

Effect of Language and Speech Impairments on Early Learners in Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Language and speech development lay the foundation for a child's academic, emotional and social success. The goal of this research was to understand the Effect of Language and Speech Impairments among Early Learners in Kenya. It utilized desktop review approach whereby secondary sources of data namely government reports, academic papers as well as publications by relevant stakeholders were scrutinized for relevant empirical data informing the research question. The research yielded qualitative data which were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that language is foundational in the learning process, and that the period before 8 years is formative and is a developmental timing associated with critical periods when speech and language develop rapidly. Effects experienced by children with SLI include learning and behavioral difficulties associated with reading during early childhood and later school years and that the impairments are more common among children from economically challenged households. Findings also revealed the need for capacity building of stakeholders working with children on early identification, assessment, intervention and referral system. Kenya has enacted legislations and policies to support children with language and speech difficulties. The research recommended creation of awareness on identification, assessment, intervention and referral process for early learners with language and speech difficulties. Assessment and intervention plans should preferably be made by multidisciplinary teams. The enacted legislations and policies need to be operationalized in order to benefit children with SLI.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the basis of all communication. Speech and language impairments are notable when a child fails to achieve developmental milestones characteristic of the domain. Although there are individual differences on how children attain language and speech milestones, those with the said impairments are usually way behind their peers in this regard. Children with speech and language impairments usually manifest challenges with receptive or expressive language. In Early Childhood Development and Education ECDE, Speech and language impairments affect how a child expresses themselves, experience the world around them, process, decode, analyze and comprehend information. Language forms the foundation for all learning. It influences how children communicate ideas, retain, recall information and remain involved at school, as they relate with peers and teachers. A strong command of language is therefore critical to a child's classroom and future academic success (Sherred,2021).

Swerling (2024) elucidates that about 40-75% of children with speech and language impairments have problems learning to read. Effective early interventions work to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

The period between birth and five years encompasses what is believed to be the formative years. It is a developmental timing associated with critical periods or sensitive phase during which speech and language develop rapidly, hence children are likely to benefit from developmental stimulation that is matched to their individual needs and abilities (Ryugo, limb & Redd,2000; Mahoney &Wiggers, 2007) cited by (Okinyi, 2023). Further, programs that maximize on interventions during these formative years are found to have the best

outcomes for children with language and communication impairments, reiterates (Okinyi, 2023).

The government of Kenya in line with the sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four (4) is committed to provide quality education to all children including those with speech and language impairments. Other Legal documents which provide similar directions include: The Constitution of Kenya (2010), the Basic Education Act (2013), The Children Act (2022) and the convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The Prevalence of disability and special needs in Kenya could be as high as 15% of the population, which translates to over 6.6 million Kenyans including children and youth (WHO and World Bank 2011) cited in The Kenya National Survey on Children with disabilities and Special Needs in Education (2017).

In Kenya, the prevalence of Speech and Language impairments is recorded at 0.9%. This population would benefit immensely if stakeholders would learn the effects that language and communication impairments have on children. It is against this backdrop that this research sought to enumerate the effect of language and communication difficulties on early learners. This will enable stakeholders dealing with children's issues to conceptualize the needed support for this cohort.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children with Speech and Language Impairments SLI experience learning and behavioral difficulties associated with reading during early childhood and primary school years. These problems are known to persist through high school and may deteriorate over time (Redmond & Rice 2002) cited by Tag Clinic (2022).

In Norway, Joner, et al., (2023) investigated how children with language difficulties are identified, as well as the adapted provision given in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) before referrals are made to The Educational Psychological Service (EPS).

To this end, a qualitative content analysis of 20 documents of four children identified with language difficulties were conducted using observations of social settings to identify language difficulties. The EPS discovered a larger spectrum of language difficulties, usually omitted in according to ECECs observations. Findings showed omission of the adapted provision given in ECEC before the referral. Adaptation was also missing between the referral and the decision on special needs assistance. The research recommended that a deliberate target of the gap between when a referral is made and when special needs assistance is received be factored in the ECEC services.

In Australia Burgoyne, et al., (2019) researched on a large sample of ($N = 569$) children at school entry. Children completed tasks measuring oral language (expressive and receptive grammar and listening comprehension), reading and reading-related skills (one word reading, letter-sound knowledge, phonic awareness, quick automatized naming) and non-verbal IQ. The children were assessed six months later. Results showed that 6.88% of them had speech difficulties, which were associated with poorer non-verbal IQ, oral language and reading relative to children without speech difficulties. A mediation model demonstrated that the relationship between speech difficulties and later reading was entirely facilitated by phonetic awareness. These findings showed the relationship between speech difficulties at school entry can result in difficulties in acquisition of phonetic awareness which in turn are associated with difficulties in learning to read. Hence children with speech difficulties should be assessed at or even before school entry and monitored and interventions provided for oral language difficulties and for delays in reading development, early interventions would ameliorate such difficulties. This research shows a contextual gap in knowledge as the Australian context is different from Kenyan.

Joner, et al., (2023) posits that according to the white paper 'Early intervention and inclusive education in kindergartens, schools and out-of-school-hours care', many children experiencing speech and language delays get help too late. Such children are not heard or understood and hence develop and learn less than they could have done with better adapted educational approaches (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). To mitigate these challenges, early assessment and follow up is important for the affected children.

In India, a cross-sectional study was conducted at a pediatric outpatient department (OPD) of a tertiary care

teaching hospital. The sample consisted of 1658 children 1–12 years who attended the pediatric OPD during the study period. Results showed that 42 children (2.53%) had speech and language delay while 3 had comorbidities (Sunderajan and Kanhere (2019).

Mwoma and Pillay (2015) in their study focusing on Orphans and Vulnerable Children OVC's in public primary schools in Soweto South Africa noted that one of the effects of language and communication impairments on early learners was that children from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced challenges related to psychosocial support due to lack of relevant interventions by qualified personnel as the parents could not afford to pay for the needed professional services. This cohort was found to be in need of educational interventions in order to safeguard them from the risk of becoming infected with HIV due to reduced parental care and protection as well as increased susceptibility to abuse.

Adebayo and Mabuku (2014) carried out descriptive research on the impact of speech and language disorders on pupils' learning and socialization in schools of Kalomo District, Zambia. The sample consisted of 48 pupils with speech and language impairments purposively selected from 6 schools. The results of the study revealed that the performance of pupils with speech and language impairments in English Language was low, but were average in their socialization. It was also discovered that 77.2% variance in academic performance was accounted for by the level of speech and language disorders. The positive beta value of 11.885 showed that, the less the severity of speech and language disorder, the better the academic performance of pupils. It was recommended that teachers make early identification of pupils with speech and language disorders upon enrolling in schools for early educational interventions and that District Education Boards organize sensitization programs on the teaching and socialization of pupils with speech and language disorders.

The Kenya National Survey on Children with disabilities and Special Needs in Education (2017) clearly states that the government of Kenya has committed itself to realization of the right of education for children with disabilities SLI included. This has been through signing of regional and local conventions.

Kiogora (2021) carried out an investigation that adopted a descriptive research design. It targeted 121 parents who had visited The Kenya Institute of Special Education KISE in 2019 and 2020 for speech and language therapy and 33 teachers who taught children with speech and language disorders. Secondary data was collected for this study. The study revealed that providing education for children with special needs is one way of ensuring that their right to basic education is protected. The effect of failure to provide children with this right is far reaching as the said children would be unlikely to realize their full potential. This research was not categorical about the effect of language and communication difficulties on early learners in Kenya, a gap the current research seeks to fill.

METHODOLOGY

The design adopted by the current research was descriptive. This is because the research sort to describe the current status of The Effect of language and communication impairments on early learners' phenomena. The approach used was desktop review whereby literature searches focused on language and speech impairments among early learners. Government sources, academic papers and other empirical works published in reputable research journals were reviewed for relevance to language and speech impairments. Data were analyzed thematically.

FINDINGS

The research findings were as follows; Language is foundational in the learning process and is pivotal to a child's classroom and future academic success. Hence children with language and speech difficulties require interventions to help them attain their developmental potential

The period before 8 years is formative and is a developmental timing associated with critical periods or sensitive phase during which speech and language develop rapidly. Developmentally appropriate interventions tailored to meet children's individual needs yield best outcomes. Multi-disciplinary teams are recommended in designing

of interventions. This would help early learners to benefit from this developmental window hence equipping them for academic and future career wellbeing.

Children with Speech and Language Impairments SLI experience learning and behavioral difficulties associated with reading during early childhood and later school years.

Another Effect of SLI in early learners is that when their unique educational needs are not met, the country's commitment to provide quality education to all children including those with Special Needs and Disabilities is still not attained.

Capacity building of stakeholders working with children on early identification, assessment and interventions of language and speech difficulties would help them to support a holistic interventional process that would help these children to realize their full potential.

Professional Support such as educational and psychosocial services for children with SLI are needed. The referral process should also be made clear.

Poverty has a significant effect on language and speech difficulties in early learners in that the parents lack resources needed to support the unique learning process of children with language and communication difficulties.

As a country Kenya has made great strides in enactment of legislations and policies however, gaps in their implementation have left the unique needs of children with language and speech impairments unaddressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need to create awareness on identification, assessment, interventions as well as the referral system for children with language and speech difficulties among stakeholders.

A multidisciplinary team should be involved in determining assessment outcomes and subsequent holistic age-appropriate interventions based on the child's unique needs.

Operationalization of legislations and policies that address the unique needs of children with language and communication difficulties is needed so to benefit the intended population.

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