



Pamoja education project in Homa Bay, Kenya

Peer-led participatory research

Stage 1 (pre-intervention) research findings

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Executive summary

Pamoja Inclusive Education is a three-year project, implemented in Homa Bay County, Kenya since 2016, with technical and financial support from Sightsavers. The overall objective of the project is to help achieve universal access to basic education for all children with disabilities in Homa Bay. The project supports five schools, where children with disabilities study alongside their non-disabled peers.

The inclusive education research presented here has been integrated within the project and is founded on community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology, which involves respectful collaboration with the local community. CBPR is about shared decision-making and ownership, where members of the community are involved in planning, gathering evidence, analysing that evidence, and sharing what is found.

To conduct the research, we recruited 10 community researchers from Homa Bay County, one teacher from each of the pilot schools, and five community members that are linked to the schools in some way. A Sightsavers researcher, experienced in CBPR methodology, spent time with the team, training everyone in research skills and, in turn, learning from them about the details of the context.

The research targeted three key groups of stakeholders – teachers, parents and children, and had a set of pre-defined questions for each of the groups. The data presented in this report was collected at the beginning of the project. The key objective of this stage was to collect information on positive and negative experiences of education of children with disabilities in the five pilot schools; to explore barriers to inclusion and related challenges; and to identify opportunities for strengthening the current system. The findings of this stage of the research were shared with the project team and local stakeholders and fed into the adaptation of the proposed project interventions. Altogether, at this stage of the research, 93 parents of children with disabilities; 31 class teachers; and 30 children with disabilities shared their experiences of inclusive education across the five schools.

The findings from this phase are presented under two broad themes, each of which is further divided into sub-themes:

1. Overview of current experiences across the five schools
2. Opportunities for strengthening inclusive education practices

Children's experiences of inclusive education were narrated under five main themes: perception of their impairment; positive experiences of schooling; challenges in school; school and community support; and areas for improvement.

Parents spoke about positive changes in their children's lives associated with schooling; challenges experienced in going to school; and community attitudes. In terms of positive changes associated with going to school, parents talked about three main aspects: academic progress; social behaviours; and school environment. Challenges related to three main aspects: school-specific challenges; parent-related challenges; and financial burden.

Teachers also spoke about their experiences and challenges in teaching children with disabilities in their classes. The key challenges identified by different groups of stakeholders in this research are summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Challenges reported by different participant groups

Challenges	Children	Parents	Teachers
Long walking distances to school and the lack of transport	X	X	
Inaccessible infrastructure (rocky pathways; distant and inaccessible toilets; crossroads between the buildings and on the way home)	X	X	X
Unadjusted school environment (poor lighting; sitting arrangements; kitchen smoke; chalk dust)	X	X	X
Lack of education materials (large-print books; exercise books for large-print teaching objects)	X		X
Lack of assistive devices (low-vision devices; wheelchairs of appropriate size and quality)	X	X	X
Unadjusted examination papers and processes	X		X
Psychological and behavioural issues (anger; mood swings; hyperactivity; depression)	X		X
Managing impairment-related situations in the class (such as epileptic seizures)			X
Boarding requirements		X	
Large class sizes and high student to staff ratios	X		X
Heavy workload for teachers			X
Heavy and rigid curriculum with a lot of content to be covered			X
Short class length			X
Time required to accompany children to school		X	

Challenges	Children	Parents	Teachers
Fears for children's safety, particularly girls'		X	
Late arrivals and school absenteeism due to parent's unavailability or medical appointment (and traditional healer visits)		X	X
Poor treatment of children by the parents and unwillingness to support (and pay for) child education			X
Little knowledge of how to communicate with or help the child		X	X
Financial burden (school fees, transportation, textbooks, lunches)		X	X
Poor morale among teachers due to low pay; inconsistent policies on SEN allowances; poor infrastructure; and lack of resources			X

Study participants also spoke about opportunities for improving inclusive education practices in the five project schools. Proposed ideas and opportunities have been subdivided into three themes:

- Opportunities for strengthening the links between parents of children with disabilities and the schools
- Opportunities for strengthening community participation
- Opportunities for strengthening schools and classroom practices

The key areas for improvements identified by different stakeholder groups are summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Opportunities for improvements identified by different participant groups

Areas for improvements	Children	Parents	Teachers
More accessible school infrastructure (better quality ramps; toilets; chalk-free boards; breakout space for children with multiple needs)	X	X	X

Areas for improvements	Children	Parents	Teachers
More accessible classroom environment (better lighting; contrasting colours; more appropriate sitting arrangements; regular food breaks)	X	X	X
More education materials and teaching equipment (storybooks; stationery; large-print books, including diagrams; large-lined exercise books; projectors; computers; equipment for vocational classes (such as sewing machines); magnifying glasses; hearing aids)	X	X	X
Access to assistive devices (wheelchairs of correct size; crutches; low-vision devices; glasses)	X	X	X
Adaptation to teaching and learning processes (more flexible curriculum; curriculum guidelines; more options for sports classes; vocational training; hands-on learning; adaptations to examinations)	X	X	X
Improved teaching and learning support (smaller classes; regular home visits; more teachers and teaching assistants; physiotherapist support)	X	X	X
Improved knowledge and skills for teachers (regular in-service training; skills for managing epilepsy; psychological and behavioural issues; skills for teaching creative subjects and sports; sign language training; preparing for secondary education)			X
Reducing or removing school fees and giving financial assistance, particularly to children from poor households	X	X	X
Access to health services (eye check-ups) and improved collaboration with health professionals	X	X	X

Areas for improvements	Children	Parents	Teachers
Regular and more effective communication with the parents (phone calls and SMS to discuss child progress; open conversations about child difficulties; regular parent visits; and early notification of parent meetings)			X
Sensitisation of teachers, other pupils, employers, community and spiritual leaders (awareness raising on disability; information on children's progress and opportunities for secondary education; improved collaboration with DPOs; mobilisation through eye camps)		X	X
Empowerment of children (involve children in community and local business; use successful role models)		X	X
Empowerment of parents through training (on disability, sign language, communication and support) and parent support groups		X	X
Opportunities for boarding	X		
More respectful and caring relationships in school	X		

Background

Pamoja Inclusive Education is a three-year project, implemented in Homa Bay County, Kenya since 2016, with technical and financial support from Sightsavers.

The overall objective of the project is to help achieve universal access to basic education for all children with disabilities in Homa Bay and more specifically to:

- strengthen existing Education Assessment and Resources Centres to support children with disabilities and their parents.
- strengthen selected pilot schools to provide a strong, nationally-replicable model of quality education for children with disabilities.
- ensure local communities support the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools.
- ensure the Ministry of Education of Kenya implements policies that strengthen education provision for children with disabilities, nationwide.

The project supported five schools, where children with disabilities studied alongside their non-disabled peers.

Research methodology

This research has been integrated within the project and is founded on community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology, which involves respectful collaboration with the local community. CBPR is about shared decision-making and ownership, where members of the community are involved in planning, gathering evidence, analysing that evidence, and sharing what is found. Everyone involved in CBPR has an opportunity to contribute and we respect the unique strengths that each person brings. As well as asking specific research questions, the design of this kind of research seeks to break down social injustice and helps everyone to re-think power structures and ownership. The overall aim of CBPR is to increase knowledge and understanding of the situations being studied, to construct meaning together, and integrate this with interventions and policy change to improve the quality of life for the community.

Community researcher training

We recruited 10 community researchers from Homa Bay County: one teacher from each of the pilot schools and five community members that are linked to the schools in some way. A community researcher is someone who lives in the local area where the research is taking place, cares about the research topic and is not a professional researcher. They work alongside a professional researcher, interviewing community members and observing professional situations, enriching the research with their unique contribution.



Three of our community researchers on the first day of gathering evidence in a local school

Before gathering evidence in the five schools, the Sightsavers researcher spent time with the team, training everyone in research skills and, in turn, learning from them about the details of the context. Together, we refined the research questions and planned the school visits.

We explored more about this type of research, practised some interviews and recording techniques and used role-play to gain skills in leading focus group discussions (FGDs).

We also discussed ethical issues and how to protect the participants before, during and after the research. On the first day of data collection, we all went to the first school to observe and practise in a real-life setting.

Research tools

The research targeted three key groups of stakeholders – teachers, parents and children, and had a set of pre-defined questions for each of the groups. Additional questions were asked during the interview to explore issues in greater depth. Topic guides for each group of participants can be found in Appendix 1.

Data collection in each school

Pilot school 1 is a mainstream school. On the interview day, parents of children with disabilities, and teachers and pupils got together to share their experiences of inclusive education in small focus groups. Parents and pupils gave their views in Dholuo, the local dialect; the narratives were recorded and later translated into English.

Pilot school 2 is also a mainstream school. Thirty parents of children with disabilities attended the meeting and were keen to engage in focus groups, again in the local dialect.

Pilot school 3 is a boarding school for Deaf children. During the interviews the pupils expressed themselves using sign language with one of the teachers interpreting. Twenty parents had travelled significant distances to participate in the research.

Pilot school 4 is what is termed an ‘integrated school’ – a mainstream school which also has school boarders with a range of disabilities. Most pupils with disabilities join in the mainstream classes, and there is also a unit for pupils with more severe learning disabilities. The research team was welcomed to the school by the headteacher who took us for a tour before embarking on the research. Teachers, pupils and parents came to share their views with the community researchers, including parents of boarders, who had travelled long distances.



A community researcher leading a focus group with pupils

Pilot school 5 is a boys’ boarding school. Twenty parents, five teachers and eight pupils participated in the focus groups. Many parents had also travelled long distances to have their voices heard.

Altogether, 93 parents of children with disabilities, 31 class teachers and 30 children with disabilities shared their experiences of inclusive education across the five schools. Data for each school and each participant group is available from the authors. Common themes identified across studies in five schools are shown in Appendix 2.

Findings

This phase of the research was conducted at the beginning of the project. The key objective of this stage was to collect information on positive and negative experiences of education of children with disabilities in the five pilot schools; to explore barriers and challenges; and identify opportunities for strengthening the current system. The findings fed into the design and adaptation of the proposed project interventions.

The findings from this phase are presented under two broad themes, each of which is further divided into sub-themes:

1. Overview of current experiences across the five schools
2. Opportunities for strengthening inclusive education practices

Education challenges and areas for improvements identified by each group of the study participants are shown in tables 1 and 2.

Overview of current experiences across the five schools

Children's views

Children's experiences of inclusive education were narrated under five main themes: perception of their impairment; positive experiences of schooling; challenges in school; school and community support; and areas for improvement.

Perception of impairments

The schools accommodated children with different types of impairments, and children described their disabilities in different ways: breathing problems, eye problems, being unable to walk or having severe memory problems. Children with mobility issues described their impairments as having paralysed limbs, brittle bones, painful joints/bones or painful bones and swelling.

A variety of terms was also used to describe visual impairments, ranging from "cannot see well" or "pain in the eyes" to "sudden loss of vision" and "blackouts without glasses". Some children described the symptoms they experienced in terms such as "swollen, itchy eyes that produce tears".

Similarly, children with hearing impairments described their difficulties in many different ways: "being deaf and not being able to speak", "being deaf in one ear" or "hearing very little and not being able to speak". Some children referred to specific conditions, for example, otitis media. Some children were "deaf from birth". Others became deaf because of meningitis or cerebral malaria.

Positive experiences of schooling

When asked what children enjoyed about being in school, many talked about the academic benefits, such as improving knowledge, "becoming clever", understanding

subjects and languages, and being able to read and write. A number of children referred to longer term benefits of education and said that they were “acquiring knowledge for a better future and to help others”, and that the school helped them to achieve their goals.

Another important aspect of schooling noted by the children was social interactions with friends. Many described how they enjoyed learning new things and playing, spending time and interacting with friends. A number of children talked about their friends’ kindness when sharing information and knowledge, helping them with writing, carrying bags and advising on medical help. A number of children said that in contrast to their home, they felt well taken care of; and that the school provided them with a safe environment, where they felt equal:

“When I was at home I was discriminated against, but here we are equal.”

Challenges in school

Six groups of challenges have been identified during the interviews with the children. The first challenge named by the children was long walking distances to school and the lack of transport.

The second challenge was inaccessible infrastructure or school environment, including very rocky paths, smoke from the kitchen and dust from the chalkboard. Girls referred specifically to the toilets, which were a long distance away and with a path inaccessible for wheelchairs, so some had to “crawl to the toilet”.

A number of comments were made about inappropriate lighting in the classroom, including “the lack of light”, “lots of light blackouts” and “too much glare at times”; and some children complained about their sitting arrangements, as they could not see things on the blackboard, especially when teachers wrote with small letters.

The next group of challenges identified related to the lack of appropriate materials and assistive devices, particularly the lack of large-print books and an insufficient number of wheelchairs and crutches.



Community researchers greeting parents of children with disabilities who attend the school

A number of children also said that they were afraid of examinations, as they were not given enough time to complete the work. Finally, a number of comments were made about psycho-social aspects of schooling. Some children talked about “feeling angry with themselves, other children and God”.

Others believed that children were unkind to them and asked them uncomfortable questions. Some children spoke about their fears and anxiety in relation to being orphaned.

School and community support

Children were positive about the support they receive from their teachers and peers at the five schools. The main type of support they described was being helped with reading, writing and learning new words, being well positioned in the classroom and being assisted with personal hygiene and medical care. Other children helped them with reading and copying notes and by lending them books.

Within the community, children spoke primarily about help they received from their neighbours, who offered them food or clothes, brought them water for bathing and helped with washing, pushing their wheelchair or even taking the child to the hospital when the parents were not around. Some neighbours helped with advice about seeking medical care or support from a charity. Some read to the children or kept them company when they felt lonely. Other children in the community helped children with disabilities by giving them information, by sharing stories and assisting them with learning difficult subjects.

Examples of negative community attitudes were also shared during the interviews and were largely in relation to disagreeing or fighting with other children; general abuse and rude gestures; stealing; and hitting. Some children also said that they were ignored during community gatherings, for example, in churches or at funerals.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvements suggested by the children reflected the challenges they experienced in schools and were broadly categorised into four groups: i) infrastructure and classroom environment; ii) education materials and assistive devices; iii) teaching and learning support; and iv) relationships with staff and peers.

Many children suggested that they wanted to have more and better-quality ramps; more walkways within the school; and easier access to toilets – particularly toilets for girls. In the classroom, they advocated for appropriate desks, white boards and black pens to reduce dust; proper contrast both at the board and on paper; and bulbs with less glare.

Children also wanted more wheelchairs of correct size; crutches; and games equipment. They argued for more storybooks and stationery; large-print materials, including diagrams; projectors and computers to better understand the subject; more options for sports classes; and equipment for vocational classes, such as sewing machines. Some children argued for regular eye check-ups and better access to glasses. Others worried more broadly about school levies.

With regards to teaching and learning support, children talked about large class sizes and a need for more staff. Some wanted to be visited at home, while others wanted to have a boarding facility option.

With regards to the relationships and atmosphere in schools, all children wanted to be respected, valued and cared for. As one child put it: “They must love us.”

Parents' views

Positive changes

In terms of positive changes associated with coming to school, parents talked about three main aspects – academic progress, social behaviours and the school environment.

Academic progress

Parents expressed that they witnessed academic improvement in their children, including that they started to count and could write something. Some parents observed a growing sense of independence, including children becoming physically stronger, being able to carry out some activities on their own, for example, washing clothes.

Social behaviours

Socially, the most significant changes were in their children's behaviour, with examples like "no longer keeping bad company" and is "not being wild any more". The school has taken away children's shyness and isolation and given them the sense of togetherness, as well as the ability to communicate and have friends. Furthermore, some parents said that their children now had hopes because they could see role models.

School environment

Most parents were positive about their child's school, saying that they felt their child was safe and in good hands. Further, they believed that specialist services, such as exercise therapy, helped their children physically and emotionally. Additionally, parents felt that their children attending school gave them an opportunity to rest.

Challenges

There were three groups of challenges reported by the parents: i) challenges specific to school; ii) parent-related challenges; and iii) financial burden.

School-specific challenges

Challenges faced at school related primarily to facilities and resources, including boarding requirements, lack of toilet facilities, and toilet-related difficulties during lessons. In terms of resources, parents mentioned the scarcity of wheelchairs, the heavy weight of wheelchairs, and the lack of optical and non-optical low-vision devices. Additional barriers were reported in the classroom, for example, their child's physical place in the classroom or chalk dust affecting their child's eyes and breathing. Barriers reported within the school premises included difficulty moving to and from home for lunch, crossing roads from the boarding section to the tuition section, and uneven surfaces for wheelchairs.

Parent-related challenges

The main difficulties faced by the parents of children with disabilities were transportation (many had to carry their child to the road before boarding a vehicle) and late arrival during the term due to the time needed for the parent to accompany their child. Many parents found it difficult to accompany their child to school as they needed to work, and often had to ask other children for help. Parents also mentioned the feelings of guilt, as they thought

they could not fully meet their child's needs. Parents of deaf children felt that there was a lack of advice on how to help their child with communication, as they themselves had little or no knowledge of sign language. Some parents felt that their child missed out on a large part of schooling due to spending too much time at the hospital. Parents also expressed fears that girls with disabilities may be molested on their way to school.

Financial burden

Parents also faced a significant financial burden, including school fees, transportation to school, cost of toiletries, textbooks, and school lunches. Additional expenditures were required for girls with disabilities. Parents talked about poverty, hunger and the feeling of shame, as they could not pay school fees or provide for the basic needs of their children.

Attitudes of the community

Positive attitudes

Some parents referred to their community as a provider or a safety net. Others mentioned specific examples when community members “carried their child out of danger, or helped them when they were knocked down by a motorbike.” Some neighbours helped their child with advice, and some community members gave information about schooling and helped with food. Children from the community helped to move children with disabilities using wheelchairs.

Negative attitudes

Parents also talked about the lack of understanding of disability and the stigma associated with it. Some parents had heard myths regarding deafness with members of the community thinking it was a curse. A number of community members did not want their own children to play with children with disabilities and treated them as strangers. Some community members sympathised rather than empathised; and some participants referred to cases of abuse and forced marriages of children with disabilities.

Teachers' views

Positive experiences

One of the key positive experiences mentioned by the teachers was seeing their pupils' progress as a result of their teaching and care:

“When you show them love, they will open up”.

A number of teachers explained that children often arrived with limited or no communication skills. But, through engagement in class communications, they were able to express themselves, get involved in various activities and adapt to school life. Some teachers found that learning communication skills could be very rewarding and a bonding mechanism for all children in the class.

Some teachers found that using resources, such as real objects and games, helped children with disabilities to open up and get involved. Learners with visual impairments were able to perform all the regular duties in the same way as other children. Some teachers felt that students with visual impairments performed as well as, or even better than, other learners.

Teachers enjoyed hearing of their learners' positive progress and achievements in secondary schools. Hearing their learners praised was reported to be very motivating for the teachers, while seeing their learners' progress from one step to another made them happy and professionally satisfied.

Teachers also enjoyed the mutual bond they formed with their pupils, which created a pleasant working environment where children felt loved and well cared for. One teacher explained:

“You feel like a king because you have done what others fear.”

Some participants talked about an extra 10 per cent payment for those who worked with children with special needs, which also encouraged and motivated the teachers.

Challenges

When describing the challenges, teachers covered five main areas of concern: i) resources and school environment; ii) children's behaviour; iii) classroom dynamics and adaptations; iv) issues with the parents; and v) poor morale.

Resources and school environment

One of the key issues mentioned by the teachers interviewed was the lack of adequate or good quality teaching resources. Many stated that there was not enough financial support from the government to support learners with special needs. For example, visually impaired students lacked large-print textbooks. They had to use books with regular print size, which made their eyes water. Exercise books did not provide spaces for writing large print, and many teachers faced difficulties teaching without real objects. Some classrooms were dark; children's eyes were strained, and some students could not see the board. A number of teachers said that the lack of teaching materials impacted on children's attention and learning. They recommended more magnifying glasses, large-print books, large-lined exercise books, and assistive devices for students with hearing impairments.

Further, faulty wheelchairs caused children with mobility problems to slip off them. Some schools lacked ramps and there was a shortage of pathways and pavements from toilets to classrooms, particularly needed in rainy seasons.

Children's behaviour

Teachers experienced various challenging behaviours among their students in the classroom, including mood swings and hyperactivity. Teachers reported that they had to find a way of calming students while still delivering the content of the lesson. Also, when some students had epileptic seizures or soiled themselves, the teacher had to deal with the situation, which was disruptive for the rest of the class.

According to teachers, some children refused to accept that they had a functional difficulty and refused any help from their peers. Children suffering from epilepsy felt excluded, as others feared their seizures. Some children wanted to keep their own sign language (the one that they used at home), which also isolated them from their peers.

Classroom dynamics and adaptations

Teachers also experienced challenges related to class sizes, workload, staff to student ratio and the length of the class – all of which affected classroom dynamics and student progress.

Large numbers of students in a class (in some cases as high as 78) and a high student to staff ratio were highlighted as very big challenges, as many students with disabilities required intensive one-to-one support. Some learners required regular eye contact to keep their attention. Teachers talked about a need to have more teachers and teacher aides.

Teachers also felt that their high workload affected their preparation for classes and teaching quality. Some felt that the curriculum was too rigid and that they could not cover what was expected to reach their targets. Some teachers said that the length of the lessons was too short and that 35 minutes was not enough time to complete all the work with a large and diverse class.

Some teachers talked about exam adaptations. At present, extra exam time was only available for children with disabilities, but even that was not sufficient. There were no oral test adaptations and there was no extra time given in oral exams. Some students also required computers, which were not available for examinations.

Issues with the parents

Some teachers also faced challenges in communications and relationships with the parents. A number of them said that parents did not always know how to support their disabled child, which affected that child's academic commitment and progress. Others did not support their child's education at all and did not want to pay their school fees or buy learning materials. Children from such families often dropped out of school.

In some cases, teachers experienced difficulties in trying to encourage parents to bring their child to school on time. Some parents wanted to take their child with disabilities to

spiritual healers, which resulted in frequent school absenteeism. Teachers also reported that in a few cases, parents were abusive towards their children.

Low morale

Heavy workload, poor resources and high student to staff ratios created multi-faceted challenges for teachers and made them feel frustrated and demoralised. A number of teachers



Community researchers leading a research focus group with teachers

reported sadness and poor motivation; some felt that they failed in their duty as a teacher.

Others felt demotivated by their low pay and some reported inconsistencies in special needs school allowances, with some teachers getting it and others not, despite teaching the same learners.

Table 1: Challenges reported by different participant groups

Challenges	Children	Parents	Teachers
Long walking distances to school and the lack of transport	X	X	
Inaccessible infrastructure (rocky pathways; distant and inaccessible toilets; crossroads between the buildings and on the way home)	X	X	X
Unadjusted school environment (poor lighting; sitting arrangements; kitchen smoke, chalk dust)	X	X	X
Lack of education materials (large-print books; exercise books for large print; teaching objects)	X		X
Lack of assistive devices (low-vision devices; wheelchairs of appropriate size and quality)	X	X	X
Unadjusted examination papers and processes	X		X
Psychological and behavioural issues (anger; mood swings; hyperactivity; depression)	X		X
Managing health situations in the class (such as epileptic fits)			X
Boarding requirements		X	
Large class sizes and high student to staff ratios	X		X
Heavy workload for teachers			X
Heavy and rigid curriculum with a lot of content to be covered			X
Short class length			X

Challenges	Children	Parents	Teachers
Time required to accompany children to school		X	
Fears for child's safety, particularly girls		X	
Late arrivals and school absenteeism due to parent's unavailability or medical appointment (also traditional healer visits)		X	X
Poor treatment of children by the parents and unwillingness to support (and pay for) their child's education			X
Little knowledge of how to communicate with or help the child		X	X
Financial burden (school fees; transportation; textbooks; lunches)		X	X
Poor morale among teachers due to low pay; inconsistent policies on SEN allowances; poor infrastructure and lack of resources			X

Opportunities for strengthening inclusive education practices

This section covers the views of teachers and parents of children with disabilities on how inclusive education practices in the five pilot schools could be strengthened and developed. Proposed ideas and opportunities have been sub-divided into three themes:

- Opportunities for strengthening the links between parents of children with disabilities and the schools
- Opportunities for strengthening community participation
- Opportunities for strengthening schools and classroom practices

Opportunities for strengthening the links between parents of children with disabilities and the schools

Teachers stated that they needed sufficient time to communicate with each other about every individual child in order to know how best to support their progress, interactions and information for their parents.

Teachers also said that communication and closer collaboration between the teacher and the parents can be improved in various ways. It was recommended that parents should provide their phone numbers to the school authorities to arrange better phone communications through SMS and to discuss issues. Other recommendations included early invitations to parent meetings; regular parent visits; and ongoing communications between parents and school residential aides (for residential students). Better communication would help to prevent problems from escalating, giving a greater reassurance regarding how the child is coping in school. This could be an opportunity to demonstrate to parents that the situation can be positive and to gain their commitment and support.

Teachers said that parents should be open with the school regarding the real extent of their child's struggle and needs. Parents wanted to have training about their child's impairments, as well as financial assistance to address their child's needs. Suggestions were made regarding sponsorships and additional support for children with disabilities from particularly poor, or otherwise vulnerable, homes. Another important area for improvement was collaboration between the school, parents and health professionals.

Opportunities for strengthening community participation

Two main themes have been identified here: community sensitisation and empowering children and their parents.

Community awareness and sensitisation

There was a strong emphasis during the interviews on community sensitisation, including sensitisation of teachers, other pupils and employers. Community sensitisation was reported to be critical for bringing about community ownership and a real sustainable change in inclusive schools. It was recommended that the project should engage community and spiritual leaders, and conduct meetings that explain the causes of disability. It was argued that support for ideas and events could be sought from the National Council for Persons with Disabilities.

“Once the community understands the child, then support will come.”

“Work together to create awareness. Together we can create a change of attitude towards these children.”

Another suggestion for community participation focused on changing community attitudes through awareness raising. Some people recommended sharing information with the community and the chief's barazas (weekly meetings of provincial administration) on children's progress, positive changes and achievements. Other ideas centered on awareness campaigns through 'eye camps'. A focus on the transition to secondary school was seen as a way to help the community recognise that children with disabilities can progress.

“They don’t know the importance of these learners. They should be made aware that these learners are also like other children, and can do things that others can. Maybe in the future they can be important people.”

“Sensitise the parents on the causes of disability – that it’s not witchcraft. Involve chiefs, assistant chiefs – they meet people every day. They can help echo this to the community.”

Empowering children and their parents

Notable opportunity ideas for community support and participation centered on child empowerment, for instance through helping children with disabilities play useful roles in their community. One suggestion was to encourage business owners to employ children with disabilities, “so that the children can get self-reliance.” Further proposals included encouraging successful people with disabilities to act as role models for students, their parents and the entire community.

Ideas for empowering parents included better education and communication. It was pointed out that parents needed to gain knowledge and confidence in engaging with their children. This could be achieved through parent seminars, sign language training and other guidance. Another idea was to build parent support groups and a forum for sharing information.

“They can go and see that it happens in other places too and come together”.

Opportunities for strengthening schools and classroom practices

Four broad areas for improvements were discussed here: i) improved school infrastructure and resources; ii) improvements in teaching and learning processes; iii) teacher training and motivation; and iv) integration of education and other services.

Improved school infrastructure and resources

In terms of resources and more inclusive environments, improvements were recommended in the provision of hearing aids, hand-driven wheelchairs, large-print books, glasses, and low-vision devices. Further recommendations included brighter rooms, better outside accessibility during the rainy season and breakout space for extra support for children with multiple needs. Another recommendation was affordable lunch arrangements and regular food breaks for children with certain conditions.

Improved teaching and learning processes

Some specific recommendations were made regarding teaching and learning processes, including a more flexible curriculum, opportunities for hands-on learning, greater integration with other classes, the inclusion of vocational skills training, and more adaptations to the examination system.

Classroom re-design and fewer children per class were also mentioned. Further suggestions included having attendants/teaching assistants to deal with practical problems and one-on-one encounters, as well as increased physiotherapist time.

Teacher training and motivation

Teachers wanted more opportunities for training and exchanges with other schools, including practice observations. They required assistance with designing an adapted curriculum, curriculum guidelines and sign language lessons. Teachers also requested help with preparing children for secondary education and creating more life skills/vocational options. Some suggestions were made for improvements in teaching creative work and sports. Teachers wanted to have regular and relevant in-service training courses, which are local and easy to access. A need was expressed for enabling teachers to better understand children with disabilities to know how to help them, for example, a greater understanding of the treatment for epilepsy, or how to engage with certain behaviours in the classroom.

Teachers also stated that they did not always receive their government allowance for SEN; they wanted a more transparent and fair process for paying such allowances.

Integration with other services

Opportunities for strengthening the quality of education also included improvements in the integration between different services. Specific examples included the integration of in-depth disability assessments and eye check-ups.

Table 2: Opportunities for improvements identified by different participant groups

Areas for improvements	Children	Parents	Teachers
More accessible school infrastructure (better quality ramps; toilets; chalk-free boards; breakout space for children with multiple needs)	X	X	X
More accessible classroom environment (better lighting; contrasting colours; more appropriate sitting arrangements; regular food breaks)	X	X	X
More education materials and teaching equipment (storybooks; stationery; large-print books, including diagrams; large-lined exercise books; projectors; computers; equipment for vocational classes (such as sewing machines); magnifying glasses, hearing aids)	X	X	X

Areas for improvements	Children	Parents	Teachers
Access to assistive devices (wheelchairs of correct size; crutches; low-vision devices; glasses)	X	X	X
Adaptation to teaching and learning processes (more flexible curriculum; curriculum guidelines; more options for sports classes; vocational training; hands-on learning; adaptations to examinations)	X	X	X
Improved teaching and learning support (smaller classes; regular home visits; more teachers and teaching assistants; physiotherapist support)	X	X	X
Improved knowledge and skills for teachers (regular in-service training; skills for managing epilepsy; psychological and behavioural issues; skills for teaching creative subjects and sports; sign language training; preparing for secondary education)			X
Reducing or removing school fees and giving financial assistance, particularly to children from poor households	X	X	X
Access to health services (eye check-ups) and improved collaboration with health professionals	X	X	X
Regular and more effective communication with parents (phone calls and SMS to discuss child progress; open conversations about child difficulties; regular parent visits; and early notification of parent meetings)			X
Sensitisation of teachers, other pupils, employers, community and spiritual leaders (awareness raising on disability; information on children's progress and opportunities for secondary education; improved collaboration with DPOs; mobilisation through eye camps)		X	X
Empowerment of children (involve children in community and local business; use successful role models)		X	X

Areas for improvements	Children	Parents	Teachers
Empowerment of parents through training (on disability; sign language; communication and support) and parent support groups		X	X
Opportunities for boarding	X		
More respectful and caring relationships in school	X		

The reported challenges and opportunities have been presented to the project team and other stakeholders and a number of intervention areas have been modified or expanded. These included modifications to the school infrastructure, community mobilisation activities, training for the parents and other caregivers and more opportunities for interactions between the parents and the schools.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Teacher questions:

- What is your role at the school?
- When do you come across teaching children with disabilities in your working week?
- Do you have any examples of when this goes well for you? (please share)
- Do you have any examples of when the situation is difficult? (please share)
- What do you think could make your experience better?
- In what ways could links between parents or carers of children with disabilities/special education needs and your school be strengthened?
- What do you see as obstacles for getting community support for school inclusion of children with disabilities?
- Can you suggest key ways in which the Pamoja project can increase community support for the inclusion of children with disabilities in your school?
- What are the top two ways that the Pamoja project could help you as you teach children with disabilities?

Parents' questions:

- Please can you tell me how close you live to the school?
- Please can you tell me something about the nature of your child's disability?
- What do you find positive about your child being at school?
- What do you find challenging in relation to your child attending school?
- What do you think could make your experience better?
- In what ways could communication between yourself and the school be strengthened? Is that important to you?
- What is your experience of community support for your child (and others with disabilities) to be at school?
- Can you think of reasons why there might not be community support for school inclusion of children with disabilities?
- Can you suggest ways in which the Pamoja project can increase community support for the inclusion of children with disabilities in your school?

Children's questions:

- What do you like about being in school?
- What do you find difficult about being in school?
- Can you tell me a bit about your disability?
- Can you think of times when your friends and teachers have helped you in relation to your disability? (please share)
- Can you think of times when people near where you live have helped you? (to share)
- What would make being at school even better for you? (if needed, prompt with examples like physical access, materials, emotional support)

Appendix 2

Overarching themes across the five schools

- **Sensitisation** – this was suggested at a community level but also within the school in a more nuanced way.
- **Safety and dignity** – concerns and fears were expressed surrounding girls with disabilities getting to school safely and struggling practically and financially when menstruating.
Dignity for boys and girls, especially in rainy season, was cited as lacking.
- **Empowering teachers** – teaching strategies and resourcing were key areas raised as needing further support.
- **Government advocacy** – this was relating to pay and the SEN policy. Separation within a school is rewarded financially, therefore undermining integration (more money for schools with units).
- **Clear diagnosis/assessment** – clearer diagnosis and assessment of disability were cited as needed in EARCS and beyond.
- **Collaboration** – there was a calling for co-ordinated action rather than pockets of less effective support.
- **Celebrating the children** – creating space to celebrate the children's successes in being and doing was a recurring theme, both within the schools and their communities.

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