

## The History of Education for Learners with Visual Impairments in Kenya

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### Abstract

*This paper traces the beginnings of education for Learners with Visual Impairments (LWVI) in Kenya and the strides made thereafter. In documenting this progress, the study used the historical research design in collection, analysis and interpretation of data. External and internal criticisms were used to evaluate the historical data. Information was sought through archival research, oral interviews and review of secondary materials in libraries. Data analysis was done qualitatively through triangulation and emerging themes were deduced. The findings reveal that there were some uncoordinated efforts in training of the persons with blindness before the establishment of the first educational institution for Persons with Visual Impairments (PWVI) in the year 1946. More organized forms of training for the PWVI at different levels would emerge later though at a slow rate. The findings thus present the early beginnings of education for LWVI before 1945, developments realized from 1945 to the time of Kenya's independence in 1963 and advances made thereafter. Whereas the introduction of education for the PWVI in Kenya and its early progress relied on charity, the study concluded that this model slowly changed making education for PWVI as a fundamental human right at the present.*

**Key Words:** Education, Special Education, Special Needs Education, Visual Impairments, Kenya

### 1.0 Introduction

Education for Learners with Visual Impairments (LWVI) is an aspect that has gained reasonable development globally over the last couple of decades (Korir, 2015). This development could be associated to several conventions, proclamations, and legal instruments at international level that have put emphasis on the importance of provision of basic education for all. These include; the 1948 United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights, the 1954 Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the four United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conferences held between 1960 and 1966. Others include the 1989 UN convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC), the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), the 2000 African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the 2000 Global Movement for Children (GMC) to mention but a few. All these initiatives present education as a fundamental tool for a country's development, with emphasis on access to quality education for every child regardless of gender, creed, race or any other perceived differences such as any form of physical or sensory impairment.

In spite of these developments and declarations aimed at enhancing the provision of EFA including Persons with Visual Impairments (PWVI), some literature has indicated that education for PWVI is still faced with a number of challenges alongside other areas of Special Needs Education (SNE) (Kiarie, 2004; Kamere, 2004). In Kenya, Oketch (2009) indicates that education for PWVI faces challenges of insufficient funding, lingering negative societal attitudes towards PWVI, and inadequate policy as well as research attention. Despite pointing to the existence of challenges in provision of education for the PWVI in Kenya, the literature reviewed lacks a systematic documentation of the developments realized in provision of education for the PWVI. It is in this regard that this paper sought to document the development of education for PWVI in Kenya in order to enlighten on the progress realized and make recommendations for further development.

The term visual impairment in this paper is used to refer to persons who have vision difficulties to the extent that it interferes with their optimum learning and success, unless modifications are made in the methodology, the nature of learning materials and/or the learning environment. According to Project Informing and Designing Education for all Learners (IDEAL) (2013), students with visual challenges have a limited ability to learn from the environment.

Therefore, LWVI in regular schools often perform poorly compared to other children that have no such impairments (Korir, 2015). Project IDEAL (2013) further observed that children with VI must be taught compensatory skills and adaptive techniques in specialized ways in order to be able to acquire knowledge from other methods apart from sight. This can only be achieved by providing special education to these children with visual impairment.

Education for LWVI is an aspect that needs serious attention around the world due to the considerable number of PWVI in society. The World Health Organization (WHO) report of 2012 for instance estimated the number of people with visual impairments in the world at 285 million with 39 million being totally blind and 246 million having moderate to severe blindness (WHO, 2012). Of the estimated 289 million people that were living with blindness, close to 90 percent of them were said to be living in developing countries such as Kenya. The Kenyan census report of 2009 indicated that there were about 325 thousand people living with visual impairments in Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2010). This group of the population needs to be fully educated just like the other general population. This is because if not well educated and their special needs met, the group would be rendered dependent and thus affect the normal development of a nation.

## **2.0 Methodology**

The study used historical research design as a methodology in collecting data related to the development of education for LWVI in Kenya. These entailed the researchers systematically locating, collecting, evaluating and synthesizing evidence related to education for PWVI from the past to the present. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources that were utilized include archival data and oral evidence from informants. Archival data search included analysis of reports as well as original documents such as educational reports and minutes of relevant meetings as well as records from special schools for the visually impaired. Secondary sources that were utilized included published materials such as journals, textbooks as well as online materials from the internet. After the collection of data, the data was verified and validated before being used as historical evidence for the study. The developments in education for LWVI as acquired from documentary sources and oral interviews were then analyzed qualitatively through triangulation and emerging themes deduced. The historical development of education for LWVI in Kenya is presented in four phases. The first phase covers the period before 1945 which marked the end of World War II. The second phase covers the period of 1945 to 1963, the year in which Kenya got its independence. The third phase covers the period 1963 to 2003, the year in which Kenya adopted a number of policies and efforts to promote inclusive education. The fourth and last phase covers the most recent developments in the history of education for LWVI extending from the year 2003 to the present.

## **3.0 The Beginnings of Formal Education for Persons with Visual Impairments in Kenya Before 1945**

The scattered efforts in offering education to PWVI are closely linked to the emergence of western education in Kenya. The first encountered records of care, rehabilitation and training of PWVI in Kenya is traced back to Church Missionary Society (CMC) missionaries Ludwig Krapf and Johann Rebmann. Krapf had arrived in Kenya in 1844 and Rebmann followed him two years later in the year 1846. The two missionaries established a mission station at Rabai near Mombasa. The mission station had a school which admitted former slave children some of whom were blind (Khanani, 2015). These children with blindness were not only rehabilitated but they were given some basic training aimed at making them self-reliant.

From the time of the establishment of the mission school at Rabai, there was limited spread of missionary activities to other parts of Kenya until 1900, when there was significant progress. The progress after 1900 was instigated by the colonial factor that led to improved transport network and protection. Despite the spread of Christian missionary activities to other parts of Kenya, there were no other recorded training activities for PWVI for a long period of time until the year 1942. The Salvation Army mission tapped the experience of Mrs. Colonel Barell in training of persons with blindness to establish a training center for persons with blindness at the Nairobi Station of the Salvation Army in 1942(KNA, MOH/3/282). Mrs. Barrel had previously been involved in training of persons with blindness in Jamaica before coming to Kenya. She started by gathering a few PWVI into temporary quarters in Nairobi where she taught them the Braille system of reading and writing (KNA, DC/TTA/3/15/1).

Mrs. Barrel's efforts seem to have captured the attention of the Kenyan government of the time because in the year 1944, the government gave a promise of financial assistance to the Salvation Army mission to expand welfare activities for the PWVI (KNA, MOH/3/282). The government of the time gave an undertaking to the Salvation Army to provide a sum of £1,000 every year to support the payment of staff if the training work was expanded. The government also committed itself to provide some monthly stipend to support the running of the expanded training (KNA, MOH/3/282). The Salvation Army mission accepted the government's offer and by 1945, plans were already underway to establish the first institute for the blind in Kenya.

## **3.1 Developments in Education for Learners with Visual Impairments in Kenya from 1945 to 1963**

The period of 1945 to 1963 is a duration in which remarkable development in provision of education to PWVI was made. This is because most of the founding institutions were established during this period. In Kenya the activities of training PWVI which had begun at Salvation Army Nairobi station were enhanced. Upon consideration of the financial support promise from the government, the Salvation Army moved the training activities from Nairobi to a nearby Thika town leading to the establishment of Thika Institute for the Blind in the year 1946. The planned expansion of the training of PWVI at Nairobi station therefore led to the establishment of an Institute for the Blind at Thika town in central region of Kenya. This institute became the first educational institution for PWVI not only in Kenya but in the entire East African region.

The institute at Thika started training for three groups of Africans with blindness. The first group was that of ex-servicemen who had served in the Second World War from East African Territory, while the second group was that of civilian male adults less than 25 years of age and without dependents. The last group comprised of boys from 8 years and above. Persons admitted to the institute did not only come from Kenya but also from Tanganyika and Uganda because the institute was the only institution for the blind that had been established in the East African region (KNA, MOH/3/282). The institute did not however provide training for female persons until the year 1954. This could be associated to the then lingering societal attitudes in which women were to stay at home and be dependent on men.

The training that was offered at Thika Institute for the Blind at its establishment and a few years that followed comprised of mainly trade training in which learners were offered skills in different trades such as carpentry, masonry, gardening, mat-making, shoe making and basket making among others (KNA, AB/14/34). There was however some little training on literacy, numerical competence skills and use of Braille. This latter type of training was usually referred to as 'academical training' (KNA, AB/14/34). The bias of the training in trade related skills could be associated to the negative views towards PWVI at the time in that they were considered to be of less ability and therefore they were only trained in immediate local life related skills and not in academic education. Even though the academic education at Thika Institute for the Blind comprised of some aspects that were related to what was being taught in the main stream primary schools such as reading, writing and arithmetic, the depth of such subjects was shallow with main focus on the basics.

In the year 1953, the government formed an ad hoc committee for the blind established as a short-term measure until such a time the proposed new foundation for the blind was established. Among its first tasks, the committee changed the Institute for the Blind at Thika to a primary school that could admit both boys and girls with blindness to primary school education (KNA, AB/14/34). This led to the admission of the first six blind girls to formal schooling in Kenya by 1954. Thika School for the Blind again became the first primary school for LWVI in the East African region. By 1956, Thika School for the Blind registered its first candidates for Kenya African Preliminary Examinations (KAPE) and recorded the first success in the said examinations. The School also adopted an eight year academic program which comprised of four years of primary schooling and four years of intermediate schooling after which industrial and vocational training could be commenced.

The development of Thika Institute for the Blind to a primary school led to the realization of a need to create more schools for LWVI. This led to the establishment of other institutions for PWVI. In 1956 for instance, a Shamba (farm) training center was established at Kolanya in Western part to provide gardening training to young peasant farmers with blindness. This was followed by the establishment of a similar Shamba training center at Chuka in Eastern part of Kenya in the year 1958. The blind trainees at the Shamba training centers were taught on how to do the normal agricultural tasks connected with a family Shamba (KNA, BY/27/4). The second primary school for the LWVI would later be established by the catholic mission in the year 1958. The school was established at Meru in Eastern part of Kenya by the name of St. Lucy's School for the Blind. The school expanded the access of LWVI to formal education by complementing the work that had begun at Thika School for the Blind.

In the same year 1958 another key institution for PWVI known as Machakos Institute for the Blind was established by the Kenya Society for the Blind. The institute at Machakos had initially began as a rehabilitation center but was later converted into an institute for the blind to provide vocational training to youths of over 17 years of age who had visual impairments. The vocational training comprised of crafts and light industries courses. Training in crafts comprised of simple carpentry, basketry, rural training and mat-making. The training in crafts lasted for one year while the training in light industries lasted for six months. The nature of the training at Machakos Institute for the Blind was to enable PWVI to establish themselves as local craftsmen or be absorbed into local light industry (KNA, KTI/3/7/11).

As Kenya was approaching its independence, a third primary school for LWVI was established in the year 1961. The school by the name by St. Oda School for the Blind was established at Nyanza region of Kenya through the collaboration between the catholic mission and the Kenya Society for the Blind. By the time Kenya was attaining independence in 1963, there were three primary schools for the blind, one vocational training institute for the blind and two Shamba training centers. Table 1 provides a summary of the educational institutions for PWVI that had been established in Kenya by 1963.

### 3.2 Development of Education for Learners with Visual Impairments in Kenya from 1963 to 2003

After Kenya got its independence in 1963, the Kenyan government took a more active role in promoting education for the handicapped including LWVI. This was demonstrated by the establishment of the Committee on Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled in the year 1964 (GoK, 1964). The committee which was chaired by Ngala Mwendwa made 28 recommendations concerning the handicapped. The recommendations were however not implemented immediately probably due to lack of the necessary structures in place. The work of the committee however led to the formulation of Sessional Paper No. 5 of 1968 titled Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled which provided a framework for the development of special education.

The attainment of independence also led to increase in the number of educational institutions that were offering education to PWVI (Chikati, Wachira & Mwinzi, 2019). The Salvation Army for instance collaborated with Kenya Society for the Blind to establish Likoni School for the Blind at Mombasa and Kibos School for the Blind Nyanza region of Kenya in the year 1965. Despite the increase in the number of educational institutions that were offering education and training to LWVI, there was lack of special secondary school education for LWVI for several years up to the year 1967. Due to increase in the number of institutions that were offering primary school education to LWVI, there was eminent need to establish a special secondary school for LWVI. This led to the establishment of Thika Secondary School for the blind within the premises of Thika School for the Blind (Chikati, Wachira & Mwinzi, 2019). The Establishment of Thika Secondary School for the Blind which later became Thika High School for the Blind in the year 1978 was fundamental in the development of education for LWVI since by the year 2003, it was the only special secondary school for LWVI in the country. Another institution that was established after 1963 was a vocational center at Sikri which was similar to the one at Machakos. The Sikri Vocational Institute was established by the Catholic Church in Nyanza region of Kenya in 1970 (Ojwando, 1990). The Sikri Institute for the blind was so fundamental because it became the first institution that produced Braille materials in Kenya although the production was later halted due to lack of funds to sustain the production. A fourth primary School for the Blind was also established by the catholic mission at West Pokot in the Rift-Valley part of Kenya by the name St. Francis School Kapenguria for the Blind. Table 2 gives a summary of the educational institutions for PWVI that were established in Kenya from 1963 to 2003.

### 3.3 Development of Education for Learners with Visual Impairments in Kenya from 2003 to 2019

The year 2003 forms an important landmark in the history of education for LWVI in Kenya because of several reasons. Firstly, the government formed the second taskforce since independence that was primarily charged with addressing the needs of handicapped persons. The report of the taskforce, Kochung Report (2003) gave rise to the Persons with Disabilities Act (2003) which was brought into force in June 2004. The Kochung taskforce was set to examine the challenges that individuals with special educational needs such as the LWVI face. Besides identifying those challenges, the report while borrowing from the Koech Report of 1999 however went further and provided a comprehensive legal framework which outlawed all forms of discriminative treatment of persons with special needs and disabilities. The report recommended that all persons with special needs should have access to education and training. It further reiterated that there should be adaptation of infrastructural, socio-economic and environmental facilities to provide a conducive environment for persons with special needs and disabilities. The taskforce also led to the establishment of a National Council for Persons with Disability whose mandate was to implement the rest of the Act on the rights, privileges and protection of persons with disabilities such as inclusion of persons with disabilities in education and training programs. The summary of the impact of this taskforce to education of LWVI is that it shifted the focus from segregation in the special schools to integration and inclusion.

Another key thing about the significance of the year 2003 in educational history of LWVI is that the newly elected government re-introduced free primary education (FPE). The money given by the government was used as subsidy of the fees that was paid for every student thus reducing the fees charged to the students. This brought much relief to parents of LWVI most of whom were struggling to raise fees for their children since they were only levied the deficit of what the government funds could cater for as a supplement to government's contribution (TSB, P/1/2005). The government therefore enhanced its financial assistance towards education for LWVI and other special schools following the declaration of FPE.

Since 2003, the government has continued its engagement in education for the VI and other sectors of special education through both financial aid as well as policy formulation. In 2005 for instance, the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 was formulated. The paper states in part the overall government policy direction on learners with special needs and disabilities. It sets out clear policy guidelines for all education sub-sectors, including special needs education and further underscores the government's commitment to ensuring that learners with special needs and disabilities have equal access to quality and relevant education. It provides the overall policy framework for the education sector and references the necessary legal context within which education and training, including SNE, shall be designed, developed and implemented in Kenya.

The increase of educational access to LWVI since 2003 has therefore been geared towards enrolling learners in mainstream schools as part of the integration and inclusion measures besides establishing a few secondary schools to compliment the then only existing Thika High School for the Blind.

Such schools include St. Lucy's Secondary School for the Blind established in 2005, St. Francis Secondary School for the Blind established in 2007, Kibos Secondary school for the Blind established in 2009, Nico Hausa Secondary School for the Blind established at St. Oda School for the Blind in 2013 and Likoni High School for the Blind in Mombasa.

By the year 2019, there were six special primary schools, six special secondary schools for LWVI and more than twenty units for LWVI in mainstream schools spread across the country. Some of the primary schools that have special units for LWVI include Muslim Primary school in Kitui, Illacit Primary in Loitoktok, Kiminini Primary School in Kitale, Turkana Integrated Primary and Kajiado Boys Primary School. Some of the secondary schools that have special units for LWVI include Nakuru High School, Kericho Tea Secondary School, Aquinas High School, Upper Hill Secondary and AIC Girls Secondary School in Kajiado (MoEST, 2019). These schools and units collectively provide access to about 0.8 percent of the total learners' population in Kenya (KNBS, 2010). This shows that there is tremendous progress that has been made through the years in provision of education for the VI. While there is still much to be done, increase of access to primary school education for the VI is a step towards realization of Universal Primary Education.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

Development of education for the LWVI in Kenya has been a slow but hopeful journey towards educating PWVI. Having started with fragmented efforts by Christian missionaries such as CMS and the Salvation Army, these efforts led to the establishment of the first institution for PWVI in the year 1946. Despite the lack of policies and guidelines on what form of education or training that was to be given to the PWVI, this education grew leading to establishment of more special schools for LWVI as well as vocational centers that undoubtedly brought improved socio-economic status for PWVI and the society at Large. Having started on voluntary basis by the Christian missionaries, education for the LWVI has since moved from charity model in 1940s to a human right model in which the government is obliged to ensure that all learners have access to the suitable education that is accommodative to their needs.

**Table 1: List of Educational Institutions for PWVI in Kenya by the year 1963**

Institution	Year Established	Place Established	Nature of Training
Thika School for the Blind	1946	Thika	Trade training and Primary School Education from 1954
Kolanya Shamba Training Center	1956	Busia	Farm Training/Gardening
Chuka Shamba Training Center	1958	Meru	Farm Training/Gardening
St. Lucy's School for the Blind	1958	Meru	Primary School education
Machakos Institute for the Blind	1958	Machakos	Vocational training
St. Oda School for the blind	1961	Siaya	Primary School education

**Table 2: List of Educational Institutions for PWVI in Kenya established from 1963 to 2003**

Institution	Year Established	Place Established	Nature of Training
Likoni School for the Blind	1965	Mombasa	Primary School Education
Kibos School for the Blind	1965	Kisumu	Primary School Education
Thika Secondary for the Blind	1967	Thika	Secondary School Education and High School Education from 1974
Sikri Institute for the Blind	1970	Kisii	Vocational training
St. Francis School for the Blind	1979	West Pokot	Primary School Education

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