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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER SUPPORT THROUGH TEACHERS ADVISORY CENTRE WORKSHOPS IN WARENG DISTRICT, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The use of learning materials is an invaluable approach to effective curriculum delivery. Education practitioners have long recognized that Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) and indeed any other level of education cannot be effective without the use of learning materials. Teachers Advisory Centres (TACs) were established with the basic function of organizing in-service training for teachers in order to help them implement the curriculum effectively. However, the TACs have been ineffectual in this mission and have drifted away from this central function. This study therefore surveyed the role played by the TACs in inservicing teachers in the production and use of learning materials in Wareng District. The sample comprised of ECD teachers, lower primary school teachers, head teachers and TAC tutors. Data was derived from the sample by questionnaires and interview schedules. The study established low levels of intervention by the TACs in the production and use of learning materials in ECDE; it was found that workshops and professional meetings for ECDE teachers were hard to come by due to long distances from the TACs to the schools, financial constraints, the heavy workloads and also because information about the workshops and meetings sometimes didn't get to the teachers. The study recommended that TACs be well facilitated in order to improve the services that it offered.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 'Handbook for TAC Tutors (Ministry of Education, 1995) the Ministry of Education's terms of reference for TAC tutors are indicated. According to this Handbook, Teachers Advisory Centres (TACs) are expected to identify the training needs of head teachers and teachers in the zone or district, to organize and conduct, in conjunction with the zonal or district inspectors (QASO's) in-service seminars, induction courses, and professional meetings to satisfy the needs of the teachers. However, this has not been the case. TAC tutors have often been noted to carry out duties not in their docket and TACs have not been serving the purpose they were intended for. Bishop (1995) asserts that for curriculum implementation and innovation to succeed, the teachers must have the tools for the job.

He says that if there is to be change and improvement in education, there must be adequate resources. Basic to the success of any attempt at curriculum implementation and improvement in education is the availability of suitable textbooks, teachers' guides and other teaching and learning materials. This means teachers have a salient role and therefore need support in their onerous task of delivering the curriculum effectively. Farrant, (1999) states that the need for a support service for teachers in schools has led to some countries setting up national resource centres. Others have

established regional networks of centres to serve clusters of schools. For practical reasons, the emphasis in both cases has been on production of materials rather than on lending. Ideally, a resource centre serving a group of schools should be provided with sufficient facilities to enable it function efficiently and provide a service that teachers need. To the teacher, eager to do a good job in the classroom, such centres offer much needed support, providing facilities that schools themselves could not hope to match.

When a teacher has tools at hand, his confidence, his effectiveness, his productivity, all increase. With better tools, his professional capabilities are more fully utilized and he accomplishes larger and better results. In the past, many countries have expended scarce funds on importing equipment and materials from abroad. This can be a very expensive business. In many countries, teachers are provided with kits or tool boxes, containing basic tools and instruments to help teachers produce inexpensive instructional materials on their own while in others like Kenya the teachers are equipped with the relevant knowledge to be able to improvise using locally available resources. This is what Clark (1991) calls teacher development. Clark alludes that teacher development is a common and more generalizable model to provide teachers with an accessible and permanently available support or advisory service. He goes on to say that those in the support service act as consultants providing information or access to it, and as facilitators supplying the organizational requirements for teachers to meet together to analyze problems, discuss

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alternative solutions, implement them and evaluate the results in the light of their own classroom reality. He further states that teacher development enables teachers to develop broad curricular skills which it was not possible for them to acquire in pre-service training. Through various task-related activities they become proficient at translating broad aims into pedagogical objectives, thinking through alternative classroom teaching/learning strategies and producing teaching/ learning materials among other tasks (Clark, 1991). Kahn (1991), reports about centres and resources being established worldwide. These centres, despite their varying names (Learning Resource centres, Pedagogical Centres and Advisory Centres), have a common characteristic of providing classroom support for teachers. Adams (1975) suggests that the teachers should be given the right kind of support since their potential for development is inexhaustible and their proficiency is constantly being tested in the class. Increasing attention is being paid to research aimed at discovering ways of producing low-cost educational materials and of using a greater proportion of local materials in the construction of items for learning. The value of creating materials from the local environment was perhaps one of the main reasons why the Government of Kenya through the Ministry of Education established the Teachers Advisory Centers (TACs) in Kenya. One of the aims of these centres was to help teachers in developing and using new instructional materials.

Learning materials

Materials are things that are needed in order to do a particular activity (Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary). Kochar (1991) defines learning materials/aids as devises which present units of knowledge through auditory or visual stimuli or both with a view to help learning. Farrant (1999) describes a learning material as any kind of aid whether audio or visual used by the class teacher to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The central role of teaching materials is to support teaching by making ideas and concepts clear and making learning interesting and vivid. Teaching/ materials can be invaluable in promoting motivation and retention. Kasambira (1993) states a Chinese proverb which says one picture is worth a thousand words. He argues that this statement is true because good teaching materials have eye and ear appeal. Kochar (1991) asserts that learning materials concretize the knowledge to be presented and thus help in making a learning experience appear real, living and vital. They supplement the spoken word, develop concepts, and improve attitudes and extent appreciations and interests.

They help in making learning permanent and supplement the material of the text-books. Audio-visual aids, in fact, are supplementary devises by which the teacher, through the utilization of more than one sensory channel, can help to clarify, establish and correlate accuracy, concepts, interpretations and appreciations and to make learning alive and interesting. To reinforce teaching, a rich galaxy of audio visual aids will have to be harnessed. This galaxy of materials has been classified by Kochar (1991) in to the following categories: the printed aids, the visual aids, the audio-aids and the audio-visual aids. The printed materials include periodicals, books and newspapers. Among the visual aids are slides, film strips, models, graphs and charts, pictorial materials, globes and maps. Some of the audio aids are tape recordings, phonograph discs and radio. The audio-visual aids

are motion pictures, television and dramatization. NACECE (2001), states that a variety of materials should be provided to cater for different ages, interests and developmental levels of children. Materials should also cater for all aspects of growth and development of children. Trends in the education circles indicate that the high cost of electrically operated teaching aids is forcing many countries to look more closely at basic resources for education and encouraging teachers to make greater use of them. Trends also show that teachers are recognizing with increasing force the educational value as well as the economic wisdom of creating their own teaching aids; producing one's own teaching materials would be more relevant and adaptive to a particular group of children to be taught.

The role of the TAC

In his circular letter dated 5th June 2009, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Prof. Karega Mutahi declares that one thousand and fifty two Teachers Advisory Centre tutors/Advisors are deployed in the zones to provide professional support to teachers by organizing in-service training programmes for teachers in schools, cluster and zonal levels because the Ministry of Education recognizes the need for continuous professional development of teachers through regular in-service training programmes to sharpen their teaching skills (Mutahi, 2009). TACs are involved in collecting resources, organizing them and making them available to users. They are involved in informing teachers of new resources and of new ideas. People need information. Information empowers people. It helps teachers realize and use their potential to better the lives of the children and their own lives as well by providing them with the best education they can offer. The TAC organizes training and facilitates development of ideas, skills, learning resources and helps them realize their ability to influence and change the lives of the people around them through effective delivery of curriculum. The TACs were established to bring closer to the school professional advisory services as well as carry out in-service courses for teachers. TACs were also established as resource centres where teachers can make references and be assisted to prepare teaching/learning aids (MOEHRD, 1998).

Increasing attention is being paid to research aimed at discovering ways of producing low-cost educational materials and of using a greater proportion of local materials in the construction of items for learning. The value of creating materials from the local environment was perhaps one of the main reasons why the Government of Kenya through the Ministry of Education established the Teachers Advisory Centers (TACs) in Kenya. One of the aims of these centres was to help teachers in developing and using instructional materials. According to the Handbook for Inspection of Educational Institutions (MOEST, 2009) the TAC Advisor should assist institutions in the implementation of recommendations agreed on in the inspection reports of schools. Key amongst the areas that the TAC Advisor intervenes is teacher preparation and the provision and development of learning materials. The TACs are used for delivery of professional development activities such as in-service training and to support teachers in their work in the classroom. The TACs should essentially lay the foundation for acquiring skills and knowledge.

Objectives of the study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the role of the TACs in the production and use of learning materials for Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) in Wareng District. The specific objective of the study was to determine if workshops and professional meetings are organized by the TAC tutors to support teachers in development and use of learning materials.

Theoretical framework

This work was guided by the intervention theory advanced by Chris Argyris' (1970). This theory states that decision to effectively intervene in a situation is important in securing desired outcomes.

Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was adapted for the study. The study was carried out in 100 ECD centres and 40 primary schools drawn from the five educational zones in Wareng district. A sample of 40 head teachers, 111 ECD teachers and 125 lower primary school teachers in both public and private schools were selected using stratified, proportionate and simple random sampling techniques. The data for the study was collected using questionnaire, observation checklist and interview schedule. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Chi-square was used to test the hypothesis. Findings. It should be noted that the primary purpose of the TAC advisor is to advice and train (MOEST, 2009). His/her basic function is to organize in-service training for teachers in order to help them implement the curriculum effectively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Farrant (1999) also notes that the main functions of a teachers' centre is to provide in-service training, seminars and workshops in which partial solutions to current difficulties are hammered out and materials required for implementing these solutions are devised and produced to help teachers in their work. It was against this backdrop that the study sought to find out whether workshops and meetings were organized at the TAC to help teachers in developing and using learning materials. Table 1 shows a comparison of the teachers' views on organization of meetings and workshops. The respondents were categorized into four according to the number of years that they had served as teachers i.e. 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and above 15 years.

As depicted in Table 1 majority of the respondents across all the teaching experience categories expressed satisfaction with the frequency of seminars and professional meetings and the way they were organized. Of all the teachers who had taught for the period 1-5 years, 53.6% agreed to the statement that workshops and professional meetings were often organized in the TAC, 51.3% of all the teachers who had taught for 6-10 years, 60.5% of all the teachers in the 11-15 years category, and 59.2% of those in the above 16 years category. From the responses it occurred that teachers who had taught between 6-10 years had more negative views than those in the other categories. On the contrary, a larger proportion of the participants from each category; (56.1%, 51.3% and 57.9% and 55.1) in the 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and above 16 years teaching experience categories respectively confirmed that the

workshops/meetings dealt with common things and were often a reiteration of same issues. Majority of respondents in each of the teaching experience categories also agreed that the workshops and meetings at the TAC were often timely. Although many workshops and professional meetings which were timely, relevant and useful to teaching in ECD and primary school had been organized in the TACs in the five years preceding the time of study, most of them were not based on learning materials. As shown on table 2 a bulk of the workshops and meetings were called for when there was information to be passed from authorities. A paltry 2, 4 and 6% of ECD teachers, lower primary school teachers and head teachers respectively had attended workshops purposed for learning materials.

The perceived impact of the workshops

Table 3 shows the participants views on what they thought of the usefulness of the workshops and meetings organized at the TAC. An overwhelming majority of the respondents felt that the workshops/seminars and professional meetings they had attended were relevant to teaching in their classes. A larger proportion (69.5% of those who had taught for a period of 1-5 years, 53.9% of 6-10 years, 71.7% of 11-15 years and 73.5% of those who had an experience of more than 16 years agreed that the workshops they had attended were relevant to teaching in their classes. Apart from the teachers who had taught for 5 years or less, in the rest of the categories majority of respondents were of the opinion that the learning materials that they developed for their classes were not as a result of knowledge gained through the workshops and meetings they had attended.

Table 4 shows some reasons given by teachers for sometimes not attending in-service courses and professional meetings. These meetings were often well attended, though for some teachers, their ability to attend was thwarted by the long distances teachers had to walk, the heavy workloads they carried due to shortfall of teachers vis-à-vis high enrolments in schools. Some of them didn't attend because information did not reach them on time. Another setback for these workshops was that they were not supported from any quarters. There was no financial or material support from the Ministry of Education or from the District Education office. The only donation in sight was the contribution made by the participating schools upon request from the TAC tutor.

Relationship between teachers' opinions on relevance of workshops and the number attended

In order to test whether there was a significant difference in number of workshops attended and teachers' opinion on relevance of the workshop, a chi-square test was used. The results are shown on Table 5. The analysis revealed that there was a significant relationship between participants' views on relevance of meetings and workshops to teaching in their classrooms and the number of workshops or meetings they had attended. The χ^2 calculated value 9.084, at 0.05 confidence interval and degrees of freedom 6, was less than χ^2 critical value 12.592. Therefore H_0 that stated, 'There is no significant difference in number of workshops attended and teachers' opinions on relevance of the workshops was accepted. It was evident from the study that there was a significant relationship between number of workshops that had been attended by teachers' and their opinions on relevance of the workshops.

Table 1. Teachers' views on organization of meetings/workshops

<i>Number of workshops attended</i>				
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16+
No of years in teaching				
Workshops and professional meetings on learning materials are often organized in my zone	%	%	%	%
Agree	53.6	51.3	60.5	59.2
Undecided	6.1	7.7	10.5	4.1
Disagree	40.2	41.0	29.0	36.7
Workshops and professional meetings deal with common things and are often a repetition of same issues	%	%	%	%
Agree	56.1	38.5	57.9	52.1
Undecided	11.0	23.1	15.8	14.40
Disagree	32.9	38.4	23.6	33.4
Organization of meetings and workshops are often timely	%	%	%	%
Agree	56.1	51.3	57.9	55.1
Undecided	12.2	17.9	2.6	14.3
Disagree	31.7	30.7	39.5	30.6
	N=82	N=39	N=38	N=49

Table 2. Purpose for workshop and meetings

	HTs	ECD teachers	LPTs
	%	%	%
Games	14	4	18
New syllabus	12	43	29
Examinations	26	2	16
Learning materials	2	4	6
Information from authorities	38	22	18
Subject panels	6	3	9
Others	2	22	4
	N=40	N=87	N=81

Table 3.Teachers views on the impact of the workshops/meetings

<i>Number of workshops attended</i>				
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16+
<i>Impact of workshops</i>				
Statement: The Workshops and professional meetings organized in my zone:	%	%	%	%
Are relevant to teaching in my class				
Agree	69.5	53.9	71.7	73.5
Undecided	13.4	12.8	7.9	14.3
Disagree	17.1	33.3	21.0	12.2
Help teachers realize and use their potential in development of quality materials for teaching				
Agree	71.9	61.5	76.3	75.0
Undecided	8.5	15.4	2.6	12.5
Disagree	19.5	23.1	21.1	12.5
The learning materials developed for my class are as a result of knowledge gained through the workshops/ meetings attended at the TAC				
Agree	50.0	43.5	42.1	22.9
Undecided	7.3	7.7	7.9	14.6
Disagree	42.7	48.7	50.0	62.5
	N=82	N=39	N=38	N=49

Table 4.Reasons for failure to attend meetings

Reason	(N)	%	(N)	%	
Long distances	6	15	11	12.7	
Heavy workloads	12	30	24	27.6	
Under staffing	16	40	13	14.9	
Information received late	4	10	36	41.4	
Others	2	5	3	3.4	
Total	40	100	87	100	
			81	100	

Table 5. Relationship between opinions on relevance of workshops and number attended

No of workshops	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Total
1-5	44	16	38	98
6-10	67	8	27	102
11-15	3	1	2	6
16-20	1	0	1	2
Total	115	25	68	208

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teachers' Advisory centres play a vital role in supporting the learning process for its fundamental goal is to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the school and classroom level. From this study, it was noted that although many workshops and professional meetings which were timely, relevant and useful to teaching in ECD and primary school had been organized in the TACs in the five years preceding the time of study, most of them were not based on learning materials. These meetings were often well attended, though for reasons at times, such as long distances, heavy workloads and not receiving information on time, some teachers did not attend. For the TAC to play its intervention role effectively as a support service, this study recommends that the TACs be adequately staffed to ensure consistent and ideally long term following of teachers in the classroom. In this sense, every TAC should have at least two TAC tutors. Competent, experienced and committed teachers should be appointed to serve as TAC tutors.

A clerk with librarian skills should also be deployed to the centre to ease the work of the TAC tutor and to bring some kind of order with the materials. Provision of funds to the TAC is very crucial for effective functioning. The Ministry of Education should provide funding that is channeled directly to TAC accounts to enable the TAC tutors to run workshops and seminars (purchase workshop materials and provide lunches/snacks and even transport). When participants are well taken care of during meetings, they tend to be motivated to attend other meetings in future. It is a given that the Ministry of Education attaches great importance to continuing capacity building programmes for its staff. On the same gesture it should step up in-service courses for TAC tutors, so that they in turn can in-service teachers on good practice in teaching.

A lot of these courses should be purposed on development and use of learning materials among other issues. The TAC tutor should also be well inducted in to his job immediately he/she is appointed to acquaint him/her with his roles and responsibilities. TACs can only be effective if they are well equipped and facilitated. The Ministry of Education is to ensure that TACs are housed in good and functional buildings with the necessary equipment of modern times such as computers and other modern technology. The buildings should have enough storage space, reading space and a conference space that can be used for teachers' meetings and workshops. The TAC should be centrally located at a place that is conveniently accessible for the teachers, to make it convenient for them to make full use of it at more regular basis and with less expenses.

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