



## **Examining the Methods of Teaching the Mentally Challenged and Communication Deficient Learners in a Selected Primary School Special Unit in Nairobi**

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### **Abstract**

*This study sought to examine the methods of teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners in a selected primary school special unit in Nairobi. Case study design was employed by the study. The sample consisted of mentally challenged learners (n=10), communication deficient learners (n=3), special education teachers (n=4) and a head teacher (n=1). The study used purposive sampling technique to select the special education teachers and the head teacher while simple stratified random sampling procedure was used to categorize the learners with disabilities. Data Collection instruments included interview schedules, observation and document analysis. Interview schedules were used to collect data from the teachers and the head teacher. The study used SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to analyze data. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the data. From the analysis, the study found out that although both mentally challenged and communication deficient learners have different special needs, there are some learning methods and aids that are applicable to all of them. The major methods as the study found out were: grouping the learners into different groups that are given enough space and time for learning, demonstration and repeating the work that had been done previously. The learning aids used were: Stencils used for drawing and charts containing letters of the alphabet. The study recommends that the government, teachers, non-governmental organizations and the community in general should work together to improve the methods of teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners in various institutions so that they acquire quality education.*

**Keywords:** Teaching Methods, Mentally Challenged, Communication Deficient Learners, Intellectual Disability

### **1. Introduction**

Mental retardation is a global challenge that many countries deals with. It is estimated that 83 million people in the world are mentally retarded (Patidar & Gameti, 2018). Being mentally challenged refers to the impairment of adaptive functioning during the developmental stage of individuals under the age of eighteen years. The American Association for Intellectual and Development Disability changed the term mental retardation to intellectual disability (ID). This is after they deemed the term mentally retarded to be associated with social stigma (Jacob, 2012).



Teaching children who are mentally challenged require special skills and training. This is because these children require extra attention and support in doing any activity (Therapy travellers, 2018). Special educators and trainers are always faced with an uphill task of assessing, evaluating and programming a child with special needs. A thorough evaluation is needed to assess the services that a child with special needs requires (Johny, Harish & Anoop, 2012).

The methods and strategies that are employed in teaching are as important as the knowledge imparted. According to Klein and Cook (as cited by Rutere, 2013) teaching methods are not fully effective without well thought out strategies. Further, they front that teaching strategies enhance and enrich teaching methods which improves the learning outcomes of mentally retarded learners. Even with application of strategies and methods, the concept of individual differences is as important. This concept should therefore inform the strategies and methods to be employed in learning. Understanding the concept of individual differences makes the teacher aware of variations amongst learners and how to overcome them. For one to understand the different developmental levels among individuals, one must comprehend the concept of individual differences. The ultimate goal of education is achieving integral growth in an individual. This is the wholesome growth in all aspects. For anyone to achieve this growth, then proper guidance and assistance should be accorded (S. Maheshwari & V. Maheshwari, 2014).

According to Piaget theory, empirical evidence alone is not sufficient to answer the problems involved in understanding the meaning and acquisition of knowledge. Piaget looks for links between experience and learning, not from a theoretical exposition about the meaning of experience, but rather from empirical studies and observation about how children learn. In terms of deprived application of Piaget's theories in educational practice, the insight into the "development stages" of learning is of great importance. It alerts educators to the gradual assimilation of knowledge based on the learner's ability to assimilate structure and relate any learning experience. If one simply adds more information, one may in fact be inhibiting the possibility of learning. There is more involved in learning than simple accumulation of facts. Piaget also offers a basis to look closely at the function of dialogue in any learning process, particularly in the way the educator's own mental framework can enter into the conditioning and interpretation of the learner's responses (Hamlyn, 1971). As such, teaching methods are important in ensuring effective content delivery.

There is indeed need for a teacher to be competent and flexible in terms of delivery in a way that will increase learning and satisfaction among students. The teacher emerges as a key player in effective learning processes. Teachers play a central role in the implementation of daily living skills to mentally challenged learners. These skills enable the learners to master self-help skills such as personal grooming among others (Odongo, 2016). In Turkey, many teachers find direct instruction as a suitable mode of teaching. This if followed by group work where learners help



one another. These modes of teaching were influenced by the physical conditions and the intensive curricula. These methods yielded the best results in grade four, six and eleven (Birgili, Kiziltepe, & Seggie, 2016).

The Kenyan government put a policy that requires special needs children to be integrated into schooling system with the non-disabled children. Stakeholders in government and schools have been exploring the ways to implement this policy. This inclusive policy stipulates that disabled children should be educated with non-disabled of the same age. This policy aims at enabling regular learning in regular classrooms for all children (Odongo, 2012). Inclusive education being a relatively new concept is vital in planning and implementation. Teachers on practice are also likely to have extended contacts with disabled and non-disabled students in class. This early preparation in their curricula increases the eventual probability of success of inclusion (Odongo & Davidson, 2016).

Active participation of students in learning activities ensures effective learning outcomes. However, it is not enough to only have student participation. It is important to ensure that in learning, the elements of communication, creativity and innovation are embedded in the learning process. As such, the aspect of cooperative learning emerges. This in essence means student-centered teaching methods. In this learning process, the teacher not only interacts with students but also with the help of interactive learning programs that include: audio, video and computers (Alias, Hussin, Hassan, Adnan, Othman & Hussin, 2018). For learners with disabilities, teachers ought to use easy learning materials for easy visualization, interpretation and memorization (Bulloch, 2020).

Both parents and teachers are critical components in the development of mentally challenged individuals. Effective teaching methods and appropriate learning materials employed by teachers in school will help intellectually disabled students to overcome minor challenges in learning processes. On the other hand, support from the family will help the individuals develop independence in carrying out their day to day (Jiu, Zulfia, Rahayu, Kep, Putra & Wuriani, 2020).

Teachers are critical in the overall success of any education system. Teaching is a noble cause that is geared towards change of behavior and abilities in humans. That said, achieving the milestones with regard to curricula requires application of effective teaching methods (Dorgu, 2016). Therefore, a teacher uses various methods to achieve desired results. Methods used by teachers range from group discussions, demonstrations, lectures and assignments. All these methods are applicable to learners with mild intellectual disability. Other methods such as discussion, storytelling, demonstration and drilling can be used on learners with moderate intellectual disability. Various other devices and techniques can be used by teachers to aid them in classrooms that include: screen reader technology, audio-visuals, and printouts (Saputri &



Hakiman, 2020). Teaching methods and use of appropriate materials have been argued to bring about effective learning outcomes. This study therefore sought to examine the methods of teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners in a selected primary school special unit in Nairobi.

## 2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative paradigm using a case study design. Qualitative method was used to generate data from the interview guides. The targeted population in this study consisted of teachers, head teacher, support staff and learners with mental and communication deficit from a selected primary school special unit in Nairobi. This population was particularly targeted since it provided key information on the methods and effectiveness of teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners from special unit of the school.

The study employed purposive sampling. The sample in the study consisted of ten (n=10) mentally challenged learners, three (n=3) communication deficient learners, four teachers (n=4), one head teacher (n=1) and one support staff (n=1). In total there was a sample of nineteen respondents (N= 19).

Quota sampling procedure was used to sample learners with disabilities into two: the mentally challenged and communication deficit learners. In this technique sample members were drawn from various target population strata. From mentally challenged strata, ten respondents (50%) were selected purposively.

Purposive sampling design was used when selecting the head teacher, support staff (1) and all the teachers in the unit were involved, since they are the key informants whose opinions and ideas are of specific interest to this study.

Jacaranda special school for the mentally challenged learners which shared the same characteristics as the target population was used in piloting the instruments. Once the instruments were obtained back, they were sorted out and ambiguous items were cleaned and necessary changes made. Further triangulation, where different participants were involved (special unit teachers, head teacher, learners) to ensure the reliability of the instruments.



### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Demographic information of the respondents

All the special education teachers who participated in the study were female. It is also noted that 3 of them were in the 41-45 age bracket while only one (1) was in the 35-40 years age bracket. Half of the respondents (2) were assistant teachers and the others (2) were special needs teachers in Mbagathi Primary School. Only one head teacher participated in the study. He had acquired a Diploma in Education and had a working experience of two years in the current school.

#### 3.2 Methods used for teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners

The study intended to find out the various methods for teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners in Mbagathi Primary School, Lang'ata Division. In order to solicit information the teachers and the head teacher were asked to point out which methods they used to teach the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners and the learning aids that they have to assist in teaching.

##### 3.2.1 Methods used for teaching Mentally Challenged Learners

The findings of the study are summarized in the tables below according to information provided by the Special education teachers, the head teacher, the researcher's observation and analyzing documents. Table 1 shows the methods that the special education teachers use in teaching the mentally challenged learners.

Table 1: Methods used to teach mentally challenged learners

	Methods
Special education teachers	Individualized Education Program (I.E.P) Observation of activities Demonstration of activities
Observation	Grouping of learners into groups and giving them enough space and time for learning and demonstration, Repeating the work done previously, The sitting arrangement of pupils was facing the blackboard, Assigning less work to pupils, Providing freedom of expression to pupils and integrating of learners who develop skills of reading and writing to normal classes.

According to table 1, most of special education teachers were asked to explain the methods that they use in teaching the mentally challenged learners. Most of them indicated that the most commonly used methods include: Individualized Education Program (I.E.P); observation activities and demonstration of activities. One of the teachers indicated that:



We normally use Individualized Education Program whereby the child learns at his or her own pace. It's a process that requires a lot of patience from the teacher (Mbagathi Primary School teacher 3, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009).

The study also observed the following: the special education teachers grouped the learners into different groups according to their capabilities and given enough space and time for learning and demonstration; they repeated the work that had been done previously; the sitting arrangement of the pupils was facing the chalk board; the teachers gave less work to the pupils; freedom of expression was provided by the teachers and finally, those pupils who developed the skill of reading and writing were integrated in the normal classes.

### 3.2.2 Methods used for teaching Communication Deficient Learners

The study also was interested in finding out the methods that the special education teachers use in teaching the communication deficient learners. Table 2 shows the methods that teachers use in teaching these learners.

Table 2: Methods used to teach communication deficient learners

	<b>Methods</b>
Special education teachers	Carrying out blowing exercises Observation of activities Demonstration of activities
Observation	The teachers demonstrated activities before allowing the learners to perform them; the learners were placed in different groups according to their individual capabilities and were given different tasks to carry out and also allocated enough time to complete the tasks; the teachers stood in front of the class and communicated mainly by use of the sign language and the activities that had been done previously were repeated.

According to Table 2, majority of the special education teachers indicated that the most commonly used methods in teaching the communication deficient learners include: carrying out blowing exercises; observation and demonstration of activities. One of the teachers participating in the study reported that:

In order for the learners to exercise their tongues, we normally carry out blowing exercises which involves candle blowing. (Mbagathi Primary School teacher 1, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2009)

On the methods that are used in teaching the communication deficient learners, the study observed that: the teachers demonstrated activities before allowing the learners to



perform them; the learners were placed in different groups that were given different tasks to carry out and also allocated enough time to complete the tasks and the activities that had been done previously were repeated.

### 3.3 Learning aids used for teaching the Mentally Challenged and communication deficient learners

The study sought to find out the learning aids used for teaching both mentally challenged and deficient learners.

#### 3.3.1 Learning aids used for teaching Mentally Challenged Learners

The study further sought to find out the learning aids used for teaching the mentally challenged learners. Table 3 shows the learning aids that teachers use in teaching these learners.

Table 3: Learning aids used to teach the mentally challenged learners

Method	Learning aids
Special education teachers	Threading beads, Charts containing alphabetical letters, Drawing stencils, Slades for practicing to hold pencils
Observation	Papers for sketching purposes, paper stencils containing words and numbers, chinks for writing on the slades and books for writing and reading practices.
Document analysis	Schemes of work, Lesson plans, Assessment records, Enrollment records, Class registers

According to Table 3, most of the special education teachers indicated that the most commonly used learning aids include: threading beads; charts containing the alphabetical letters; drawing stencils and slades for practicing how to hold pencils. One of the teachers said that:

In order to improve on the concentration of these children, we normally use beads whereby they learn how to thread them. They further learn how to arrange them in a certain order, pairing them and even matching them (Mbagathi Primary School teacher 4, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2009).

The study also carried out an observation on the learning aids used to teach the mentally challenged learners and found out that the materials used are: papers for sketching purposes; paper stencils containing of words and numbers; chinks for writing on the slates; books that are used for writing and reading practices and charts containing the letters of the alphabet.

#### 3.3.2 Learning aids used for teaching communication deficient learners





The study also was interested in finding out the learning aids that the special education teachers use in teaching the communication deficient learners. Table 4 shows the methods that teachers use in teaching these learners.

Table 4: Learning aids used to teach communication deficient learners

Method	Learning aids
Special education teachers	Candles and musical instruments for blowing, Chewing gums for speech exercises, Items used in daily life for instance: brooms, cups, shoes
Observation	Charts containing information, stencils containing letters of the alphabet, candles and musical instruments.
Document analysis	Schemes of work, Lesson plans, Assessment records, Enrollment records, Class registers

According to Table 4, Majority of the teachers indicated that the most commonly used learning aids include: candles and musical instruments specifically for blowing; chewing gums for speech exercise and items that are used in daily life for instance brooms, cups, brushes among others .One of the teachers participating in the study explained that:

Since the major problem of these learners is in their speech, we use aids that specifically exercise the tongue, mainly candle blowing, the use of chewing gums and also blowing musical instruments. The musical instruments also help them to appreciate sound (Mbagathi Primary School teacher 2, 7<sup>th</sup> August 2009).

From the observations made, the learning aids that the special education teachers use to teach the communication deficient learners include: charts containing information; stencils containing letters of the alphabet; candles for blowing and musical instruments.

The analyzed documents in the study showed that the instruction materials records used to teach the both categories of learners included: schemes of work; lesson plans; assessment records; enrollment records and class registers.

#### 4. Discussion

This study was able to establish that most commonly used methods for teaching the mentally challenged learners in Mbagathi Primary School special unit as indicated by most of the teachers included: Individualized Education Program (I.E.P) where the learner is taken and treated as an





individual whereby he/she learns at his/her own pace; observation of activities being performed by the teachers and demonstration of activities. From the observation made, the following methods were noted: the special education teachers grouped the learners into different groups that are given enough space and time for learning and demonstration; they repeated the work that had been done previously; the sitting arrangement of the pupils was facing the chalk board; the teachers gave less work to the pupils; freedom of expression was provided by the teachers and finally, those pupils who developed the skill of reading and writing were integrated in the normal classes. This methods of learning that is much student centered yields greater educational outcomes. As Alias et al., (2018) indicates, active participation of students in learning processes has effective outcomes.

The methods for teaching communication deficient learners that were commonly used included: carrying out blowing exercises; observation and demonstration of activities. Teachers demonstrated activities before allowing the learners to perform them; the learners were placed in different groups that were given different tasks to carry out and also allocated enough time to complete the tasks; the teachers stood in front of the class and communicated mainly by use of the sign language and the activities that had been done previously were repeated. As Jiu et.al (2020) fronts, use of adequate and proper teaching methods and materials overcome the minor challenges in the learning processes of intellectually disabled children.

The study further sought to find out the learning aids used for teaching the mentally challenged learners. Most of the teachers indicated that the most commonly used learning aids included: threading beads; charts containing the alphabetical letters; drawing stencils and slades for practicing how to hold pencils. This can imply that the mentally handicapped learners need to be taught using materials that develop the mind and keeps them active. According to Bulloch (2020) it is important to use large learning materials which can be easily visualized and interpreted by mentally challenged learners. Through document analysis, the study found out that instruction materials were used to teach mentally challenged learners and they included the following type of records: schemes of work; lesson plans; assessment records; enrollment records and class registers. These were to assist in the recording of the work covered by the teachers and the activities mastered by the learners.

The teachers were then asked to identify the methods that have been most successful in teaching both categories of learners. The most successful methods as identified by majority of the teachers for teaching the mentally challenged learners include: demonstration and observation of activities and individualized education program while the most successful methods of teaching the communication deficient learners include the use of blowing exercises and demonstration of activities. It further observed that the materials used are: papers for sketching purposes; paper stencils containing of words and numbers; chawks for writing on the slates; books that are used for writing and reading practices and charts containing the letters of the alphabet. This can imply that the mentally handicapped learners need to be taught using materials that develop the mind and keeps them active.



The study further observed that there were similar methods that were used by the special education teachers in teaching both the mentally challenged and the communication deficient learners. These methods included: the special education teachers grouped the learners into different groups that are given enough space and time for learning, demonstration and repeating the work that had been done previously. Additionally there were some similar learning aids that are used to teach both mentally challenged and communication deficient learners. They include: Stencils used for drawing and charts containing letters of the alphabet. Instructional materials were also used to teach both categories of learners included: schemes of work; lesson plans; assessment records; enrollment records and class registers.

From the findings, it can be noted that the methods used for teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners are almost the same. For instance, demonstration of activities and observation were indicated by most of the special education teachers as used to teach both categories of learners. The study further found out that demonstration and observation of activities have been very successful methods of teaching the learners.

## **5. Conclusion**

The major methods of teaching as the study found out were: grouping the learners into different groups that are given enough space and time for learning, demonstration and repeating the work that had been done previously. The learning aids used were: Stencils used for drawing and charts containing letters of the alphabet. The study also established that although both mentally challenged and communication deficient learners have different special needs, there are some learning methods and aids that are applicable to all of them. The study recommends that the government, teachers, Non-governmental organizations and the community in general should work together to improve the methods of teaching the mentally challenged and communication deficient learners in various institutions so as they acquire quality education.



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