

Supporting street-connected children's special educational needs through learning support assistants in western Kenya

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School (re)integration programmes for street-connected children tend to focus on (re-) enrolment, with little to no consideration for children's specific learning needs, which may contribute to high drop-out rates later on.

In 2014, Chance for Childhood and Yellow House Children's Services Trust, a Kenyan speech and language therapy organisation, assessed 15 street-connected children, at a non-formal education (NFE) centre, and found that all had learning difficulties. Screening of a further 32 children in 2015 revealed similar results and 52% had difficulties with presented expressive language. These findings prompted the replication of an inclusive education model from our project in Rwanda, using community-based learning support assistants (LSAs) to provide individual support.

Rwanda's community LSA model

The Rwandan government has put together a Special Education and Inclusive Education Strategic Plan 2011-2015. However, communication disability continues to be 'hidden' and excluded, as too often only physical and intellectual disabilities are taken into account. People with communication disability may have difficulties understanding what others say, using spoken language effectively, making their speech understood clearly, or a combination of these. In addition, communication disability severely reduces access to education, both due to a predominantly verbal and written pedagogy, and stigma affecting participation in class.

Chance for Childhood therefore introduced their LSA model to play a significant role in:

- ensuring the inclusion of children with special educational needs and/or communication disability in education;
- creating a positive impact on their learning and behaviour;
- creating awareness in schools and families on the rights of children with disabilities;
- reducing stigma and negative attitudes towards children with disabilities.

This low-cost, community-based LSA model has been adapted to other contexts, such as with child survivors of conflict in northern Uganda, and with street-connected children in Kisumu, Kenya.

Delivering the model in Kisumu

Chance for Childhood's local partner, Kisumu Urban Apostolates Programme (KUAP), has been delivering NFE for over 20 years, providing out-of-school learners with education. A low-cost, flexible community-based approach to NFE is well positioned to support children adjusting (back) to a classroom environment, whilst providing an opportunity to assess their abilities and challenges in learning. The project builds on an established relationship with education directors, referral mechanisms across more than 26 schools, and the addition of LSAs, to reintegrate street-connected children into inclusive, mainstream classroom settings.

Our successful LSA model stresses community ownership and buy-in, adapting the principles of a traditional LSA role found in education systems of many developed economies. Community LSAs provide specialised support to children in schools, like traditional LSAs, but they also champion the rights of children with disabilities within the community and children's families. Often, they are the key drivers of change at village and community levels, where stigma is widespread.

Community leaders and retired teachers are recruited and trained in inclusive teaching methodologies to provide children with special educational needs and/or communication disability with inclusive and quality education through four key objectives:

- promoting independence and social skills;
- providing personal and physical support by assisting students with feeding and mobility;
- providing learning support services, such as one-to-one or small group learning opportunities;
- ongoing communication with teachers, head teachers, and family members about students' progress, strengths and needs.

LSAs attend training to understand the basics of inclusive education, terminologies, and teaching methodologies. They later attend in-class training alongside teachers to gain practical experience of how to work collaboratively with class teachers, a key factor of success.

Trained LSAs are then assigned to street-connected children who have been assessed by education specialists and speech and language therapists (SLTs) as having a special educational need and/or communication disability. Each LSA supports 2-5 children, three days a week. The part-time nature of the LSA support prevents dependency and encourages self-confidence and self-learning. LSAs and class teachers work together with the teacher trainer, and sometimes an SLT, to create individual educational plans (IEP) for each child. The IEP sets short- and long-term individual learning outcomes and outlines the psychosocial background of the child. Progress is measured against the plan and parents are familiarised with their child's special educational need. Once the child is ready to be mainstreamed into formal schooling, usually having spent up to three months in NFE, the IEP is introduced to the class teachers. Ideally, an LSA is also placed in the mainstream school to offer uninterrupted support to the child, and the LSA can support the child until they can learn independently. Some LSAs are placed in more than one school, depending on the number of children who require LSA support and the proximity of the schools. When learning outcomes reach a satisfactory and consistent level that is unique for each child, the LSA-supported child 'graduates' from the LSA model and learns independently. Formal school teachers are also trained in inclusive teaching methodologies and managing the classroom through positive discipline techniques.

The close coordination between LSAs and class teachers results in positive learning and social impact for children with special educational needs and/or communication disability but also for their non-disabled peers. For instance, teachers with LSAs in class are much more confident in encouraging children without disabilities to participate. Children without disabilities have also contributed to the reduction in stigma and negative attitudes, as

they learn alongside their peers with disabilities. In general, all children's school performance increased, though LSA-supported children displayed a greater improvement, which is to be expected since it is the first time that many of them have received special learning support.

We have now introduced the LSA model to seven street children organisations, providing their NFE teachers with inclusive education training and rolling out LSAs to each NFE centre to support their children with special educational needs and/or communication disability.

Collaboration and advocacy

Various stakeholders have been part of the development of the Kenyan project. Therapists, university researchers (in the UK and East Africa) and disability and social inclusion advisors have contributed to the LSA model, ensuring it is fully adapted to the local context and beneficiaries. Together, we have developed an inclusive education training manual, accredited by Maseno University, and built the capacity of local staff to understand disability and special educational needs and strengthen their support for children with special educational needs and/or communication disability. Our learning and progress is being shared with the Kisumu Street Children Consortium of NGOs. Using the consortium as a platform, we aim to generate evidence about supporting the special educational needs of street-connected children.

The LSA model strengthens and tailors support for street-connected children's specific needs, ensuring they have sustainable access to quality inclusive education and are not left behind.

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