

Challenges in the Use of School Readiness Screening Tool for Learners with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

The School Readiness Screening test Tool is important because it is used by Educational Assessment and Research Centres; Professionals in the Educational Assessment Centres determine school placement and intervention strategies for learners with Special Needs in Pre-school programmes. The tool has been in use in the Educational Centres in Kenya since 1984 up to date and yet its efficacy is still in doubt. The purpose of this study was to find out the challenges in using School Readiness Screening Tool for Learners with Special Needs in Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The study involved 25 Educational Assessment professionals who were the coordinators of the Centres purposefully sampled from City, Urban, Rural and Semi-arid areas in Kenya. Data was collected by interview schedule, observation schedule and document analysis guide. The study revealed that; the School Readiness Screening Tool does not screen all kinds of disabilities The study recommended that additional test content should be incorporated to the School Readiness Screening Tool to screen the contemporary Special Needs.

Keywords: Challenges, School Readiness, Screening Tool and Learners with Special Needs

INTRODUCTION

Educational assessment in Kenya has been practised since 1984. The process of screening using the School Readiness Screening Tool determines the category of special needs and disabilities that a learner may have and the placement options. In Kenya Screening of School Readiness is done using a Screening tool at Educational assessment and Research Centres. The changing dimension in Special Needs Education is reflected in various reports, task force and educational reviews initiated by the government among them the Republic of Kenya (2008), which initiated the process of setting up facilities that could support parents and their children before admission to schools.

The Kochung' taskforce of 2003 established a big gap in the screening process and recommended that the services of Educational Assessment and Resource Services should be expanded to each Sub-County. The Koech Report (Republic of Kenya, 1999) emphasized the need of assessment personnel to support parents and their children in schools, Educational Assessment and Resource Centres and at home. These reviews specifically pointed out the need for assessment service and how they could be expanded to support parents and their children with special needs both at home and in school.

The basis for establishment of Educational and Assessment Research Centres in Kenya in 1984 was for screening learners of pre-school age for early intervention, correct institution placement, identification of Special Needs and disabilities. The school readiness screening tools since introduction in 1984 screened the four traditional categories of learners with special needs that is mental handicaps, visually impaired and those speech and language

difficulties. The diversities of children with special needs have since increased to include learners with autism, learners with specific learning disabilities, learners living under difficult circumstances, learners with multiple handicaps and learners with emotional and behavioural problems (Kochung', 2003). The Kochung' (2003), taskforce established that the first process of screening gives a picture of the presence of difficulties for the children with diverse Special Needs. In response to these recommendations, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Republic of Kenya, 2004) established diagnostic facilities to facilitate assessment.

Currently, in all the Educational Assessment and Research Centres in Kenya, the assessment is carried out by use of School Readiness Screening Tool. The tool screens learners who are blind with autism, with specific learning difficulties and with mental retardation. After screening referral is done for intervention and placement, in addition, the tool cannot screen contemporary diversity of learners with Special Needs and Disabilities. Screening and Assessment of children with Special Needs is a multifaceted process that moves from general screening activities to a more specific and narrow diagnosis. Educational Assessment determines existence of a development delay, identifies strengths and needs, and develops strategies for intervention. Development perspectives and theories on child development are based on the development of screening procedures.

In Kenya, Republic of Kenya (2003) points out that, Special Needs Education has been expanding rapidly in the last two decades beginning 1970s to 2000. In 1970s, a few residential schools catered for those children with disabilities. The report further emphasized that parents of children with special needs be involved in all decisions made concerning assessment, placement and intervention. The Koech Report (Republic of Kenya, 1999) emphasized the need of assessment personnel to support parents and their children in schools, educational assessment research and resource centres and at home.

Major counties in Kenya have an Educational Assessment and Research Centres, where parents with children with special needs take their children of ages 0 to 18 years or children of the age of school going for educational assessment. These centres give guidance and counselling to the parents; do follow up programmes in schools and in homes for children not of school age. The educational assessment teachers organize and conduct courses for all those involved in education of children with special needs. The professionals work with the parents and assessment professionals in the production of appropriate low cost Aids that can be used by children with special needs, to meet their individual disability needs. According to the Ministry of Education (Republic of Kenya, 2005), the main objectives of Educational Assessment and Resource Services were to:

1. Identify children with disabilities as early as possible,
2. Provide educational assessment services for children with special needs,
3. Guide and counsel parents,
4. Refer learners with special needs to educational facilities,
5. Provide peripatetic services for children in ordinary schools,
6. Help build small homes for the purpose of integration.

In the Educational assessment research and resource Centres specially trained assessment teachers screen children with special needs for the purpose of detecting difficulties and thereafter making educational decisions. The assessment teachers are supposed to work in collaboration with other professionals as an interdisciplinary team include medical personnel such as: physicians, dieticians, physiotherapists, occupational therapists social workers, and psychologists. Parents are informed of the role of any professional who is interacting with

the child. All referrals are explained to the parents so that the parents are aware of what the professional intends to undertake. If a parent is referred to a professional, the referral letter is supposed to explain why the child is to be further examined by the professional. Educational Assessment writes referral for intervention or for school placement. This referral does not give much detail of strategies to be carried out or strengths and weakness of the learner/child.

The policy document from the Ministry of Education (Republic of Kenya, 2009) explains some of the initiatives addressed to streamline Special Needs Education (SNE). After assessment, the assessors, which are referral, prescribe placement activities and home based programmes. Referral may be to various professionals like the psychologists, doctors, social workers ophthalmologists for further diagnostic tests. Referral can be for placement in educational facilities (special schools, inclusive schools), rehabilitation centres and small homes. The assumption here is that the professionals after screening discuss the results and referral with the parents (Kochung', 2003).

As a matter of procedures, parents present their children at Educational Assessment and Research centre on appointment. Many parenting seeking information on development information and achievement age level milestones delays, which impacts to School Readiness Screening. The process of screening using the school Readiness Screening Tool give a chance to learner with disability or Special Needs to be identified. This gives opportunity for early intervention to be done which prevents impairments becoming disabilities and disabilities becoming handicaps. Screening of School Readiness is done by Educational Assessment professional at regional Centres in Kenya. The efficacy of this tool in screening all the categories of learners and children with Special Needs and Disabilities for placement and intervention strategies has not been established. This study therefore sought to examine the challenges in the use of School Readiness Screening Tool for Learners with special needs.

Research Objectives

The study therefore aimed at exploring challenges in the use of School Readiness Screening Tool for Learners with special needs.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed descriptive survey design. Gall (2014) describes descriptive design as collecting data in order to test hypothesis or answer questions concerning the current status of the subject study. Descriptive survey design was chosen because it is appropriate for educational fact finding as it yields a great deal of information, which is accurate (Orodho, 2009).

Methodology

Purposive sampling technique was used to select 25 Coordinators out of the 32 Coordinators for Educational Assessment Research and Resource Centres selected from City setting, Rural setting, Urban, Semi-arid and Arid setting from the main nine regions of Kenya namely: Nairobi, Western, Central, Eastern, Coast, North Eastern, Nyanza and Rift Valley across the forty-seventy Counties of Kenya. Observation Guide was used to gather "live" data from "live" situations given that, in an observation, the researcher looks at what is happening (first hand data), to "understand the context of programmes, to be open-ended and inductive, to see things that might be otherwise be unconsciously missed, to discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations, to move beyond perception-based data (e.g. opinions in interviews), and to access personal knowledge" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2014). Interview Schedules were used to obtain information from the Educational

Assessment professionals. The informants were interviewed in their respective environments. All the formal interviews were tape-recorded. To establish reliability of research instruments, a pilot study was conducted using test – retest method. The two tests were administered at an interval of 2 weeks. This was done so as to ensure consistency, dependability and adequacy of the instruments. Pearson’s r was used to determine correlation of instruments which were judged to be reliable at the value of magnitude of relationship of 0.7. Face validity of the instruments was confirmed by specialists in the area of study at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology together with Directors of Quality Assurance Ministry of Education. Data was analysed by use of descriptive statistics. Data was organised, categorised under various emergent themes and presented in tables, graphs and narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Challenges in Use of School Readiness Screening Tool for Learners with Special Needs

The study sought to find out challenges in using the School Readiness Screening Tool for learners with Special Needs. The study findings were summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges in Meeting Specific Individual Needs by the Education Assessment Professionals (n=25)

<i>Challenges in Meeting Needs by the Education Assessment Professionals</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
To test a child who is blind, with low vision, need for tactile and embossed objects, used of sign language necessary for learners with hearing difficulties	5	20.0
Check list are missing in the screening tool	2	4.0
Co-operation from the parents and regular teachers and the time	2	8.0
Fear of strangers or strange environment make some not responding to test items totally as expected	1	4.0
In some cases the number of children to be screened for is overwhelming to service provider hence inability to meet individual needs, incompetence of the service provider	1	4.0
Lack of reliable guardian or parents to give reliable background information	2	8.0
One teacher delaying with several children with different specific individual needs	1	4.0
Professionals do adaptation during the screening process	2	8.0
Provision of specialized equipment by delivery services in placement and intervention programme	1	4.0
Strategies under visual discrimination cannot be used in testing a child with Visually impaired, some of these try to discriminate, cannot be used to test Hearing Impaired	1	4.0
The check list is missing in the screening tool	1	4.0
The tool has no materials to screen all areas of disabilities	1	4.0
Unique and heterogeneous nature of needs	1	4.0
There is no one specific or common language to communicate with learners with specific learning difficulties	4	16.0

It is clear from Table 1 that; co-operation from the parents and regular teachers is not forthcoming. The screening process needs adequate time and preparation. The mode of

communication to learners with Special Needs varied from mother tongue to Kiswahili, English and mixed depending on age of the learner and cultural background. There is need for appropriate adaptation of materials to meet the individual Special Needs for the blind, low vision, autistic and with speech and language difficulties in screening process. The major challenge in using the School Readiness Screening Tool from the study findings is the Scope of School Readiness Screening Tool.

Challenges in the Scope of School Readiness Screening Tool

Educational Assessment and Resource professionals stated that School Readiness Screening Tool does not screen areas especially of learners with in autism. It does not screen children with severe cerebral palsy, emotional and behavioural difficulties, speech and language difficulties, mentally handicapped and visual impairment. Respondents were to indicate the scope of the School Readiness Screening tool. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges in the Scope of School Readiness Screening Tool (n = 25)

<i>Response</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
All diversities of disabilities	3	12.0
Assume all children to be screened have no special needs	7	28.0
The screening tool does not all screen diversities of disability	14	56.0
None committal	1	4.0

Table 2 shows the findings of the study in relation to Scope of School Readiness Screening Tool, in relationship to diversities of Special Needs and disabilities. Majority (56.0%) of the Education Assessment and Resource professionals stated that the School Readiness screening Tool does not screen all categories of contemporary Special Needs and Disabilities, the categories are namely; learners who are blind, with autism, specific learning disabilities, mental retardation, with speech and language difficulties, children with severe cerebral palsy, emotional and behavioural difficulties, epilepsy and severe motor difficulties. And 28.0% of the Education Assessment professionals felt that the School Readiness Screening tool content focuses only on children/ learner with no Special Needs and Disabilities. There is therefore need to bring all the stakeholders together with the professionals in the process of validation, development and legislation of the manual and the materials used for screening.

CONCLUSIONS

The study conclusions on Challenges in use of school readiness screening tool for learners with special needs were as follows:

Challenges in the Scope of School Readiness Screening Tool

The findings revealed that Screening using School Readiness Screening Tool used by Educational Assessment and Resource professionals does not screen areas especially of learners in following categories: Learners with Autism, learners with severe cerebral palsy, emotional and behavioural difficulties, speech and language difficulties, mentally handicapped and visual impairment. The tool does not also screen Special Needs related to emotional and behavioural difficulties, epilepsy, physically handicapped, visually impaired

and learners with specific learning difficulties and learners with severe motor difficulties, and learners with speech and language difficulties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendation was made:

Since the School Readiness Screening Tools materials cannot adequately screen the contemporary categories of learners with Special Needs and Disabilities. Additional test content strategy should be devised. There should be the use of Braille materials, laminated coloured pictures, large print for Low vision, cognitive developmental checklist. Additional content in the referral form for more details of intervention and placement strategies and sustainable multidisciplinary approach in the screening process.

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