

Research & Essays

Vernacular Radio Stations and Inclusive Education in Marginalized Communities in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper addresses a qualitative research project concerning the role of vernacular radio in promoting inclusive education among rural communities in Kenya. It suggests that the media plays a crucial role in highlighting inclusive education as an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunity for academic and social achievement. The study involved interviews with 20 key informants who included radio presenters, producers, and stakeholders in inclusive education in Kenya. Findings indicate that few vernacular radio stations aired disability specific content despite the fact that existing broadcasting laws provide a framework for broadcasters to include disability specific content in their programming. Some radio stations aired a wide array of topics on disability but failed to capture specific issues relating to inclusive education for children with disabilities. Radio packaged disability content into a variety of program formats providing multiple angles for stories on children with disabilities. The use of inclusive language in reporting was more likely to influence societal perceptions towards education for children with disabilities. Few inclusive education stakeholders were involved in generating content on inclusive education for radio, and even fewer disability activists used vernacular radio to champion the rights of children with disabilities. The study recommends that vernacular radio stations should broadcast more disability specific information on inclusive education. Furthermore, disability stakeholders should engage with producers in radio stations to do this accurately.

Keywords: inclusive education, vernacular radio, marginalized communities

How can access to the unique powers of local, vernacular media empower marginalized populations? How may this potential power benefit those most marginalized, especially students with disabilities? And how may considering these questions fit into Kenya's larger goals of universal access to education? This paper addresses a qualitative research study exploring the role of media in promoting inclusive education in Kenya. The focus will be on how vernacular radio stations are setting the agenda of inclusive education in the country. It is well recognized that media plays an enormously influential role in public responses to emergent issues in society (Leask, Hooker & King, 2010). Radio has an unparalleled reach as a communication mechanism (Gunther, 1998). It has substantial power in setting agendas, that is, what we should be concerned about and take action on, and in framing issues, that is, how we should think about those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Radio continues to be a vibrant, multi-vocal, persistent, and mobile feature of daily life (Battles & Patterson, 2018). As a platform, it remains a vital cultural force for various social groups to advocate for change (Starkey, 2017). This essay considers how this influence may be leveraged towards supporting inclusive education.

Inclusive education for children with disabilities has been a major focus for disability activists and parents of children with disabilities since laws on universal access to education were passed in Kenya. It is estimated that only one in six disabled children attend school in Kenya (National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development & Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Those few who do face the familiar problems of exclusion, stigmatization, inappropriate curricula, poorly equipped schools, and insufficiently trained teachers (Global Education for All, 2016). There are currently 1.3 million people in Kenya living with a disability. Of these, only 39% have attended a mainstream primary school, and only 9% have attended high school (National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development & Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Addressing this disparity, and with a focus on leaving no one behind (as articulated in the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development), the Kenyan government generally increased the primary net enrollment from 75% in 2006 to 83% in 2012 (World Bank Group, 2012). However, the statistics for the most marginalized groups are not as impressive. The enrollment of learners in schools that cater for special needs currently stand at 102,749 students, of which 21,050 are in special schools and 81,649 are enrolled in integrated special units at both primary and secondary schools (Republic of Kenya, 2015). According to

estimates, these enrollment figures represent about one-third of the expected number of learners with special needs. According to Gebrekidan (2012), Africans with disabilities are among the poorest of the world's poor, and such exclusion from education further perpetuates the cycle of disability and poverty (Bii & Taylor, 2013).

At the same time, enrollment is no guarantee of success. In fact, those enrolled are far more likely than their nondisabled peers to drop out. For example, in the District of Nyando, the dropout rate amongst disabled children is estimated at 75%, compared to 40% amongst their nondisabled peers (Global Education for All, 2016). This difference can largely be attributed to the fact that disabled children do not receive the amount and type of attention needed to successfully complete their education. With no assessment at enrollment, or any other stage, the teacher is left unsure as to how to teach the child and what to expect.

Given these challenges, students require inclusive education. This means placing students with disabilities of all ranges and types in general education classrooms with appropriate services, care, and support (Lipsky & Gartner, 2006). It is important to notice that inclusion contains a very radical idea of diversity that is not found in the idea of integration. While integration has principally to do with proximity and opportunities for social interaction, inclusive education advocates for full membership and conjoint participation with peers at all levels of education. Inclusive education not only involves fundamentally re-thinking the meaning and purpose of education for all children and young people, but it also refers to the restructuring of ordinary schools as well as being pro-active. The principle of inclusion raises fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of our education system and the part schools play in the life of the community. Schools do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of the wider community, and community life does not stop at the school gates (Johnsen & Skjørten, 2001).

This interconnected nature of school and community has been supported by a number of international conventions on education. Documents emerging from these include international and national legal frameworks and policies that bind the government of Kenya in recognizing the rights of persons with disability. A case in point, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is an international convention aimed at protecting the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007). It promotes and protects the rights of every

Kenyan living with a disability thanks to its ratification on 19 May 2008 by the government of Kenya.

Article 24 of the CRPD requires state parties to recognize the right to education for children with disabilities and education free from discrimination [sic]. It states that “state parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, state parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.” The article further states that children or adults with disability cannot be excluded from the education system on the basis of disability, and people with disabilities must be given the opportunity to learn the life and social development skills they need. To ensure this education is free from discrimination and offers equal opportunity, state parties are required to provide an inclusive education system.

Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. The four core principles of the Convention are (1) non-discrimination; (2) devotion to the best interests of the child; (3) the right to life, survival, and development; and (4) respect for the views of the child. The Convention protects children’s rights by setting standards in health care, education, and legal, civil, and social services. By agreeing to undertake the obligations of the convention, the Kenyan government committed to being held accountable for this before the international community.

In a similar commitment, Kenya adopted a new constitution in August 2010 that contains a substantially improved bill of rights and represents a real change in the protection of the right to equality and non-discrimination in Kenya. The constitution lists equality as one of six essential values upon which governance should be based. These expressions of principle are given legal force in article 10, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of disability. The constitution provides for children with disabilities’ right to free and compulsory basic education, as well as access to quality services, and to educational institutions and facilities. Various other legal provisions and policies in Kenya advocate for the provision of education for children with disabilities. The Basic Education Act (2013), Special Needs Education Policy Framework (2009), and Persons with Disabilities Act (2003) all address critical issues related to education for learners with disabilities. Indeed, Kenya has

a rich legal landscape that can guarantee the safeguarding of the needs of children with disabilities. Greater awareness of these legal frameworks, though, is crucial.

Mass media in general, and radio in particular, can help provide greater awareness of the fundamental rights to education for children with special needs. A report by the Rockefeller Foundation asserts that community radio is one of the best ways to reach excluded or marginalized communities in targeted, useful ways (Dagron, 2001). As far back as the mid-1940s, community radio has demonstrated its potential for social change (Pavarala, 2003). In rural areas, 95% of Kenyans regularly listen to the radio (BBC Media Action, 2018). The Communications Authority of Kenya (CA) puts the number of radio stations broadcasting in local vernacular at over 30. Vernacular stations command 38 percent of the total radio market share (Media Council Annual Report, 2019). The majority of these stations are privately owned while others are either state-run or community based local language stations. Vernacular radios are especially popular in rural areas, with a majority of listeners being older than 30 years (Media Council of Kenya, 2012). These statistics suggest that vernacular radio can potentially and effectively reach rural communities with targeted information regarding education inclusion for children with disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the agenda-setting theory of media. This theory lays emphasis on the ability of media to influence the importance placed on a topic of public agenda (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2014). The theory posits that when a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important. Repeated news coverage of an issue appears to have an influence on the public perception of the importance of issues (Happer & Philo, 2013). In essence then, issues highlighted by the media become issues that the society accepts as important for attention and discussion (Dragu & Fan, 2016). Consequently, the media can be used to influence policies and the way people think.

In outlining this process of agenda setting, Folarin (2005) describes the elements involved in agenda setting to include the quantity or frequency of reporting by the media, prominence given to the reporting, the degree of the conflict generated in the reports, and cumulative media-specific effects over time. On the other hand, Lang and Lang (1983) outline six key factors in agenda setting as:

1. highlighting some events or activities and making them stand out,
2. determining the required amounts of news coverage to gain attention, framing of events and activities in the focus of attention,
3. selecting the language used by the media to affect perception of the importance of an issue,
4. linking the activities or events that have become the focus of attention to secondary symbols whose location is easily recognized, and finally,
5. accelerating the agenda through well-known and credible individuals to speak out on an issue.

A critical issue in this process of agenda setting is that the media person setting the agenda must be conversant with the topic about which the agenda is being set. Additionally, the journalist should be prepared to implement the issue in stages as the concept of agenda building seems to suggest. Media framing of an issue and the role of well-known individuals commenting on the issue should be considered equally important (Oyero, 2010). The labels that journalists (especially well-known ones) apply to events can have an important influence on whether the public pays attention to the issues connected with the event. Agenda setting theory is relevant because it provides the basis for examining how vernacular radio stations in Kenya are promoting inclusive education especially for the most marginalized students with disabilities.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design for data collection and analysis to establish the role of the vernacular radio stations in promoting inclusive education in rural communities in Kenya. A purposeful sample of 20 key informants (presenters, producers and stakeholders in inclusive education) were interviewed to provide in-depth information. We drew a purposeful sample which implies intentionally selecting “information-rich” individuals who would help in understanding the central phenomenon and best answer the research questions. A purposive sample of disabled people’s organizations (DPOs), county education officers, parents, caregivers, head teachers, teachers in public primary schools and media producers, reporters, and presenters were selected. Two participants from each stratum were selected for interviewing.

We developed two structured interview guides which ensured that we asked each respondent the same questions in the same way. We used the first interview guide to gather data from radio producers, reporters and presenters. We used the second interview guide to get information from stakeholders in inclusive education in Kenya. We selected individual participants who were most likely to contribute appropriate data, both in terms of relevance and depth. For example, we identified radio presenters dealing with reporting disability stories in vernacular radio, and also staff members from the Department of Special Needs Education in the Ministry of Education. We explained interview confidentiality to each participant as well as described how their quotations would be attributed in reports.

We analyzed the qualitative data thematically. Coding was done according to the principles of thematic coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Preliminary codes were identified and then categorized and developed into more abstracted themes that captured participants' contextual responses to the coverage of inclusive education in vernacular media. The themes were discussed and revised. Each theme was then reviewed to discuss general findings.

Results

The study findings indicate that few vernacular radio stations in Kenya cover inclusive education in their programming. Out of the thirteen radio stations we sampled, only one station, Ingo FM, had a disability specific program. The program was titled *Obulamu shibuli okhukhaywa tawe* (loosely translated 'Disability is not inability') and aired on Wednesdays at 8:45 pm. Two radio stations aired stories on inclusive education: Emoo FM (which broadcasts in the Kalenjin language), and Ingo FM (which broadcasts in the Luhya language). One radio news reporter stated that his radio station does not allocate time for inclusive education content, but news items on inclusive education are given prominence depending on how they are packaged and their news value. Radio news reporters from other stations noted that content on inclusive education is aired depending on the availability of such stories. This implies that vernacular radio stations do not prioritize inclusive education content in their programming.

Language Use

Language used in the media to describe disability both shapes public attitudes and reflects prevailing assumptions about disability (Jones & Harwood, 2008). Our findings indicate that when vernacular radio stations in Kenya use inclusive language it is likely to

influence societal perceptions towards education for children with disabilities. One radio reporter we interviewed stated that his station had trained reporters on using inclusive language when writing disability stories, they avoid using ‘disabling’ language labels in vernacular and instead use ‘enabling’ language. Given that vernacular radio stations use language that is the first language of the community, the community is thus likely to comprehend inclusive education messages more clearly.

Feedback from Community

Moreover, vernacular radio plays an important role in setting the agenda of inclusive education in the society. Findings indicate that whenever radio aired content on inclusive education, there was a spike in feedback from the community. A news presenter stated that his audience appreciated content on inclusive education and requested more. A radio producer noted that most community feedback indicated a desire for more information on inclusive education. The radio producer further indicated that listeners yearned for more information on disability because in some communities disability was considered a curse. Radio presenters who reported on disability stories had a high following and listenership due to the unique stories they told. Presenters reported receiving numerous calls and text messages from listeners who testified how the stories changed their perceptions about inclusive education.

Accuracy of News Stories

As we have previously established, there is a need for accurate information on inclusive education to be aired on radio. For this to happen, there needs to be active collaboration between radio producers and stakeholders in inclusive education. These may include the Department of Special Education in the Ministry of Education, DPOs, inclusive education learning institutions, parents, and caregivers. However, the stakeholders in inclusive education hardly engage radio producers to produce content on inclusive education. An official from the National Council of Persons with Disabilities admitted to not working with radio stations but stated plans were underway to partner with radio stations to provide content on inclusive education. The involvement of stakeholders in generating content on inclusive education will help ensure that radio will provide accurate content.

Coverage of Inclusive Education in Vernacular Radio Stations

Packaging of Content

The way a news story is packaged, or framed, can affect how audiences understand it. Media frames are considered as central organizing ideas that provide meaning to events (Scheufele, 1999; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Media frames serve as guidelines to journalists who recognize and categorize information before relaying it to the masses. Radio producers stated that they used interviews, discussions and talk shows for the packaging of radio programs related to inclusive education. In addition, news and program correspondents packaged inclusive education content as features, news stories and shows. One radio producer noted that interviews were carried out involving stakeholders both in government and private sector. Packaging inclusive education content into a variety of program formats helps to capture the complexity of the issue and can help influence society's understanding of the importance of education for children with disabilities.

Selecting News Sources

Media coverage of disability stories can potentially contribute to mainstreaming inclusive education. Most radio producers indicated that they sourced their news stories on inclusive education through media briefs and releases from relevant institutions as well as from investigations by reporters. On the other hand, stakeholders in inclusive education observed that the level of awareness of inclusive education by production teams at vernacular radio stations is insufficient. This has led to the prioritization of sensational news at the expense of content on inclusive education, despite its importance and the need for it. As one disability rights activist put it, "society needs a lot of sensitization on inclusive education since many children with disabilities are still hidden in homes with no access to education" (S. Odawa, personal communication, July 10, 2019).

Topics Covered

The number of topics on inclusive education aired on radio may affect the knowledge levels of the audience. Radio producers we interviewed indicated that the range of stories on inclusive education they covered included the right to education, contribution of children with disabilities to the development of society, and the right to life for children with disabilities. Other topics included public awareness of children with disabilities, origin of disabilities, and forms of disabilities. Radio content also included challenges faced by children with

disabilities and the role of individuals, communities and the government in supporting people with disabilities. Although a wide array of topics on disability are aired by vernacular radio, specific issues on inclusive education are not well articulated.

Media Advocacy Strategies to Promote Inclusive Education

Radio remains likely to be the most powerful, most accessible, and most affordable medium for reaching large numbers of people in isolated areas. Even the remotest villages have access to vernacular radio, which builds on the oral tradition of rural populations. Despite vernacular stations now commanding 38% of the total radio market share (GeoPoll, 2019), few disability activists utilize vernacular radio to champion the rights for children with disabilities. Instead, disability rights activists interviewed indicated a preference to engage with television rather than radio when creating awareness on inclusive education. Some stated that they lacked the vernacular language proficiency to engage with vernacular radio stations. Most disability rights activists reported conducting advocacy campaigns through television, print media, social media and conferences. With print media requiring literacy and television being quite expensive to broadcast in, it would appear that vernacular radio would be better suited to reach rural, marginalized communities. Indeed, Orao (2009) states that largely rural and less formally educated communities lend themselves well to the radio medium in terms of access to information. Radio stations are therefore better placed to communicate the importance of inclusive education to create awareness that can lead to much needed attitude change in the community.

Discussion and Recommendations

Our study found that few vernacular radio stations in Kenya cover inclusive education in programming, and only one among the thirteen stations sampled had a disability specific program. This is true even though existing broadcasting laws provide a framework to include disability specific content: the 2016 Programming Code for free-to-air radio and television issued by the Communication Authority of Kenya (a media regulatory body) calls for broadcasters to promote disability specific content (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2016). Furthermore, section 4.1 of the Code provides for airing of content specific to children to promote their physical, mental, and social potential.

Moreover, our findings indicate that vernacular radio stations in Kenya use inclusive language which is likely to influence societal perceptions towards education for children with

disabilities. Language provides a forum to both construct and understand reality and current power structures. Unfortunately, the language used to refer to people with disabilities has historically marginalized them, portraying them in a derogatory way (Hadley & Brodwin, 1988). By defining individuals on the basis of disability, they may be reduced to their disability and thereby dehumanized (Back, Keys, McMahon & O'Neill, 2016). This highlights the importance of vernacular radio stations employing inclusive language, as doing so is likely to influence community attitudes towards inclusive education. Indeed, the UN (2020) asserts that images and stories in the media can deeply influence public opinion and establish societal norms.

Another finding from our study was that content aired on inclusive education directly correlated with a spike in feedback from the community. This is important as feedback provides a way to measure the audience's reception of a message and its effectiveness (Sambe, 2008). Thus, content aired by vernacular radio on inclusive education generates more interest among the community members and is likely to influence their perceptions on inclusive education.

Similarly, the involvement of inclusive education stakeholders in generating content on inclusive education will potentially improve the accuracy of this content. Despite this, few disability activists utilize vernacular radio to champion the rights of children with disabilities. The Kenya National Survey for Persons with Disabilities Report (2008) notes that when information is made about people with disabilities, there is a need to involve stakeholders who can ensure accuracy of information. By ensuring that stakeholders in inclusive education participate in creating content for radio, they will feel better represented and can ensure greater accuracy of information. An insider is viewed as better able to promote and protect the interests of individual communities and groups (Hyden, 1996).

In addition, packaging inclusive education content into a variety of program formats helps capture the complexity of the issue and can help generate audience interest. We can conclude that a sustained effort in providing a variety of programming content on inclusive education could possibly help counter existing stereotypes about education for children with disabilities.

Our study found that while vernacular radio covered a wide range of topics regarding disability, specific issues relating to inclusive education for children with disabilities were not well articulated. As Krosnick & Kinder (1990) have argued, media coverage of a topic serves

as a prime influence on public opinion about that topic and their perception of its importance. Consequently, vernacular radio's coverage of topics on inclusive education can influence the public's perception regarding the importance of education for children with disabilities.

Recommendations

Our study recommends that vernacular radio stations should broadcast disability specific content in line with the Programming Code. Most particularly, radio stations can privilege information on inclusive education for children with disabilities. We further recommend that disability rights activists should engage more with vernacular radio stations to generate content to support inclusive education. In cases where they lacked vernacular language proficiency, they can sponsor programs on inclusive education, bring in experts who are well versed with vernacular language, or engage translators when providing content. By so doing, the potential of this powerful local media to help change for the better the lives of many of the most vulnerable members of its communities may yet be realized.

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