



INFLUENCE OF PRE-SCHOOL TEACHERS' EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN PUBLIC ECDE CENTRES IN KEIYO SOUTH SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

Inclusive education is an issue of social and policy significance in the education system. Apparently, the implementation of the inclusion policy appears with statistics showing that less than 10.0% of special needs children have been enrolled in pre-schools in Keiyo South Sub County, Kenya. The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of pre-school teachers' identification of learners with special needs in public ECDE centres in Keiyo South Sub County, Elgeyo-Marakwet County, Kenya. The target population involved 247 teachers from 153 public pre-schools and 5 Sub County ECDE programme officers. A sample size of 151 of pre-school teachers and 5 ECDE field officers were selected to participate in the study through cluster sampling technique. The instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and the interview schedule. Results showed that pre-school teachers had moderate competencies in identifying learners with special needs in public pre-primary centres in Keiyo South Sub County, Kenya. There is need for pre-school teachers to be provided with training to gain skills on early identification of SNE learners to enable appropriate early interventions to be provided.

Keywords: early identification, special needs, pre-primary, teachers

1. Introduction

Early intervention and management of special needs learners at pre-primary school level is important to ensure the global, continental and national goals of education are attained

(Nandini & Taj, 2014). Every child around the world has a right to basic education from pre-primary to secondary school (Matasio, 2011). All governments across the world are required to provide universal primary education to all children irrespective of their status (Bouillet, 2011). Therefore, nations were expected to put in place measures of ensuring that each child irrespective of disability enjoyed the universal primary education including ensuring that teachers were provided with the right training during pre-service and in-service training programmes (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). These children with special needs represent a significant portion of the children across the world (Njeri, 2012). However, exclusion of children with disability by many countries across the world resulted to enactment of policies, legislation and even international conventions. The key player in implementation of inclusion of pupils with special needs in mainstream schools is the teacher; the teacher has the most significant influence on the learning environment (Gichaba, 2011). The 21st century education systems have a clear need for teachers who are sufficiently competent and motivated to know how to include children with special needs in all classrooms (Lewis & Sagree, 2013). This paper investigates the capacity that pre-primary teachers have towards identifying learners with special needs in public pre-primary in Keiyo South Sub County, Kenya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Each child irrespective of disability status has a right to basic education. Statistics from Keiyo South Sub County Education Office (2017) shows that the number of children with special needs enrolled in mainstream ECDE classes is below 10% over the past three years. This leaves the feeling that special need learners are still not well catered in mainstream schools. Despite efforts made by the Kenya constitution, world declarations and ministry of education guidelines. As a result, the special needs learners end up dropping out of school or they may not attend school at all. It is not known whether the low enrolment levels in public pre-primary institutions could be as a result of teacher capacity to identify learners with special needs in their institutions or not, a focus of this paper.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explain the influence of pre-school teacher pedagogical competency in identification of special needs learners in public ECDE centres in Keiyo South Sub-County.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Special Need Teachers Education Training in Kenya

Teacher education is an important component of education (Kafu, 2011). Qualified special education teachers are an integral part of successful national educational systems aimed at ensuring the policy of inclusion succeeds (Chitiyo, Odongo, Itimu-Phiri, Muwana & Lipemba, 2015). Teacher Education has always been an important component of

education since time immemorial. Developing a qualified teaching workforce is one of the most important challenges in the field of special education. Since lack of qualified special education professionals is one of the factors that have repeatedly been identified as impeding the development of special education in Africa (Billingsley, 2003; Republic of Kenya, 2008). In the early days, training of special education teachers was conducted on the job within respective institutions in two areas, namely for children with visual impairment or hearing impairment (Republic of Kenya, 2003). The first specialized training was for teachers of children with hearing impairment at Kamwenja Teachers College in the early 1970's. Later, teachers for children with visual or hearing impairment were trained at Highridge Teachers College in the 1980's. In 1986, all special education teachers' training was consolidated at the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE). In addition to the main three specialized areas of visual impairment, hearing impairment, and intellectual disabilities, the education for children with physical disabilities was introduced (Chitiyo *et al.*, 2015).

In Kenya, the laws and policies on which special needs education is provided fall under the Ministry of Education. Currently, the National Special Needs Education Policy Framework, developed in 2009, addresses some of the critical issues determining the delivery of quality and relevant education to learners with special needs. The document details guidelines on personnel preparation for children with special needs. Successful implementation of this policy is expected to improve the quality and access to education for children with special needs (Mwangi, 2013). Currently, special education teacher training is done at three levels. These are: (a) special needs education teacher preparation provided to professionally qualified practicing teachers through a two-year diploma program at the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE), (b) undergraduate teacher preparation for interested individuals through a four-year Bachelor of Education in Special Education Program in both public and private universities, and (c) postgraduate teacher education provided in special education at the public universities in Kenya (RoK, 2009; Chitiyo *et al.*, 2015).

The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) develops curricula and relevant curricula support materials at all levels of education and training except at the university level (Kafu, 2011). A special needs division was established at KIE (now KICD) in 1978 to develop curricula and support materials for training special education teachers in areas of physical disabilities, hearing impairment, communication disorders, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities. In addition, the division develops curricula for training special education teachers (Republic of Kenya, 2003). For the last two and a half decades, the training of special education teachers in Kenya has been done at KISE, which is a middle level college that offers a diploma in special education (roughly equivalent of an Associate Degree) and a certificate in special needs education. It was not until 1995 that the first teacher-education program was established to train teachers at the undergraduate level at Kenyatta University. KISE has however, remained the main special education teacher preparation college in the country for teachers of children with special needs (Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Education, 2005). KISE, a

semi-autonomous college under the Ministry of Education, was inaugurated in 1986 with the assistance of the Danish Development Aid (DANIDA), to spearhead the development of special education in Kenya (Mwangi, 2013).

KISE offers both certificate and diploma courses in special education through three modes of delivery namely, full-time, part-time (evening and during school holidays), and Open/Distance and Electronic Learning (ODEL). A limited number of students are admitted into the two-year full-time program and trainees have a wider choice of special education areas of specialization. It is only within the full-time program that specialization in low-incidence disability areas such as visual and hearing impairment are offered. During the two years, trainees get hands-on experience in special schools in the form of practicum, attachment, and final teaching practice (Chitiyo *et al.*, 2015). The part-time program is offered during evenings and school holidays and consists of short courses that are tailored towards equipping in-service teachers with additional skills in special education. The training is very intensive and focuses on specific areas like orientation and mobility, sign language, braille, communication with individuals with visual/hearing impairments, functional assessment, and the production of materials and devices for special education students. The program is designed for targeted groups such as teachers who work in institutions for children with special needs, teachers who work in inclusive settings, people who work in assessment centers, and community-based rehabilitation officers (Chitiyo *et al.*, 2015).

The ODEL program is designed for teachers and other personnel working or living with people with special needs who can be trained through distance learning. The program offers three main course options: (a) education of learners with special needs (inclusive education), (b) education of learners with learning disabilities, and (c) education of learners with emotional and behavioral disorders. ODEL program is organized in such a way that every administrative region of Kenya has one satellite campus where in-service teachers go for training during the school holidays. Face-to-face training is done at these satellite campuses during the months of April, August, and December when regular schools are on holiday. The program is currently conducted on eleven satellite campuses in Kenya. After each session, KISE Regional Coordinators and officers based at the Education Assessment and Resource Centers continue to professionally support the students. ODEL has succeeded in creating awareness about special needs education in every part of the country. Teacher training at KISE focuses on introducing special education skills to the teacher trainees (Mwangi, 2013). All the courses are skill oriented with an emphasis on hands-on and practical experience. The training includes three months of teaching practice. Each candidate is supervised by trainers from KISE and assessed by external evaluators from the Ministry of Education. The curriculum for the diploma program is geared towards preparing teachers to teach learners with diverse needs. Hence, all trainees must meet the requirements of a multidisciplinary course component of the program in the first half of the training period. The multidisciplinary course component consists of theory and project work.

2.2 Pre-School Teachers Pedagogical Training on Early Identification of Learners with Special Needs

Identification signs of development delay and other form of disability among pre-school children should be noted early by pre-school teachers so that intervention can begin as early as possible (Zulfija *et al.*, 2013). This is important in preventing further disabilities that can result from lack of teaching and proper care. Early intervention is also important for maximizing the outcome of therapy, interactive skills are difficult for some physically disabled children to learn and they are one of the criteria objectives of any preschool program (Gichaba, 2011). Early intervention is key to implementing successful teaching strategies for pupils with special needs (Davis & Florian, 2004). Research studies indicate that early identification and intervention leads to a seventy recovery of the children at risk. Early intervention makes the child a productive member of the society who is a taxpayer and not a tax receiver (Lerner & Kline, 2006; Njeri, 2012). The classroom teacher is usually the first to notice signs of learning disabilities and refers students for special education assessment. This poses the need for both the special and regular teachers to have knowledge on classification and characteristics of LD in order to identify the learners. In addition, the teachers assist in gathering assessment information and in coordination of special services. Learners may be identified disabled at any age, but mostly are noticed during the elementary years. There are two major indicators of learning disabilities. First, students appear capable but experience extreme difficulties in some areas of learning. This is a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement. For example, a young child may appear bright but very slow to learn and to say the alphabet, write his/her name and count to twenty. The second indicator is variation in performance, where there is a discrepancy among different areas of achievement. A class four student may perform well in mathematics but read and spell poorly (Njeri, 2012).

Several research studies have been conducted to determine teachers' competency in identifying learners with special needs. In United States, a research by Crane-Mitchel and Hedge (2007) found out that preschool teachers do not understand the characteristics of young children with disabilities and do not have knowledge related to meeting these students' needs. Moreover, the teachers need more training on inclusive practices, not only focusing their knowledge, but also their skills and experiences and most of them emphasized the necessity of the hands-on training opportunities for working with young children with disabilities. Furthermore, the researchers suggested additional research investigating the quality teacher training programs and licensure requirements. Chaula (2014) study aimed at assessing the challenges that teachers face in implementation of inclusive education in primary schools in Tanzania. Using Mbeya inclusive schools as a case study, it assesses the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools. The findings indicate that teachers implement inclusive education in schools in a very difficult environment that affects their work in one way or another. Teachers have tried to the best of their ability and within the available resources to implement inclusive education that has success to some level. Teachers have good cooperation among

themselves and with the head teachers. Good cooperation helps them achieve their goal at the school level. However, the study identified challenges that hinder the implementation of inclusive education. These include insufficient teaching and learning materials, lack of inclusive education among teachers, large number of students, unclear policies on inclusive education, lack of support from the government, lack of collaboration between teachers and parents, few number of teachers at the school, inadequate funds in supporting inclusive education and negative attitude of teachers and parents.

Ndanu (2012) determined the influence of individualized educational programme in assisting learners with learning difficulties to improve their academic performance in the selected primary schools in Nuu Division, Mwingi District. Survey design was used to collect information. The study revealed that the use of IEP and use of other strategies were effective in enhancing the learners with learning difficulties. The individualised educational program greatly enhanced the performance of learners with learning difficulties. Wafula, Poipoi, Wanyama and Begi (2012) investigated selective factors that influenced early identification of children with learning disabilities amongst standard three pupils of Butere District, Kenya. The study was based on ex-post facto design. The socio-cultural theory formed the theoretical foundation of the study. A sample of 25 public primary schools was drawn from the total population of 126 public schools. Most teachers were not trained in special needs education and handled very large classes of above 60 pupils. Most teachers lacked training in special needs education. Moreover, the classes were crowded and high teacher-pupil ratio. This makes successful early identification and intervention of learning disabilities a far dream.

Chepkoech and Ngeno (2017) study sought to assess teacher competencies in handling physically challenged pupils in public primary schools in Kericho County. The study was informed by Lev Vygotsky Social-Cultural Constructivism Theory. The study utilized a descriptive survey design. The target population was composed of 214 teachers. A sample size of 42 teachers was used. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to select the study sample. The data collection instruments used was the questionnaire and interviews. The study found that many of the teachers, 29 (69%), teaching in the public primary schools have not undergone training on Special Needs Education (SNE). Murungi (2017) study sought to determine the influence of school-based factors on performance of children with disabilities in Kenya Certificate of Primary Education in Public Primary Schools in Igembe South District, Meru County, Kenya. Questionnaires were the main instruments of data collection. Findings from the study have established that majority of head teachers had not undergone training to handle pupils with disabilities. Nevertheless, involved in the study had at least one teacher who had undergone training in managing special needs learners. The review of the above research studies shows that identification of learners with special needs by teachers is critical as said by Davis and Florian (2004). However, the review of literature fails to show how pre-school teachers in Keiyo South are providing early identification and interventions for these learners for ensuring inclusion in schools.

3. Materials and Methods

The study employed descriptive survey design. This design was considered appropriate for the study because it facilitated the collection of a wide range of information or data from a large population with different characteristics and from different geographical backgrounds (Mugenda, 2008). The study targeted a population of 153 public pre-schools in the six wards; Soy South (42), Kabiemit (28), Metkei (17) Kaptarakwa (19), Chepkorio (26) and Soy North (21) totalling to 153 pre-schools with 247 teachers. Further, the sub county programme officers in charge of ECDE were also targeted as key informants. A sample size of 151 teachers was selected through sampling formula to participate in the study. The study used cluster-sampling technique in selecting wards to participate in the study. This method ensured that different groups of the population were represented in the sample. The number of teachers selected from each ward was proportional to the population of teachers in each ward. The reason for using this method was that the sample of teachers was proportionate to the ward (target) population (O'Leary, 2004). The study used questionnaire to collect information from teachers. The researcher used interview schedule to collect information from Sub County ECDE programme officers. The two research instruments used were tested for validity and reliability. The analysis of the data was conducted using quantitative and qualitative analysis. Data from questionnaires was coded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 22.0) computer programme that aided in data coding, entry and analysis. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies and percentages. Data from open-ended questions and interviews was also analysed using thematic content analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

The study sought to answer how teacher's level of training aided in identification of learners with special needs in public ECDE centres in Keiyo South Sub County, Kenya. At first, the researcher asked the teachers whether they had children with special needs in their classes. Their response is given in Figure 1.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that 88 (62.0%) of ECDE teachers said that they have admitted special needs children in their schools while 54 (38.0%) said that they have not yet admitted special need pupils in their schools. This shows that more than 50% of pre-schools in the study have admitted learners with special needs. Different from the study results, Mpofu and Shumba (2012) research in Zimbabwe found that 70.0% of pre-school centres had enrolled special needs learners in their institutions.

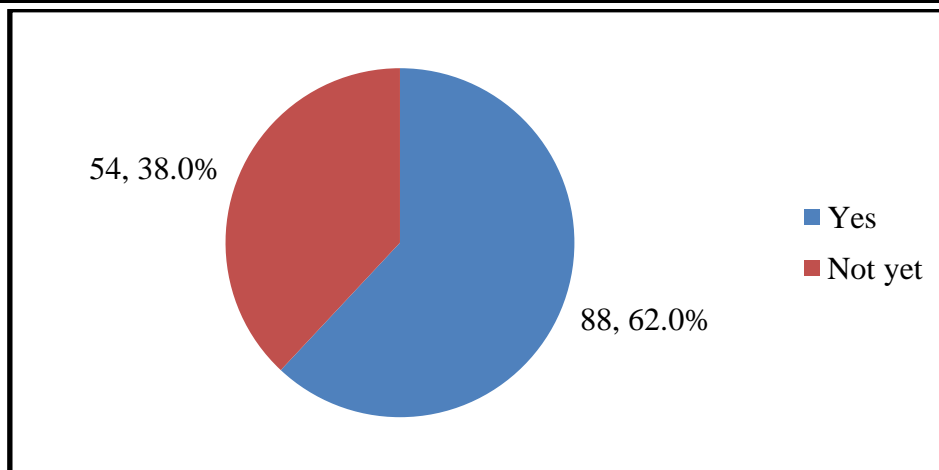


Figure 1: Existence of Children with Special Needs Class

The teachers were asked whether they could be ready to receive (if not present) and for those present (they could receive more). Their feedback is given in Figure 2.

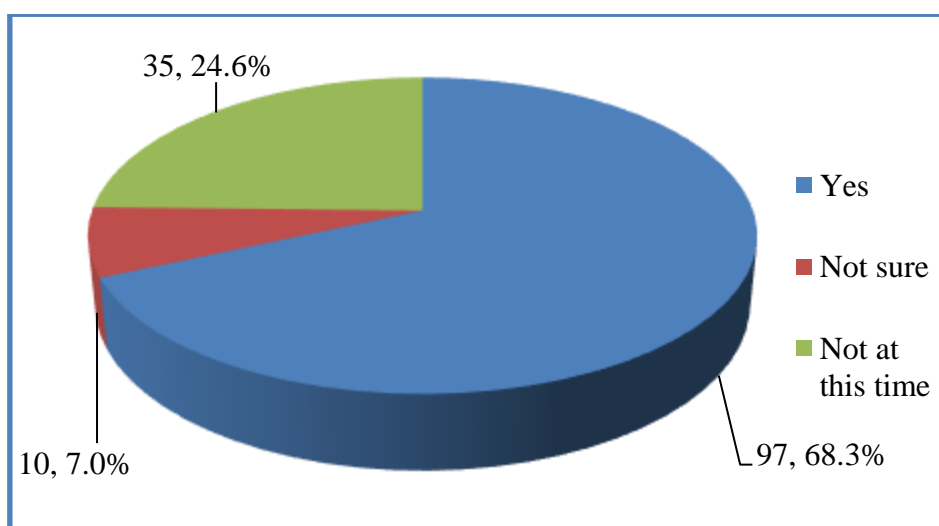


Figure 2: Whether Teachers would Receive more SNE Learners

Results show that most 97 (68.3%) of ECDE were willing to accept more special needs in their classrooms, 10 (7.0%) were not sure whether they will accept the category of learners at this time while 35 (24.6%) were not in a position to accept the learners in their classroom at this particular time. The result therefore shows that despite having SNE learners (although a small number was noted), most teachers are ready to accept more to facilitate the implementation of inclusion policy in public pre-school centres in Keiyo South Sub County.

To answer the first research question on establishing the teachers' competency in early identification of learners with special needs in classrooms, ECDE teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed (5) or disagreed (1). Their responses are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Influence of Pre-School Teachers Early Identification of SNE Learners

Capacity	SD	D	U	A	SA	M	SD
I can easily identify pupils with disability during their early years of schooling	10 (7.0%)	20 (14.1%)	27 (19.0%)	62 (43.7%)	23 (16.2%)	3.4789	1.13437
I can easily notice signs of disability among my learners	10 (7.0%)	16 (11.3%)	36 (25.4%)	52 (36.6%)	28 (19.7%)	3.5070	1.14078
I can easily classify different kinds of disabilities that pupils have	12 (8.5%)	28 (19.7%)	21 (14.8%)	59 (41.5%)	22 (15.5%)	3.3592	1.20485
I can identify pupils with learning disability and apply interventions measures where possible	8 (5.6%)	25 (17.6%)	39 (27.5%)	52 (36.6%)	18 (12.7%)	3.3310	1.08322
I do have knowledge and skills in identifying learners with specific forms of disabilities	9 (6.3%)	35 (24.6%)	25 (17.6%)	57 (40.1%)	16 (11.3%)	3.2535	1.13885
I can easily identify learners with disability through their variations in performance	18 (12.7%)	21 (14.8%)	29 (20.4%)	55 (38.7%)	19 (13.4%)	3.2535	1.23447
I collaborate with other stakeholders to identify the unique needs of learners with disabilities	11 (7.7%)	19 (13.4%)	29 (20.4%)	60 (42.3%)	23 (16.2%)	3.4577	1.14621
Composite scores						3.3773	1.15468

Key: SD-Strongly Disagree, D-Disagree, U-Undecided, A-Agree, SA-Strongly Agree, M-Mean and SD-Standard Deviation

Results show that 62 (43.7%) of ECDE teachers said that they were in a position identify learners with special needs in their early years of schooling and 20 (14.1%) disagreed with that assertion. Mean values reveal that pre-school teachers (3.47 and SD=1.13) were in a position to identify SNE learners at early years of schooling. The importance of identification of special needs learners at an early stage is important for the teacher to arrange the method of instruction to be used for those learners while at school and setting up a good foundation for early identification. The study result agrees with Njeri (2012) who found out that 78.0% of teachers indicated to have knowledge of identifying learners with disabilities in their schools.

It was also clear from the findings that 52 (36.6%) of teachers agreed that they could easily notice signs of disability among their pupils, 36 (25.4%) were undecided while 16 (11.3%) disagreed. Descriptive data reveal that most teachers (M=3.4 and SD=1.13) had the ability to notice signs of learners with special needs in their classroom. This is significant so that teachers can arrange a differentiated instruction for them. A

significant 59 (41.5%) of teachers also agreed that they were capable of classifying different kinds of disabilities that people had in their classroom. However, 19.7% were not cable and 12 (8.5%) strongly disagreed with the statement. As per the mean values, most teachers were undecided ($M=3.35$ and $SD=1.20$) on the statement. This implies that not all teachers were able to classify learners depending on the kind of disabilities they had and this could influence the successful implementation of inclusion policy in ECDE.

When asked on whether they were able to identify learners with special needs in their classroom and apply the right interventions measures where possible, 8 (5.6%) strongly disagreed, 25 (17.6%) disagreed, 39 (27.5%) were undecided, 52 (36.6%) agreed and 18 (12.7%) strongly agreed. The result therefore shows mixed reactions by ECDE teachers ($M=3.33$ and 1.08). This shows that some teachers have the capacity to detect disabled learners and apply the required interventions while others do not. For those who do not have, they may be a hindrance to effective inclusion in schools. In explaining this kind of situation, Njeri (2012) found out that despite the teachers claiming to have the knowledge of learners' identification, they did not have proper tools for identification. This makes it impossible to know the characteristics existing among children hence leading their poor management if admitted in pre-schools.

The findings also showed that only 57 (40.1%) of teachers agreed to have knowledge and skills in identification of learners with specific forms of disabilities while 35 (24.6%) did not. This also shows that the required skills and knowledge that pre-school teachers are expected to have are not prevalent among those working in public ECDE centres in Keiyo South Sub County. Study result also showed that 55 (38.7%) of teachers were in a position to identify learners with disability through their performance while 18 (12.7%) could not. This shows that not all teachers are able to detect special needs learners by evaluating their academic performance scores while others were found to have that capacity. The result therefore shows that majority of teachers had average knowledge and skills in identification of learners with special needs through their academic performance.

When asked as to whether they collaborated with other stakeholders to identify the unique needs of learners with special needs in their schools, 11 (7.7%) strongly disagreed, 19 (13.4%) disagreed, 29 (20.4%) were undecided, 60 (42.3%) agreed and 23 (16.2%) strongly agreed. The result shows that most teachers ($M=3.45$ and $SD=1.14$) were in a position to collaborate with other stakeholders to support the inclusion of learners with special needs in their schools. In line with the study results, Adams et al. (2016) found out that most teachers worked together with parents in order to know the proper strategies to apply to manage their children in Malaysian schools.

Computed composite values reveal that capacity to identify learners with special needs in Keiyo South Sub County by ECDE teachers was average ($M=3.37$ and $SD=1.15$). This could explain the reason as to why there has been low enrolment of SNE pupils in ECDE schools in the study area. The study coincides with Bukvic (2014) study that showed that teachers did not have necessary competencies in identifying learners with special needs in their schools hence low attainment of inclusion goals.

Further, the teachers were asked to state what else that they required helping them identify well the learners with special needs in their classrooms (Question No. 7 on the questionnaire). Their responses (qualitative) were converted into quantitative forms and presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Other Requirements for Teachers to Effectively Identify Learners with Special Needs

Other requirements	Frequency	Percent
Further training and skills on how to handle the children with special needs	76	53.5
Information from the parents and stakeholders all in collaboration	21	14.8
Through provision of learning resources	8	5.6
Availability of adequate, teaching and learning materials for LD learners	7	4.9
Through assessment	6	4.2
Need support from EARCS	5	3.5
Through co-curricular activities like playing, reciting poems and story telling	3	2.1
Creation of awareness in school to parents and other stakeholders	1	.7
No response	15	10.6
Total	142	100.0

Table 2 result shows that majority 76 (53.5%) felt that they need to be trained on how to identify and handle children with special needs in their classrooms. This appears to be the greatest hindrance towards identification of special needs learners in schools by teachers as it affects their effective inclusion. They also said that parents should share information with teachers about their children's conditions to facilitate easy identifications. Other requirements that teachers felt the need to have are given in Table 2 above.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

It was discovered that majority of pre-school teachers ($M=3.5$ and $SD=1.14$) were in a position to notice some signs of disability among their learners in classrooms. Secondly, research established that the teachers could easily identify ($M=3.47$ and $SD=1.13$) SNE pupils in their early years of schooling. Thirdly, the study found out that teachers agreed ($M=3.45$ and $SD=1.14$) that they work with other teachers to identify the specific needs of SNE learners. Average values revealed that teacher's level of competency in identification of learners with special needs in their schools was at moderate level ($M=3.37$ and $SD=1.15$). This outcome was due to the fact that some teachers were not in position to know or identify learners with disability through performance variations while others did not have the knowledge and skills to identify learners with specific form of disabilities (multiple forms of disabilities). The teachers suggested that for them to identify and handle well SNE learners, they needed to undergo special education training and short courses to increase their knowledge and competencies. This information was also shared by ECDE tutors who said that to fully actualise early identification of learners with special needs in mainstream pre-school, teachers needed to increase their competencies and skills. Therefore, majority of special needs pre-school learners were not

in a position to receive appropriate help in schools because of their teachers' moderate level of competencies on the side of identification. To increase teacher identification of learners with special needs, there is need for pre-school teachers to be provided with training to gain skills on early identification of SNE learners to enable appropriate early interventions to be provided.

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