

Perceptions of leaders toward inclusion of children with neurodevelopmental disorders in spiritual formation programs: A case of Christ Is The Answer Ministries in Kenya

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Abstract

A well-informed perception of leaders is critical in how members of worship congregations experience spiritual formation. This study focuses on six selected worship congregations of Kenya's Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM). The Straussian grounded-theory design was employed to analyze interviews and focus group discussions. The findings indicated that inclusive spiritual formation for children with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) in worship congregations is nonexistent due to leaders' perceptions regarding NDDs. The study recommends training worship congregational leaders to address the spiritual formation needs of children with NDDs.

Keywords

perceptions, neurodevelopmental disorders, inclusion, spiritual formation, worship congregations

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Introduction

Perceptions of leaders in worship congregations have been unfavorable toward the inclusion of children with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) in spiritual formation programs in Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM). “Worship congregation” refers to a local religious society formed to give “devotion” to God, and the practice of attending religious services, and religious education; while spiritual worship refers to acts that may be performed privately by individuals or corporately by small gatherings that attribute reverence, honor, and homage to God (Koboi, 2020).

NDDs such as intellectual disability, autism, cerebral palsy, and dyslexia continue to be the leading causes of children’s disability, resulting in educational drawbacks, prohibition, and latency in spiritual worship. NDDs have equally been correlated with higher rates of children who remain out of social and learning circles, as well as premature deaths due to underlying conditions such as weak or stiff muscles, convulsions, and epileptic seizures (DaWalt et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2016; Hirvikoski et al., 2015; Sæbønes et al., 2015).

The issue

While some children with disability can lead whole and fulfilling lives, those experiencing NDDs are associated with limitations in development that hinder participation in social, education, and faith formation processes, leading to poor health and employment outcomes (Arora et al., 2018; Blackburn et al., 2012).

Many people associate themselves with a particular worship congregation to form, share, and strengthen their faith, deepening their relationships with like-minded people. If a person finds their niche within these worship congregations, their gifts are bound to be discovered, developed, and dispensed in the whole process of spiritual worship and formation in the worship congregations. However, active participation is often tricky for children with NDDs as they encounter different forms of exclusion like; (1) not creating space for them to participate with other children, (2) not incorporating their learning styles in their teaching process, and (3) not providing learning materials that are adaptable to their mental and physical conditions; which negatively affects their faith formation process to varying degrees depending on the type of disability, where they live, or the community to which they belong (Baraza, 2017; Fioravanti, 2016; Cologon, 2015).

Research questions

1. How can worship congregational leaders avoid exclusion and decrease stigma related to NDDs?
2. How can spiritual formation programs be adapted to include children with NDDs?

Contextual background

NDDs are important and under-recognized reasons of morbidity in Sub-Saharan Africa, and with a high prevalence in under-developing countries because of the non-genetic

factors such as malnutrition, poor healthcare, and environmental factors (Iqbal et al., 2016; Meyer and Ndeti, 2016). In 2016, the World Data indicated Africa as the most affected by the NDDs with Somalia topping with 3.25%, Niger 3.04%, Democratic Republic of Congo 2.76%, and Eritrea 2.67%. In East Africa, Uganda stood at 2.32%, followed by Tanzania at 2.12% while Kenya was affected by 2.06% (Ritchie and Roser, 2018).

However, very few studies have been carried out in East Africa on the epidemiological statistics of NDDs. Thus, information on this area is very scanty. The story of the NDDs among children in Kenya does not only have a literature gap, but also a practical gap. Most children with NDDs encounter many obstacles in the social, economic, and political arenas because they are often deprived of the basics of schooling, social interactions, and appreciation (Donald et al., 2014).

Even though Kenya adopted mental health as the ninth crucial component of its primary healthcare provision in 1982, a comprehensive national mental health law is still absent (National Academies Press, 2016). The country has a Mental Health Act which was implemented in May 1991 and revised in 2012 (Laws of Kenya, 2012), where it spends only “0.01% of the total health budget on mental health” (WHO, 2011). Little wonder then that, although NDDs are increasingly prevalent across the globe, they are, nonetheless, poorly understood by most people in Kenya (Ileri et al., 2017).

Seminal contributions

NDDs manifest persistent deficits in “social communication and interaction across multiple contexts” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Children with NDDs and impairments may exhibit problems with motor skills, conduct, recollection, learning, language, communication, or other nervous system functions. Intelligence tests could be helpful if well utilized and managed in the contexts of the church, to discern the support needs of the congregants to be addressed. This is key to accessible worship, allowing every person to worship in a meaningful way.

Psychologists, sociologists, and pediatricians have been interested in testing and screening infants and children to determine progression through their developmental milestones. Binet and Simon (1916) developed an intelligence test to identify children needing additional support in their learning programs. Gesell (1925) developed a scale that enables pediatricians and adoption agencies to assess potential developmental differences in infants. It was revised in 1940, 1965 and recently in 2012 by the Gesell Institute of Child Development. Similarly, pediatricians use the Bayley Scale (1969) to assess developmental delays and plan for intervention strategies (Ayele, 2014). All these tools contributed to early identification and interventions to maximize life chances and improve outcomes for children with NDDs. However, worship congregational leaders in Kenya have yet to use these tools in the worship congregations toward the potential participation of children with NDDs.

The process of spiritual formation. The process of spiritual formation differs among religions, but they all aim to change the heart and socialize individuals to embrace a

particular way of worship. The concept is pervasive (Fowler and Dell, 2006). Indubitably, James Fowler envisioned spiritual development as a process that happens in seven universal, hierarchical, and sequential stages (Coyle, 2011), which are relevant to this discussion.

Scholars have acknowledged that every human being has a spiritual quest. The spiritual quest of the child can be integrated into Fowler's spiritual development as a tapestry across every stage of the formation. However, using hierarchical theories and rationalization of faith like Fowler's as a foundation for the spiritual formation of children has been criticized by Coyle (2011), Mathewson (2011), Ratcliff (2008), and Nye and Hay (1996) for its emphasis on cognitive structures as the core of faith development at the expense of the heart and spiritual quest of every human being.

Coles (1990) deliberately avoided stage-oriented inquiry and used a phenomenological structure to examine children from religious and non-religious upbringings. Mathewson (2011) reiterated, many researchers recognize that something fundamental was omitted in the developmental theories and that "something" was labeled as "the spirit of the child" (Nye and Hay, 1996). This sentiment was echoed among the developmental scholars who equally identified "something is missing" within the domain of spiritual development, as pointed out by Mathewson (2011) and Roehlkepartain et al. (2006).

The complexity around spiritual formation for children with NDDs may dissuade worship congregational leaders from seeking creative solutions to serve all congregants. Deuel (2013), Anderson (2015), and Pirmer (2015) have cautioned against trivializing and hiding or masking disabilities in worship congregations. These scholars argue that all humans need God in one way or another. This is anchored in the knowledge and belief of being created in the image of God, hence, bearing a fundamental dignity and having an "eschatological hope that God will overcome all" infirmities in glory (Pirmer, 2015). Therefore, children with NDDs require a commitment to their rights (the right to health, education, family life, play, and recreation), well-being (an adequate standard of living and protection from abuse and harm), and their future holistically to grow up and be productive members in worship congregation and society (National Academies Press (US), 2016).

Gaps in the spiritual formation of children with neurodevelopmental disorders

The literature on the spiritual formation of children living with NDDs reveals gaps in perceptions around (a) education, (b) faith formation, and (c) social inclusion of children in the community. A confluence of these three components seems to shape leaders' perceptions in the worship congregations as they seek to include children with NDDs in the spiritual formation programs.

Education. Inclusive education is a contentious concept among researchers of child education in Kenya and other parts of the world. The Salamanca Statement reinforced the impetus for inclusion ratified by legislatures of numerous nations and international organizations in 1994, advocating that each child has a central right to schooling and should be accorded the chance to attain and uphold an acceptable level of education

(Sónia, 2012). This advocacy was affirmed in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar to a growing consensus that it is the right of every child to have access to communal education regardless of their circumstances, attainment, or disability (UNESCO, 2000).

Meanings and considerations of inclusion and inclusive education vary significantly by each country's managerial/administrative, fiscal, and practical regulations (Suleymanov, 2015). Orinda (2011) indicates that in Kenya, for example, special education programs were spearheaded as early as 1945. The researchers further note that Ominde's Report of 1964 advocated for the care of disabled people in society and suggested that the government of Kenya address the needs and necessities of disabled children. Since then, government commissions such as the Gachathi (1976) and Mackay (1981) have recommended the education of people with impairments. Nevertheless, none of these recommendations were implemented until the late 1980s when centralization of training of the teachers of learners with disabilities was introduced at Kenya Institute of Special Education (Orinda, 2011). Similarly, there is little information on whether worship congregations were influenced to adopt some of these recommendations in their spiritual formation programs.

Recent empirical studies by Chesire (2018), Boit (2016), Cologon (2015), and Henninger et al. (2014), among others, postulate that all children are unique and can learn. Cologon (2015) postulates that "macro or micro exclusion" is occasionally erroneously taken for inclusion. Macro exclusion is when a learner with a disability is isolated in a different room from the rest of the children during the learning/formation process, while micro exclusion is when a learner with a disability is registered in a typical setting but is isolated into a different room or location throughout and hence does not mingle with the rest of the children at all (Cologon, 2015). Both macro and micro exclusion lead to children with support needs being denied the opportunity by the church leadership to learn and grow in their walk with Christ.

Nonetheless, no study in Kenya indicates that these children cannot benefit from inclusion. Neither is it clear whether teachers have the necessary training to engage children with disabilities in an inclusive educational setting. Contrarily, some researchers in Kenya and across the globe, Bui et al. (2010) and Loreman (2007), have concluded that educational inclusion in spiritual formation programs provides significant benefits for children with support needs.

Spiritual formation. According to Dallas Theological Seminary (2018), spiritual formation is the process by which God forms character in believers through the ministry of the spirit, in the context of community, and per His standards.

The definition underscores the fact that spiritual formation is a process that takes time and happens in a community. Similarly, Willard and Simpson (2006) state that "spiritual formation is a profound manifestation of God's gracious action through His Word and Spirit and something we are responsible for before God and can set about achieving in a sensible, systematic manner." At its crux, spiritual formation is the heart's transformation, which involves the child's spirit and the quest for spirituality.

It is problematic that most published studies in well-established journals presume spiritual formation with a primary focus on the non-disabled population. The existing

literature on the subject in Kenya affirms a gap in inclusion in worship congregations. Peterson reiterates, “when we sentimentalize impairments, demonize children with disabilities or blatantly deny their spiritual needs, we compromise or belittle their humanity” Peterson (n.d.). This notion is equally held by Anderson (2015), Mukuria (2012), Roberto (2012), Peters (1967), and White (2014). Oliver (2015) affirms that the worship congregation is in a state of lassitude “as it is faced with a generation of children who have not received their just inheritance” of being taught in the knowledge of God, hence, they are denied a “safe and appropriate opportunity for personal exploration and response.”

Social acceptance and economic empowerment. Most NDDs are still perceived through misinformation (Maleka, 2016), and children with some disorders are not socially accepted in worship congregations in Kenya (Anderson, 2015). Even though Kenya has one of the finest independent and comprehensive constitutions in Africa that values inclusion, discrimination, deprivation, and segregation are still prevalent (Fioravanti, 2016), leading to stigmatization, which significantly restricts access to professional attention and care, thus decreasing the quality of life for children with NDDs (Meyer and Ndeti, 2016).

Methodology

This study employed a Straussian grounded-theory design for qualitative investigation because it is suitable for a phenomenon that examines behavior and attitudes when addressing a subject matter about which little is known and describes a phenomenon, giving in-depth information to describe the situation within a context (Muhaiyuddin et al., 2016).

The general population comprised Sunday school teachers and pastors in selected CITAM churches in Nairobi. CITAM assemblies characterize urban settings with diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with a well-defined management and governance structure that promote sound stewardship and accountability, making it appropriate for the study (Kakui, 2010).

Six out of eleven CITAM assemblies were selected for the study in Nairobi and its environs. These six assemblies were considered information-rich cases due to the preliminary study done on the Nairobi CITAM assemblies that established the size of the population of children in the congregation and the number of children with NDDs in their midst, as indicated in appendix C1.

The accessible population comprised 93 individuals that were considered information-rich cases. Assemblies (pseudonyms); V had 9 support needs children, W had 12, B had 28, K had 6, N had 6, while P had two children with support needs. All these assemblies were explored, allowing the results to be “drawn together to yield an overall picture” (Rowley, 2002).

The researchers’ purpose was to offer comprehensive discussions in understanding the perceptions of Sunday school teachers and pastors regarding the inclusion of children with NDDs in the spiritual formation in CITAM churches in Kenya. This qualitative study could not interview 93 members; hence, the researchers resorted to judgmental/purposive sampling and chose 28 participants who were deemed “the appropriate number of

participants” at their convenience (Asiamah et al., 2017). This is in line with Marshall et al., who propose that “grounded theory qualitative studies should generally include between 20 and 30 interviews” to avoid extreme variations which could otherwise render recommendations challenging (Marshall et al., 2013).

Each respondent was interviewed through in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interview sessions that were recorded verbatim. The participants were selected based on personal skills and the positions held. Even though not considered as “leaders,” parents were included in the interview processes because spiritual formation begins with the primary caregivers who introduce the learning environments through Sunday school classes, curricula, and involvement in other worship activities and services to ensure that children may have formation. Key informants were Sunday School Teachers, Senior Pastors, Christian Education Pastors, Children’s Pastors, and parents from the selected assemblies, as indicated in [appendix C2](#). Due to their skills and positions, they were “able to provide more information and a deeper insight into what ‘was going on’” (Elmusharaf et al., 2012).

The study also obtained data from two focus group discussions; CITAM Sunday school teachers and CITAM pastors, with an average of 6–8 participants per group. This was helpful, especially in participatory synthesis and in-depth subgroup discussions on the subject matter (Benoot et al., 2016). Participants’ responses in the group setting prompted spontaneous inquiries from the interviewer, which consequently generated more information (Fletcher et al., 2010). A sample of the in-depth interview and focus group interviews is given under [appendices A and B](#), respectively.

The focus group sessions provided opportunities to triangulate the data collected from individual respondents. Peer de-briefers were also used to review and ask questions about this qualitative research to ensure that the data resonated with someone other than the researchers (Skovdal and Cornish, 2015).

The interviews were recorded using an Acer Swift 1 laptop and were later entirely transcribed verbatim. All participants were first communicated to through electronic mail comprising details of the study. A telephone call followed them up with the interview particulars. This was followed up by face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted by a research assistant who had duly signed a confidentiality/fidelity form prior. The research assistant was engaged in data collection from an outsider’s perspective since the primary researchers were affiliated with CITAM, bearing in mind that grounded-theory approaches assist in the development of hypothetical descriptions and explanations of the social practices and mannerisms in particular settings (Currie, 2009).

Using the given instruments, data collection was a three-fold strategy. First, the researchers collected data about the Sunday school teachers and pastors’ attitudes toward including children with NDDs in Sunday school classes. This helped the researcher to explore how well the children with NDDs are included in the aspect of curriculum instruction to their spiritual formation. Second, the researchers collected data about Sunday school teachers’ and pastors’ attitudes about the inclusion of children with NDDs in the church worship programs to explore the aspect of worship. Last, the researchers collected data about the Sunday school teachers’ and pastors’ attitudes concerning the

inclusion of children with NDDs in the church social programs and affinity groups to explore the aspect of fellowship and service.

The researchers conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the first step into the data collection and then followed up with journals/field notes and focus group interactions in the data collection to explore the research phenomenon for similar results. Methodological triangulation involved the use of multiple qualitative methods to study the phenomenon.

Data analysis

The constant comparative method of data analysis involves the “process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (Williams, 2008). The transcriptions were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The transliterated manuscript was organized in significant themes/nodes and categories with the aid of Nvivo11 according to codes, thus deconstructing the qualitative data into manageable categories, patterns, themes, and relationships per the research objective and variables (Ngulube, 2015).

The outlined progression in [appendix C3](#) allowed an organized and logical approach to the data analysis and allowed the researchers to go beyond simple descriptive, comparative, and explanatory ends to discover the basis and impetus for responses. The process was a repeated venture and was approached in a spiral manner rather than a fixed linear action to allow for exhaustive extraction of information until data saturation was obtained which was the standard measure “for determining when adequate sample size” had been reached (Gentles et al., 2015). The identified themes were further used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, examination, scrutiny, and the formulation of syntheses and interpretations in regard to the inclusion of children with NDDs in spiritual formation programs.

Results and interpretation

Ten participants out of twenty-eight individuals interviewed advocated for the segregation of children with NDDs from the spiritual formation programs, while five advocated for segregation and integration. Eight participants advocated for integration only, while the remaining five advocated for the inclusion of children with NDDs in the spiritual formation programs in the worship congregation.

Segregation denies children with NDDs the right to education and formation due to disability. The position excludes the children, claiming they are not “educable.” While integration acknowledges the right for all children to learn without discrimination, all learners are grouped for their learning throughout the day in traditional learning settings. As such, the ones with disabilities are forced to “fit in.” On the other hand, inclusion calls for a total reorganization of the learning institutions and systems, focusing on all aspects of it, to enable all children to access education and formation at all levels (Sarromaa Hausstätter and Jahnukainen, 2014).

There are many benefits to having inclusive classrooms, including reducing stigma surrounding NDDs, creating respectful relationships between all learners within a classroom, teaching all learners how to act positively with others, and increasing knowledge of NDDs (Beghin, 2021). A vast majority of children with NDDs who are provided with appropriate education show improvements not only in academic learning and functional language but also in socialization, adaptive skills, and communication (Murray, 2015).

Toward segregation of children with NDDs in spiritual formation programs

The respondents who advocated for segregation of the children with NDDs from the spiritual formation program in Sunday school rationalized that CITAM should try to understand children with NDD from “within their own world” as explained by one “Sunday School teacher”:

They are just in their world... they are normal, and they are in their world... It is good to leave them in their world.

The aspect of segregation of the children with NDDs from Sunday school as depicted seems to have been held by most respondents. Feedback from these respondents indicates that they perceived children with NDDs in their midst as people who: (1) “do not understand,” (2) “do not learn,” and (3) “do not fit.”

Children with NDDs “do not understand”. Segregation of the children with NDDs was first attributed to the preconceived perception that these children “do not understand.” Respondents who upheld this notion intimated that the children with NDDs “do not understand,” and hence trying to form them spiritually with the rest of the children could not yield many results. “A Sunday school teacher” stated, As long as they cannot understand when they are in school, I do not think coming here on a Sunday would make no change. As in, it would be the same thing.

This argument conflicts with the drive towards inclusion advocated for by the 1994 Salamanca Statement.

Children with neurodevelopmental disorders “do not learn”. Secondly, in support of segregation, respondents believed these children “do not learn.” “A Sunday school teacher” described a girl living with autism in her class,

Very hyper, she does not sit still in class... she does not learn much because she does not stay in class.

According to that response, sitting still in class was equated to “learning.” Also, learning in this context was defined by how well a child communicated verbally with other children.

The rationale that children with NDDs “do not learn” and “do not understand” is a misinformed perception that children with NDDs are incapacitated intellectually, hence, they are unable to learn. An empirical study by [Carlson et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Vettiyolil \(2015\)](#) indicated unreachable expectations that the worship congregation places on her members. Religion is primarily interpreted as a language game, and therefore, it depends on the ability to socialize. Hence, children with NDDs who struggled with verbal communication were seen through the lens of “not being able to learn.”

Children with NDDs “do not fit in”. Some proponents of segregation also alluded that children with NDDs “do not fit in” the Sunday school classes and the main worship congregation. If anything, these were deemed disruptive in Sunday school. “A Sunday school teacher” narrated how disruptive a child with NDD had been to them until they had to stop her from going to Sunday school:

The child kept coming out, and the teacher had to follow her. At times she [would] make funny noises in class. The students did not like that, [they] did not like her.

Equally, this study found that some people thought that children with NDDs were “funny looking,” as indicated in the response by another “Sunday school teacher” below:

We have two children with Down syndrome. A new boy [who visited the service] went back home and told the mother that he was learning with children who looked funny. The mother removed his child from the class... she does not want the son to be in the same class with funny-looking children.

“One individual from the Elders Council” intimated,

The numbers of such children are very minute, and it would be deemed a waste of resources for budget allocation.

“A Children’s Pastor” in one of the assemblies confirmed this assertion stating,

We are sold out to the majority as a church, and because these cases are very few, they tend to be neglected or ignored.

When probed further on the need to invest in the children based on the biblical perspective, another “Member of the Deacon Board” said,

To be able to do this kind of ministry, we may require some investment. That is where numbers come in; if we buy this kind of equipment, put up this kind of facility to minister to this person. ROI, as they say in business, comes into play. ... We should do ABCD, which can be factored into our budgeting system so that it is not an assembly project but a CITAM project.

Lack of embracing children with NDDs in the worship congregations leads to segregation. By segregating children with NDDs, the worship congregations make the support needs of children invisible. The invisibility of the needs of the children then leads to their exclusion from the spiritual formation programs. Which begs the question, what happens to their spiritual quest?

Understanding of human differences and acceptance of every individual as unique and created in the image of God, needing special attention and investment, is essential for the well-being of everyone. Those who teach in Sunday schools must be competent enough to reach out and include all the children in the spiritual formation programs. As McMillan posits, “the model of Jesus Christ presented as an all-inclusive ministry, and so must ours... One cannot build strong churches or schools in the name of Christianity to the exclusion of any” (McMillan, 2007).

Toward segregation and integration of children with NDDs in spiritual formation programs

The study also established that several respondents advocated segregation and integration of children with NDDs. This observation upheld two variables because the respondents in this category seemed to fully agree with the advocates of segregation on the assertion that the children with NDDs “do not learn” and “do not fit” in the Sunday school as they are disruptive in classes.

Hence, the proponents of this notion advocated for integration for socialization purposes only; the children with NDDs can be segregated/isolated during the “teaching-learning” process. “One Pastor” explained that the worship congregation should begin from segregation and then slowly consider moving towards integration thus:

It is better if they are alone with people who understand them... For now, they should be separated but be given opportunities to socialize with other children.

Proponents of this approach seem to embrace Fowler’s hierarchical theory of faith formation, which emphasizes cognition as a fundamental base for spiritual formation. Hence, they suggest that these children should be isolated during the formal instructional faith formation. Embracing integration for socialization purposes only and then segregating/isolating children with NDDs during the “teaching-learning” process is a step toward having “something missing” within the domain of their spiritual development as indicated by Coyle (2011), Mathewson (2011), Ratcliff (2008), and Nye and Hay (1996) while criticizing the hierarchical theories given as a foundation for the spiritual formation of children.

Toward integration of children with neurodevelopmental disorders in spiritual formation programs

Some respondents upheld the view of integration only. However, by integration, they meant that children with support needs should attend traditional classes but be attended to differently/separately within those classes. The basis for that opinion was that:

1. The children with NDDs “do not learn.”
2. They need to be socialized like all other children.

While they agreed with the proponents of segregation that children with NDDs “do not learn,” the respondents in this category explained that these children would benefit more socially when accommodated with the others. Hence, children with NDDs needed to be allowed to mingle with the rest of the children and try to adapt independently. “A Parent” of a child with an NDD recounted her ordeal, stating:

As a mother of a child with cerebral palsy, I have had many challenges... I bring my child to Sunday school, and he is expected to be integrated into Sunday school and adapt to the systems of the Sunday school without much support... There are no individual learning plans to help them learn.

The account of this parent enlightens the discussion that integration places pressure on the child to “fit in” to a system of learning which is not adapted to meet the needs of the individual child. However, most religions acknowledge that God does not discriminate against people based on abilities/disabilities. Children with disabilities are created, valued, and loved by God. Christians, for instance, teach that God has the tenderness of a father towards his children: *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust* (Psalm 103:13–14). Suffice it to note then, segregation and integration approaches lead to macro and micro exclusion which in turn lead to children with NDDs being denied the opportunity to learn and grow in their walk with God in the faith communities (Cologon, 2015).

Toward inclusion of children with NDDs in spiritual formation programs

There were a few respondents who advocated for the inclusion of children with NDDs in the spiritual formation programs in Sunday school based on the reasoning that:

1. Children with NDDs are “normal.”
2. They need regular programs/activities just like the rest of the children.

“A Pastor” stated:

They are children like any other. They need to be loved and cared for... Give them the word, and they can grasp quite a bit... They can pray for a cup of tea, pray for something, and they know their names. I encourage the teachers I work with not to discriminate against them but teach them at their pace.”

Feedback from proponents of inclusion also indicated that they appreciated the peer learning that occurs during inclusion. “One parent” said:

Peer learning occurs when the children are in an inclusive set-up ... They learn very little from a specialist, but they learn so much from their peers.

From these dialogs, proponents of the inclusion of children with NDDs believed that every child is unique and that every child is capable of learning. The idea is to support all children to be involved in all the learning and formation aspects. Hence, in inclusive education, children are not isolated or segregated in any way or for any reason. Inclusion practices are embedded within day-to-day practices.

Discussion

Inclusive education systems are an essential part of inclusive societies. “The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers” (Heezen, 2017).

Subsequently, inclusive education and formation perceive learning and formation as a process, not content-based (Mugambi, 2017). Every child has the same right to access education and spiritual formation. Therefore, the goal of inclusive education in worship congregations should be rooted in policy initiatives developed to ensure that good quality education and formation are accessible and beneficial for all (Heezen, 2017).

Inclusion requires much time and hard work to take care of the children with support needs and the rest of the class. As more children with NDDs are included in the Sunday school programs, teachers must receive the appropriate support through additional personnel, equipment, time, and training to succeed. Ultimately, inclusive systems for learning can only be created if ordinary learning institutions become better at educating and forming all children in their communities, irrespective of their abilities and disabilities (Mugambi, 2017).

As Nolen (2003) states, children learn best when their strengths are identified, and their teachers and other adults build on those strengths. Some children with NDDs tend to have one or two areas of learning intelligence that they have mastered and that a teacher can leverage to teach them (Duvall, 2020). What is needed is an obligation to eliminate all the obstacles to the full involvement of everyone as equally valued and unique individuals.

Inclusive education systems are an essential part of inclusive societies. “The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers” (Heezen, 2017). Every child has the same right to access spiritual formation. Those who teach in Sunday schools must be competent enough to reach out and include all the children in the spiritual formation programs.

The study revealed that inclusive spiritual formation for children with NDDs is inadequate in worship congregations in CITAM. More importantly, the perception of leaders in some worship congregations has perpetuated the non-inclusion status.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the perception of leaders about children with NDDs is an essential contributor to the exclusion of children with support needs in spiritual formation

activities. Therefore, changing the perception of leaders will have implications for worship congregations, Sunday school teachers, pastors, parents, congregational leaders, and policymakers.

Inclusive spiritual formation is a systematic change at all levels; pastors, teachers, Sunday school children, the worship congregation, communities, policymakers, decision-makers, families, and society. Access to Sunday school classes alone is not sufficient because participation means that all children are engaged in learning activities that are meaningful for them. Promoting positive attitudes in Sunday school and spiritual formation programs is crucial for widening participation.

Parental and teacher attitudes towards the spiritual formation of children with NDDs appear to be primarily determined by personal experiences; this fact needs to be recognized and strategies and resources are implemented to address factors influencing leader perception. The respondents in this study advocated for providing additional training opportunities to include children with NDDs in Sunday school classes.

Congregational leaders must be equipped with learning materials adaptable to children with NDDs. As opposed to the curriculum-centered teaching methods, all children, regardless of their differences, can have the opportunity to interact, play, learn, work, and experience the feeling of belonging and experiment to develop their potential (Republic of Kenya, 2018). The study recommends training leaders at various levels to address the spiritual formation needs of children with NDDs.

The researchers recommend consistent training of the Sunday school teachers and parents/primary caregivers of children with NDDs. Since NDDs are broad, training needs to focus on the knowledge required to serve and teach such children in spiritual matters. Teachers who are equipped would incorporate children with NDDs in the Sunday school programs and activities (inclusion) and, thus, add value to their spiritual formation.

The researchers also recommend training and participation of all worship congregational leaders in Sunday school activities. Equipping these leaders with the proper knowledge will ensure that they understand the children with NDDs and make knowledgeable/informed decisions about their inclusion.

Furthermore, leaders of worship congregations should participate in the Sunday school activities of children with support needs directly or indirectly. That would include supporting the children with NDDs, creating inclusive environments, developing inclusive curriculums, and supporting parents of children with support needs.

Due to the gap in the literature regarding the spiritual formation of children with NDDs, this study recommends further investigation into other factors that impinge on the exclusion of children from spiritual activities of worship congregations. Particularly, scholarly work is needed in focusing on children with NDDs to create awareness and form them spiritually. A well-informed perception of leaders is critical in how different constituencies in the worship congregation experience spiritual formation and how this is achieved.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data Availability Statement

The [data](#) that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [P. A. B.], upon reasonable request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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