Naidu, 2000; Moeller, 2000; Yoshinaga- Itano). Most professionals and countries have resorted to interventions to enhance the development of children with hearing impairments (Arehart & Yoshinaga-Itano,

1999). In support of early intervention, Ndurumo (1986) asserts that intervention in academic education for children with HI assists in preparing this category of children to compete with hearing peers.

Group work also emerges from literature as a crucial support service to offer to children with HI. Contributing to the importance of group work, Luckner, Schauerman and Robb (1994) contend that group work enhances friendship, in which case children with HI spend time with, learn from, nurture and are nurtured by children with normal hearing. This in essence broadens experiences of the two sets of children helping them to stretch and grow. According to Corbett (2001), putting children with HI in groups together with children with normal hearing, would address issues like discrimination, harassment, negative attitudes among others. The implication of these findings is that group work is an important learning and social activity for all children. Consequently, there is a need to consider how children with HI and those with normal hearing can be made to work together in groups.

It is with the backdrop of such conflicting findings regarding inclusion of children with HI into general education that warrants an investigation of establishing the effect of support services offered to children with HI in the inclusive context on their academic progress.

Statement of the Problem

With the paradigm shift to inclusiveness of children with HI in regular education classroom, the assumption is that such placements can turn out to be academically and socially beneficial. Studies conducted in the recent past are however reporting conflicting findings. Existing evidence indicate that children with HI, on average are not socially or emotionally comfortable in mainstream settings as they are in classrooms with other children who are not like them (Antia & Kriemeyer, 2003).

Although evidence of progress in the teaching and learning of children with HI exists (Lang, 2003), other evidence still emerges of the relative lack of academic improvement among this group of children (Qi & Mitchell, 2007). Indeed, a plethora of research suggests that the self-concept of students with hearing disabilities improves the most in the most segregated settings (Jones, 2005; Anita 2003 & Kriemeyer, 2003; Sapere, LaRock, Convertino, Gallimore & Lessard, 2005). Coupled with the negative attitude among teachers towards this group of learners, and the level of unpreparedness among the teachers to handle children with special needs, several questions emerge with respect to inclusion of children with HI into the mainstream school programs. Are the strategies adopted to support this group of children adequate? Do they provide for the range of social and economic needs of these kinds of children? And more importantly, are they tailored to enhance academic progress of these children? This study was therefore designed to establish the effect group work offered to ECDE learners with HI within the inclusive framework, on their academic progress.

Objective of the Study

The study was guided by one objective: To examine the effect of group work on Academic progress of learners with HI.

Research Methodology

The study adopted causal comparative research design that was best suited for the deductive aim of the study. This design as noted by Blaikie (2003) enabled the effect of support services on children academic progress that was measured, while using the existing public primary schools. The study was conducted in public primary schools in Turbo Sub-County. The target population for the study comprised of all Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) centers in the sub-county. The study units were ECDE teachers and head teachers of the public primary schools and targeted to use a total of 228 individuals (152 ECDE teachers representing 2 from each center, and 76 head teachers representing each of the 76 centers). Table 1 gives a summary of the target population.

Table 1: Target Population

Category of Respondent	Number selected	Total target population
ECDE teacher	2 per school	152
Head teacher	1 per school	76
Total		228

Both stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 59 head teachers and 117 teachers.

This study utilized questionnaires and interviews in data collection. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher to capture the teachers' perception on effect of group work on academic progress of learners with Hearing Impairment. Triangulation was done by developing interview schedule for principals. The instruments were validated and reliability was tested by use of one sample test. Cronbach alpha value of 0.850 was obtained which indicated internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

Group Work as a Support Service for Learners with HI

The objective of the study focused on examining the effect of group work on academic progress of learners with HI. Group work was assessed using six structured items and one open ended item. First, ECDE teachers were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with the six structured items. Responses were elicited on a 5-point scale (1-strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- moderately agree, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree). Second, they were asked to comment on how effective group work was in integrating children with HI in regular classroom contexts. Teacher's comments were examined for prominent, recurrent themes using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted with the goal of processing data inductively rather than deductively (Seidman, 1996).

The mean response scores together with associated standard deviations were used to analyze responses on the structured items. This was necessary so as to identify the typical response and consistency among respondents in responding that way. In addition, skewness and kurtosis statistics were computed to show the distribution of response scores about the mean.

Results displayed in Table 2 revealed that respondents appeared to agree with all the items. In particular, respondents tended to agree that pupils were made to feel that they needed each other to complete group tasks ($M=4.04$, $SD = 0.811$); that pupils were grouped in small groups consisting of children with different levels of hearing ($M=3.97$, $SD=1.098$); that groups were assigned a variety of learning activities that could integrate children with HI ($M=3.70$, $SD = 1.186$); and that groups were deemed not successful until each member had learned the intended material ($M=3.76$, $SD=1.122$).

Respondents moderately agreed that children with HI actively participated in group activities (M=3.40,SD=1.164) and that pupils were given time to analyze how well the group was functioning (M=3.39, SD = 1.022).

Table 2: Use of Group Work as a Support Service for Learners with HI in Turbo County

Questionnaire items	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Pupils are made to feel that they need each other to complete group tasks	4.04	.811	-.667	.169
2. Pupils are grouped in small groups consisting of children with different levels of hearing	3.97	1.098	-.463	-1.274
3. Groups are assigned a variety of learning activities that integrate	3.79	1.186	-.670	-.702
4. Groups are deemed not successful until each member has learned the	3.76	1.122	-.930	.125
5. Children with HI actively participate in group activities	3.40	1.164	.052	-.760
6. Pupils are given time to analyze how	3.39	1.022	-.311	-.566

Teacher comments on the effectiveness of group work in integration of children with HI in regular classrooms were further analyzed thematically and results presented in Table 3. Five themes emerged from the ECDE teachers in relation to effectiveness of group work.

The first theme that emerged is that of learner confidence. Respondents noted that group work tended to raise confidence levels in children with HI. They attributed this gain in confidence to interaction between the two sets of children. During group interactions, children with normal hearing often assisted those with HI.

Socialization emerged as the second key theme recurring across responses. Respondents observed that group work enhanced socialization and enabled children to gain a lot in sharing ideas in the integration set up. The view among respondents was that in group socialization, children tended to learn more.

The third theme that was consistent among respondents was motivation. Respondents noted that children with HI felt motivated during group work since they were not segregated. Under this set up, children with HI participated actively in class work.

Two themes focused on the negatives ECDE teachers associated with group work as a support service. The fourth theme that emerged from collated responses was communication barrier. Respondents were of the view that children with HI were not adequately attended to because of the communication barrier. They conceded that at times these children were punished for lack of participation when in fact the problem was lack of communication. More importantly, respondents indicated that children with normal hearing often found it hard to assist children with HI and therefore group work was practically difficult.

The final theme that emerged was that of negative attitude. Respondents noted that they at times they lacked patience to accommodate children with HI. Besides, it was also revealed that children with HI were not well involved since they were at times viewed inferior and were segregated upon. Respondents further reported that children with HI were often viewed as a challenge to the speed of content coverage.

Table 3: ECDE Teachers Perceptions of Use of Group Work in Teaching Learners with HI in Turbo County

Item	Themes	Typology of Comments
Comment generally on effectiveness of group work in integrating children with HI in regular classroom	Confidence	Group work raises confidence levels in children with HI
	Socialization	HI learners interact with normal of hearing children and gain confidence
		Learners are able to interact
		Group work enhances socialization
	Motivation	Learners with HI gain a lot in sharing ideas in integration set up
		Learners socialize and learn more Other children in the group assist
	Communication barrier	Children with HI participate actively in class work Children with HI are not attended to Sometimes they are punished for lack of participation yet the problem is communication
	Negative attitude	Normal of hearing children are not able to assist children with HI due to communication barrier
		Teachers at times lack patience to accommodate children with HI
		Children with HI are not well involved as they are at times viewed to be inferior and sometimes segregated
		Children with HI are a challenge to speed of content coverage

The implication of the descriptive and thematic analysis of the ECDE teachers' responses with regards to group work is that group work is regarded as central to integrating children with HI into the regular classrooms. In most of the centers, learners were being encouraged to work together through small heterogeneous groups. Despite the positive strengths such as building, confidence, socialization

and motivation which could be drawn from group work, negative attitude towards children with HI and communication barrier remained key challenges to the use of group work as a support service for children with HI.

The findings that use of group work in teaching children with HI impacts positively on their academic progress are consistent with findings of other studies. According to Luckner, Schauerman and Robb (1994) group work enhances friendship and hence encourages children with HI to spend time with, learn from, nurture and get nurtured by children with normal hearing. Similar views with regards to the role of group work are shared by Corbett (2001) in observing that putting children with HI in groups together with children with normal hearing addresses issues like discrimination, harassment, and negative attitude.

The finding concerning group work in relation to academic progress of children with HI is further supported by Doyle and Dye (2002). In their contributions to the guide for mainstreaming the student who is deaf or hard of hearing, these authors observed that a team approach leads to successful mainstreaming of deaf and hard to hear children.

It is significant to note that teachers in the study area opted for preferential seating for children with HI. This finding is consistent with the findings by Heckendorf (2009), which indicate that moving a student to a second or third seat provides them with more visual access to happenings within the class. Besides the author notes, students can be able to see what some of the other students are doing without having to turn around.

Conclusion

Group work as a teaching strategy has the potential to not only motivate learners with HI, but also enables them to socialize with peers of normal hearing. This helps boost their confidence and also raises their self-concept. Group work can however be abused as a result of negative attitude shown towards children with HI by both teachers and peers. Besides, communication barrier between teachers and children with normal hearing on the one side and children with HI on the other possess a major challenge to the success of this strategy.

Policy Implication

The concept of inclusion of children with special needs in regular classroom taking root, there is a need for the Government to consider funding public primary schools which host these units so that learners can be motivated and maximize their potential through learning from each other and from children with normal hearing.

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