



**DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED LEARNERS IN KENYA:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract:

History informs the present and helps in prediction of the future. This paper examines the historical development of special education for the Visually Impaired (VI) learners in Kenya with key focus on establishment of the institutions offering special education for the VI. The paper presents the strides made and the challenges experienced in the development of this type of education from the time it was introduced in Kenya up to the present. Historical research design was employed in data collection, analysis and interpretation. Data was evaluated through external and internal criticisms. The historical inquiry was done through collection of archival data through archival research, collection of data through interviews and research into secondary materials in libraries. Data collected was analyzed qualitatively through triangulation and deduction of themes. The research findings in the paper provide an overview of the state of education for the visually impaired learners in Kenya. The research findings also reveal the disintegrated efforts in training of the blind before the establishment of the first educational institution for the VI in 1946. The paper presents the developments realized thereafter such as development of other institutions and increased enrolment. The findings thus present the strides, struggles and challenges encountered in terms of access in the process of providing education for the VI learners in Kenya. The study came to the conclusion that provision of education for the VI in Kenya has changed from charity model in 1940s to a human right model at the present.

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1. Introduction

The provision of education for the Visually Impaired (VI) learners, as part of the global commitments to quality Education for All (EFA) has gained reasonable development globally over the last couple of decades (Korir, 2015). However, such education is still faced with challenges relating to insufficient funding, lingering negative societal attitudes towards people with visual impairments, and inadequate policy as well as research attention (Oketch, 2009). In Kenya, while much has been achieved in the quest for EFA, particularly at the primary school level (Government of Kenya [GoK], 2015), the provision of education for the VI has not received commensurate policy, fiscal, and research attention (Kiarie 2004).

Education for the VI falls under the general category of Special Education (SE), which provides suitable adjustments in syllabi, methodology, educational materials, mode of communication and the learner's environment so as to meet the needs of learners with special needs (Gargiulo, 2003). Other categories of SE includes education for the: hearing impaired, physically impaired, mentally handicapped, multi handicapped, gifted and talented and socially disadvantaged persons such as street children (Gargiulo, 2003).

Globally, there has been a considerable proportion of the population with visual impairments through history. By 2012 for instance, over 285 million people in the world had visual impairments with 39 million being totally blind and 246 million having moderate to severe visual impairments (WHO, 2012). The WHO (2012) report also shows that close to 90 percent of these people with visual impairments live in developing countries such as Kenya. In Kenya, the 2009 census report indicated that 1.3 million people had disabilities with 25 percent of them having visual impairments (Government of Kenya [GoK], 2010). This group of the population needs to be fully educated just like the other general population. This is because if not well educated and their special needs met, the group would be rendered dependent and thus affect the normal development of a nation.

While there has been some developments with regard to education for the VI in Kenya (Kiarie 2004), most of the aspects with regard to such education have not been adequately addressed (WHO, 2012). Considering the population of the VI persons in Kenya, the number of institutions catering for their educational needs is inadequate. For instance, there are six special primary schools and five special secondary schools besides 19 units for students with visual impairments in regular education schools (MoEST, 2016). These institutions are inadequate to effectively cater for VI learners who form about 0.8 percent of the total learners' population in Kenya (GoK, 2010). The schools for the VI are few considering that learners have to travel over long distances in order to access them and this locks out most of the potential learners from accessing

such education. In 2015 for example, only 21 percent of visually impaired children were attending school (Nguyo, 2015). This implies that the majority, 79 percent, of visually impaired children did not have access to education. It is in this regard that this study set out to examine the establishment of special education institutions for the VI in Kenya through a historical perspective. The findings of the study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in history of education as well as in special education. Such knowledge may help in improving SE through the identification of challenges and strategies raised in education of the disabled and as such, benefit interested future researchers on SE.

2. Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and it employed the historical research design. This involved systematic location, collection, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions concerning past events, which is the intent of a historical research. The study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources included archival data and oral evidence from informants. Archival data search included analysis of reports as well as original documents such as educational reports and minutes of relevant meetings as well as records from special schools for the VI. To ensure reliability of the data collected, the researchers carried out a dual process of establishing the authenticity (external criticism) of the sources and validity of their contents (internal criticism) as suggested by Parkash (2007). This was further enhanced by use of triangulation as suggested by Guion, Diehl & McDonald (2013). After the collection of data, the data was verified and validated before being used as historical evidence for the study. The evidence was then analyzed qualitatively. The developments in education for the VI as acquired from documentary sources and oral interviews were analyzed qualitatively through triangulation and emerging themes deduced.

2.1 Early Educational Activities for the VI in Kenya

Even though the first institution in Kenya to offer education for the VI persons was established in 1946, there is evidence of some disintegrated efforts that were not only aimed at caring for the blind but also aimed to offer some form of training to them. The first form of these care and educational services can be traced to the Church Missionary Society missionaries Ludwig Krapf and Johann Rebmann who arrived in Kenya in 1844 and 1846 respectively. In their mission station which they had established at Rabai, Rebmann and Krapf set up a school for rehabilitating former slave children, some of whom were blind (Khanani, 2015).

It was not until 1942 that slightly more organized and focused training for the VI was initiated on a voluntary basis by the Salvation Army mission in Nairobi (KNA, MOH/3/282). This was facilitated by Mrs. Colonel Barell, an experienced person in training of the blind who had worked with the blind for several years in Jamaica. She

started by gathering a few blind persons into temporary quarters in Nairobi and began teaching them how to read by the Braille system (KNA, DC/TTA/3/15/1). The voluntary efforts to train the blind by Mrs. Barell can therefore be cited as the first formal training in Kenya that specifically targeted the blind. Even though this training at Nairobi was at such a small scale, it set the pace by showing that the VI could also be trained effectively.

In 1944, the Kenyan government became interested in the experimental activities of training the blind by Mrs. Barrell and therefore gave the promise of financial assistance to the SA mission on condition that they would organize and maintain on a larger scale the welfare work for the blind which had already commenced (KNA, MOH/3/282). This position was then discussed by the Salvation Army leadership in the same year who agreed that training should be put on a sound basis with government support. Plans were therefore made to move the training to Thika, a town in central region of Kenya. Accordingly, the Institute for the Blind was opened at Thika, early in 1946. The official opening of the institute was presided over by His Excellency, the acting Governor Mr. G.M. Rennie on Wednesday, 30th January, 1946.

The institute was to cater for the training of blind Africans while the non-Africans were guided to seek for such services overseas (KNA, MOH/3/282). The institute started with an accommodation capacity of twenty five students. Admission to the institute was intended for the blind persons from the following groups of people: Ex-servicemen from East African Territory; Civilian male adults under 25 years of age and without dependents; Boys from 8 years and above. The institute was therefore meant for training of male persons of different ages. The institute did not however cater for the training female persons until the year 1954. As a pioneer institution for the blind in the larger East African region, Thika Institute for the Blind admitted students from all the territories within the East African region. The institution thus catered for blind students from Tanganyika and Uganda besides those from Kenya. This was done on the basis of application by potential learners from the other territories and availability of admission slots at the institute (KNA, MOH/3/282).

2.2 Development of Primary School Education for the VI in Kenya

Primary School education for the VI in Kenya can be traced back to the education that was offered at Thika Institute for the Blind from the time of its establishment in 1946. Primary school education at the institute commenced in form of what was called 'Academical education' as derived from the term academic education. In the mainstream education system in Kenya, the primary education level consisted of six years before 1950 since the education structure in place was that of six years of primary schooling, two years of intermediate schooling and four years of secondary schooling (6-2-4) (Sifuna & Oanda, 2014). Nevertheless, the academic education offered at the institute did not adhere to the six years since the education provided was not for examinations but was mainly offered as a starting point for learners before they could undertake trade courses. This applied to children and adolescents but the learners who

were considered over age were not allowed to undertake academic education but started trade training directly (KNA, MOH/3/282).

The academic education at Thika Institute for the Blind comprised of some aspects that were related to what was being taught in the main stream primary schools. Such aspects included reading, writing, arithmetic, English and Swahili grammar, geography and history. The depth of these subjects was however shallow with main focus on the basics. In addition to these subjects, there were other aspects in academic education such as hygiene and handwork that were aimed at enabling the blind learners to be as independent as possible. In offering these academic subjects at Thika Institute for the Blind, English was the preferred medium of instruction with the first lessons covering the alphabet written in Braille. The value of instruction in English was appreciated in that Braille literature in English language was plentiful and easily accessible at that moment. There was however no such Braille literature in local languages (KNA, MOH/3/282).

The duration through which academic knowledge was offered alongside vocational training at Thika Institute for the Blind was considered as experimental period. In December 1953, the government formed an ad hoc committee for the blind that brought a major shift in the nature of education offered at Thika Institute for the Blind. The ad hoc committee was established as an interim measure until such a time the proposed new foundation for the blind was established. The committee resolved to change the Thika Institute for the Blind to a primary school and to therefore remove the non-primary pupils by the end of 1954. The ad hoc committee together with the institute's management agreed that the primary school was to be mixed, with approximately one-third of the pupils to be girls. In 1954, Thika Institute for the Blind therefore changed its name to Thika School for the Blind forming the first special primary school for the VI in Kenya. This led to the admission of the first six blind girls to formal schooling in Kenya.

The School Management Committee (SMC) further agreed that pupils to be enrolled were to be carefully selected with a view to a reasonable proportion of them being capable of proceeding for further studies. The SMC suggested that the District Education Officers could, with guidance, select a number of suitable candidates but the final selection was to be carried out by a staff member of Thika School for the Blind. The SMC further drew a three year plan in which the school was to have increased enrolment as well as introduction of teacher training programs. The program for the development of the school as an eight year primary school with accommodation for 100 pupils and an attached Teacher Training Center was thus envisaged. This implied that the school was to offer eight years of primary schooling as in the mainstream education since the system in place which had commenced in 1952 was 4-4-4 (Sifuna & Oanda, 2014).

By 1956, the primary school was on course. The school registered its first candidates for Kenya African Preliminary Examinations (KAPE). The School also adopted an eight year academic program which comprised of four years of primary

schooling and four years of intermediate schooling after which industrial and vocational training could be commenced. The development of Thika Institute for the Blind to a primary school led to the realization of a need to create more schools for the VI. This led to the establishment of other schools by the same SA church as well as by the Catholic Mission. Such schools include St. Lucy’s School for the Blind which was established by the Catholic Mission in 1958, St. Oda School for the Blind which was established by the Kenya Society for the Blind in collaboration with the Catholic Mission in 1961 and Likoni School for the Blind which was established by the SA church in 1965 (Orinda, 2008). Other schools for the blind that have been established since then include Kibos School for the Blind in 1965 and St. Francis School Kapenguria for the Blind in 1979 (MoEST, 2016). Table 1 gives a summary of Special Schools for the Blind currently in Kenya.

Table 1: List of Special Primary Schools for the VI in Kenya

| School | County | Year Established | Established by |
|----------------------------------|------------|------------------|------------------|
| Thika School for the Blind | Kiambu | 1946 | Salvation Army |
| St. Lucy’s School for the Blind | Meru | 1958 | Catholic Mission |
| St. Oda School for the blind | Siaya | 1961 | Catholic Mission |
| Likoni School for the Blind | Mombasa | 1965 | Salvation Army |
| Kibos School for the Blind | Kisumu | 1965 | Salvation Army |
| St. Francis School for the Blind | West Pokot | 1979 | Catholic Mission |

Source: MoEST (2016)

Table 1 indicates that there are only six special primary schools for the VI in the entire country. It is also important to note that establishment of these schools for the VI was spearheaded by Christian missions and charitable organizations and not by the government of the time. While (Orinda, 2008) points out that the schools for the VI were started by the Christian mission groups and not the government, this study established that the government of the time was involved in various ways towards the establishment of these schools. Mutua and Dimitrov (2001) noted that even though education for the VI in Kenya was started in 1946, it is only in recent years that it received considerable support towards attaining the needs of the VI. This is indicated by the delay in policy formulation and the slow expansion of schools that cater for VI learners (Mutua & Dimitrov, 2001). For instance, educational programs for learners with low vision was absent until the 1980s when it started in integrated schools with the assistance of the Ministry of Education and several NGOs among them Christofel Blinden Mission (CBM) and Sight Savers International (SSI). It is inferred from Muchiri (1982) that the reason for this neglect could be attributed to the negative societal attitude that persons with impairments such as the VI were incapable of engaging in gainful employment.

By the year 2016, there were six special primary schools for the VI as well as 19 units for the VI in mainstream schools spread across the country. Some of the schools that have special units for the VI include Muslim Primary school in Kitui, Illacit Primary in Loitoktok, Kiminini Primary School in Kitale, Turkana Integrated Primary

and Kajiado Boys Primary School (MoEST, 2016). These schools and units collectively provide access to about 0.8 percent of the total learners' population in Kenya (GoK, 2010). This shows that there is tremendous progress that has been made through the years in provision of education for the VI. While there is still much to be done, increase of access to primary school education for the VI is a step towards realization of Universal Primary Education.

2.3 Development of Secondary School Education for the VI in Kenya

Despite the establishment of the first institute for the blind in 1946, there was lack of special secondary school education for the blind for several years up to the year 1967. The education provided at Thika Institute was more of elementary in nature with main focus on equipping learners with simple vocational skills that would enable them to be more independent in life. As time went by however, there was eminent need for provision of secondary school education especially after the institute was transformed into a primary school. Learners from the primary school required to proceed with secondary education necessitating the arrangements for secondary schooling for the blind learners.

Prior to the establishment of secondary school section at Thika School for the Blind (TSB) in 1967, most blind learners from TSB primary and other special schools for the blind went into tertiary institutions to pursue vocational and industrial training. These institutions included the vocational center at TSB, Machakos Training Institute for the Blind and Kolanya Institute for the Blind in Busia among others. A few other students however joined mainstream secondary schools where they learned alongside learners without visual impairments. As one of the informants explained, the experience for these learners was challenging because they were to work extra hard in order to catch up with sighted learners by use of their Braille machines for writing (G. Milimu, Oral Interview, June 13, 2018).

Concerted efforts to establish access to secondary education for VI learners started in early 1959 when the school management committee of Thika Primary school for the Blind resolved to establish a secondary stream at the school (KNA, BY/12/21). This resolution was however not implemented due to financial constrains at the school as well as the intricate logistical challenges. In 1960, the Provincial Education Officer of Central Province and the head teacher of Thika High School Mr. G. Wright met to discuss the possibility of Thika High School admitting visually impaired learners from Thika Primary School for the Blind (KNA, BY/12/21). The two officials agreed to enroll the visually impaired students joining secondary school to Thika High School as from 1961 (KNA, BY/12/21). This agreement was made on condition that the students passed Kenya African Preliminary Examinations (KAPE) just like their sighted peers. In the year 1961, six blind students from Thika Primary School for the Blind were enrolled at the school (TSB, P/4/1970). Admitting blind students at Thika High School did not however bear much success since it was a mainstream school admitting students without visual impairments and therefore only a few blind students could qualify for

admission since there was no affirmative action for the blind. More so, the school had no teachers that were trained to handle the visually impaired learners. The need for TSB to have a secondary school was therefore becoming even more urgent.

Efforts of establishing a secondary school at Thika Primary School for the Blind were revived in 1965 following the SMC meeting of 9th September 1965 in which a plan was laid to establish the secondary school by 1967. This followed the expression of willingness by the Salvation Army to finance the establishment of the school (KNA, BY/12/21). This plan led to the establishment of Thika Secondary School for the Blind in 1967. Admission of blind students at Thika High School was therefore halted in 1967 when Thika Secondary School for the Blind was established (KNA, BY/12/21).

Despite the various challenges that were encountered by the school as the pioneer institution for educating the VI, the school has performed tremendously well in national examinations through the years. This is clearly shown by its comparable performance against non-special schools. In the 1970s for instance, the school featured prominently among the top ten schools in Kenya at 'O' and 'A' levels. In the 1987 results for example, 18 out of 36 candidates who sat for 'O' level examination qualified to proceed to form five. At 'A' level, 14 out of 28 candidates secured admission to the public universities. In the 1988 results, 17 out of 25 candidates who sat for 'A' level examination were admitted to the four public universities that were present at the time. The results were so good that the school was ranked position 19 nationally in the year 1988 (TSB, S/1/2000).

However, after the introduction of 8-4-4 system of education, the school experienced some challenges in terms of subjects required for Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations by the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) leading to a drop in performance in the national examinations. The school however picked up with time and the successes in performance increased gradually. In 1997 for instance, only one student qualified for university admission but this improved in 1998, in which out of 66 students the school registered for KCSE, 15 of them qualified for university admission by scoring grade C plus and above. The school scored a mean standard score of 4.27 out of the 12 points possible (TSB, S/1/2000). In 1999, thirteen students from Thika High School for the Blind joined university, two joined Kagumo Teachers College and several others joined tertiary institutions (TSB, S/1/2000). Sending 13 students to university was a high achievement for the school since there were many regular schools that could not manage to send a single student to the university.

By the year 2003, Thika High School for the Blind was the only special secondary school for the VI in Kenya. Other special secondary schools would later emerge in the special primary schools that had been established. Such schools include St. Lucy's Secondary School for the Blind established in 2005, St. Francis Secondary School for the Blind established in 2007, Kibos Secondary school for the Blind established in 2009 and Nico Hausa Secondary School for the Blind established at St. Oda School for the Blind in 2013. Besides these five special secondary schools for the VI, there are six other

mainstream secondary schools that have special units for the VI. These include Nakuru High School, Kericho Tea Secondary School, Aquinas High School, Upper Hill Secondary and AIC Girls Secondary School in Kajiado (MoEST, 2016).

Despite some commendable progress that has been realized in establishment of secondary schools for the VI, it was the researchers' conviction that there is still limited access to secondary school education for the VI in Kenya. This is informed by the large number of VI learners who have to travel for long distances to access education making all the special schools to be residential schools. This is a limitation because not all parents in Kenya are willing and able to enroll their VI children in boarding schools. This state therefore locks out most of the learners who may be forced to attend regular schools with no specialized facilities for the VI.

2.4 Development of Tertiary and Higher Education for the VI in Kenya

When education for the blind was introduced in Kenya through Thika Institute for the Blind in 1946, the course to be pursued by every learner was determined by the institute based on the learner's age as well as intelligence level. One of the main areas of placement for the boys admitted was in vocational and technical training. In the early years of the institute, this vocational and technical education involved training in some trades such as basket making, carpentry, shoe repairing, rope making, net making, mat making, gardening, pottery and brick making. Adult students were taking a three year vocational training that normally included one or two trades, according to their abilities. Adolescents on the other hand undertook trade training after two to three years of academic training while children undertook trade training towards the end of their education at the institute after undertaking a full academic course.

Gardening trade offered at Thika Institute for the Blind was equivalent to what was offered in other institutes for the blind that were called 'Shamba' training centers which literally means farm training center that were established later on. Their establishment was based on the rural background of over 90 percent of blind persons in Kenya (KNA, BY/27/4). The centers were therefore meant to train blind persons to acquire farming skills so that they could be independent by making a living from their farms. Such centers were established at Kolanya in Western part of Kenya in the year 1956 as well as at Chuka in Eastern part of Kenya in the year 1958. The trainees at Shamba training centers who had to be blind peasants were taught to do the normal agricultural tasks connected with a family Shamba (KNA, BY/27/4).

Until 1958, the Salvation Army School for the Blind at Thika was one of the only two institutions that were providing educational and vocational training for the blind. The other institution was a Shamba training center at Kolanya in Western part of Kenya which had only operated for two years. In the same year 1958 two more institutions for the blind came up. These included establishment of another Shamba training center at Chuka in Eastern part of Kenya as well as the establishment of Machakos Institute for the Blind. Machakos Institute for the Blind was established by the Kenya Society for the

Blind while the Shamba training center at Chuka was established through the joint efforts of KSB and the Salvation Army.

The institute at Machakos was started as a rehabilitation center but was later converted into an institute for the blind to provide vocational training to blind youths of over 17 years of age. The vocational training comprised of crafts and in light industries courses. Training in crafts lasted for one year and it included rural training, simple carpentry, mat-making and basketry while training in light industries lasted for six month. The training at Machakos was to enable blind persons establish themselves as local craftsmen or be absorbed into local light industry (KNA, KTI/3/7/11). A similar blind vocational center to the one at Machakos was later opened by the Catholic Church at Sikri in Nyanza region of Kenya in 1970 (Ojwando, 1990).

Besides institutions that offer vocational and technical education for the VI, there has been development in provision of teacher education for the blind. Teacher training programs for the teachers of the VI in Kenya started at Thika Institute for the Blind through on-the-job training and later a stream for teacher training was established (KNA, AB/14/34). In 1980, a meeting of special education officials was convened by the head of special education at the Ministry of Education headquarters for the purpose of formulating a policy guideline that would in future determine the direction of special education in the country (Ojwando, 1990). This meeting recommended that an institute be established to train teachers for different disability groups in Kenya. Six years later, this recommendation was adopted resulting into the establishment of Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) in 1986. The institute was established through the sponsorship of the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA).

Since its establishment, KISE has played a significant role in building the capacity of teachers of the VI learners besides other categories of special needs education. This has been achieved through teacher training, teacher in-servicing and research. A survey conducted by the KISE in 1989 revealed that up to 50% of teachers working with students with disabilities were untrained in the field (KISE/1). The institute therefore strived to fill this gap by providing training of teachers in four categories of special education that include hearing, visual, physical and intellectual impairment. The training at KISE offers diploma qualifications, certificates and distance-learning courses in Special Needs Education. The Diploma course runs for two years on a full-time residential basis and three years through distance learning. The certificate course runs as a three month residential in-service course and one year for distance learning (MoEST, 2016).

Besides these tertiary institutions that provide special education for the VI, it is the government's policy that a learner can be admitted to any university regardless of their physical or sensory disabilities. As a result VI learners in Kenya are admitted to various courses in different universities across the country provided they do qualify just like their sighted peers. Most of these learners however face a myriad of challenges since most the universities do not have specialized personnel to handle the VI. Learners with Visual Impairments in public universities also encounter mobility related

challenges (S. Nzoka, Oral Interview, February 18, 2019). Some universities in Kenya have however started special education departments that target both learners with visual impairments and those without visual impairments who train as teachers for the VI besides other categories of special education. These include Kenyatta University, Moi University, Maseno University and Methodist Universities. These universities offer Degree and Postgraduate courses in Special Education which goes a long way in providing qualified teachers for the VI learners.

3. Conclusion

Development of education for the VI in Kenya has been a slow but promising journey towards educating the blind. Having started with disintegrated efforts by the Salvation Army, the first institution for the VI was established in 1946. Even though there was no clear guideline on what form of education or training that was to be given to the VI, the first institute for the blind at Thika grew leading in to the establishment of a primary school in the year 1956. As the first school for the blind, Thika primary School for the blind set the pace that led to establishment of other institutions for the VI. These institutions include other five special primary schools for the VI, five special secondary schools for the VI, 19 special units for the VI in regular schools, Shamba training centers for the VI, a teacher training center at KISE and University education. Having been established by voluntary Christian missions such as the Salvation Army and the Catholic Mission, education for the VI has since moved from charity model in 1940s to a human right model in which the government is obliged to ensure that all learners have access to the suitable education that is accommodative to their needs.

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