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To cite this article: Amani Karisa, Judith McKenzie & Tania De Villiers (2021): ‘It’s a school but it’s not a school’: understanding father involvement in the schooling of children with intellectual disabilities in Kenya, International Journal of Inclusive Education, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2021.1980123

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1980123

Published online: 22 Sep 2021.
‘It’s a school but it’s not a school’: understanding father involvement in the schooling of children with intellectual disabilities in Kenya

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ABSTRACT
This study sought to understand how fathers perceived schooling of their children with intellectual disabilities and how this impacted upon their involvement. The paper reports specifically on the views of fathers, teachers and mothers of children with intellectual disabilities regarding how fathers understood schooling and how the understanding affected father involvement at a special school. The findings are a part of a larger case study conducted at one special school for children with intellectual disabilities in Kenya. Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine teachers, eight fathers, and six mothers of children with intellectual disabilities from the special school. Individual interviews, focus group discussions and a document review were the data collection methods. Data were transcribed and analysed thematically. Fathers’ understanding of schooling was expressed in the two themes emerging: the ambivalence of the purpose of the school and a focus on functional skills. Fathers want their children with disabilities to be educated, which means gaining knowledge and skills that would lead to becoming self-reliant, but they do not always agree with schooling which is the way that society has chosen to educate children. While fathers may not be involved in schooling they often are involved and concerned about education.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 October 2020
Accepted 9 September 2021

KEYWORDS
Africa; children with disabilities; colonialism; fathers; intellectual disability; special education

Background to education in Kenya

Little is known about formal education in Kenya prior to colonialism. However, Mosweunyane (2013) notes that, before colonialism and even before the slave trade, Africa in general had its own system of education and training that was based on word of mouth. Given that curricula in the African education formats were mostly not written, African societies in the pre-colonial period were depicted by the western society as largely illiterate and innumerate. Although the African system of education might not have conformed to the western standards, it was, nevertheless, well organised and strategic (Mosweunyane 2013).
The African system of education consisted of both instructional and non-instructional methods of learning: formal, informal and unconscious (Ocitti 1973). Formal learning happened in organised learning groups, in secluded places and under the direction of instructors who were recognised and acceptable. Examples of this learning in Kenyan communities were in the bush schools such as those of the Kikuyu and Maasai ethnic groups in the age group system (Ocitti 1973) as well as in the age-set and secret societies system of the Giriama subtribe of the Mijikenda (Brantley 1978; Parkin 1991). On the other hand, according to Ocitti (1973), informal learning was spontaneous, occurring when individuals interacted with the social and physical environment in daily life. Lastly, unconscious learning happened when individuals came into contact with the routine life of societal institutions. As it can be seen, although schools in the modern sense were not there, it did not mean that African children and youth were not educated. They learned by living and doing, making their education largely practical training (Nyerere 1961). Indigenous African education tended to mirror the values, wisdom as well as expectations of the community. According to Bray, Clarke, and Stephens (1986), this is in contrast to the formal western education that tends to focus on intellectualism and individualism, relegating the aspirations of the wider community to the background.

Abilla (1988) notes that before colonialism in Kenya the family was the primary provider of education and care for children with disabilities. However, things changed when colonial policies of education began to be implemented. Children with disabilities, depending on severity, were now expected to join segregated schools for education or institutions for care, both of which were mostly run by Christian missionaries. Separating children from families to take them into residential care was not something Africans were accustomed to do. As such, some parents and family members opted even to hide and support their children at home without the knowledge of other members of the community. Consequently, the idea of separation of children with disabilities from their parents to attend special schools or for care purposes was introduced by the colonialists (Grech 2015). Views of the African families regarding the education of their children with disabilities were not taken into account in such initiatives (Abilla 1988). However, this is not surprising as colonial authorities considered African men – who were mostly the family heads – to be primitive, barbaric, dangerous, as well as diseased (Moolman 2013).

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) Article 53 (1) (b) states that all children in Kenya have a right to free and compulsory basic education. The country has compulsory primary and secondary school level education for persons aged below 18 years (Republic of Kenya 2013). Persons aged above 18 years can still access the education offered at the primary and secondary school levels. The government pays for the tuition cost in the public primary schools and secondary schools and, consequently, learners are expected to attend the schools for free (Republic of Kenya 2013). However, schools often ask for fees from the parents or guardians of the learners in order to cater for the costs that are not met by the government, like providing boarding facilities and paying support staff. These demands continue to challenge the inclusion of children in education in Kenya, especially where poverty is rife (Elder 2015).

Inclusive education is based on the idea that barriers to learning emerge not from learners but from their interaction with education system components (Baglieri et al. 2011; Gabel 2005). Children with disabilities’ “success in education is not determined solely by
their impairment but rather by the interaction of their impairment with the education system’ (Karisa, McKenzie, and De Villiers 2020, 1525). This approach to inclusive education shifts the focus from the embodied characteristics of the individual to the disabling environment in the school. Inclusive education becomes a continuous process of improving the education system so that disabled learners can attain social justice in education (Baglieri and Shapiro 2017). Currently, children with disabilities can access neighbourhood schools with their nondisabled counterparts in Kenya (inclusive schools). Inclusive education is supported by various policy documents in the country, for example the Taskforce Report on Special Needs Education (Kochung 2003) and the National Special Needs Education Policy Framework (Ministry of Education 2009). However, some children with disabilities, like those with intellectual disabilities that this study focuses on, still attend special schools, because such schools are meant to have the specialised resources to meet the disability-related needs of the learners.

Father involvement in education of children with disabilities

Fathers of children with disabilities in Africa have often been associated with negative attitudes toward, and consequent neglect of their children with disabilities. Leonard Cheshire Disability (2017), for example, in a report about the implementation of inclusive education for girls in a rural context in Kenya, depicted fathers as holding damaging misperceptions over the causes of disability, including laying blame on the mother for the disability. Zuurmond et al. (2016) established that the stigma attached to children with disabilities in a rural part of Kenya often led fathers to stay away from caregiving duties of their children with disabilities. Such stigma was associated with the cultural context, including beliefs in supernatural interventions. Similarly, a study from Ethiopia reported that parents, including fathers, feared losing their recognition and place of belonging in the community if they afforded their child with a disability a place in the family (Schiemer 2017).

As fathers are traditionally the head of families and providers in African contexts, the schooling of children with disabilities could be affected when they are not interested in taking part in the affairs of these children. While schools may promote father involvement in the education of their children with disabilities, some factors are beyond the fathers’ control (Hart 2011). Such factors could include disease, alcoholism or even imprisonment (Carbonneau, Vitaro, and Tremblay 2018; Varghese and Wachen 2016; Morgan and Leeson 2019). Job demands could also affect father involvement (Pancsofar et al. 2019; Hart 2011). To exemplify, Towers (2009) has suggested that employers could be reluctant to allow fathers time to take care of their children’s education as they do not recognise the father as a caregiver and, thus, they do not support him to balance work demands and caregiving roles.

Accordingly, interventions to improve father involvement in the schooling of their children with disabilities should go beyond changing the attitudes and beliefs of the fathers. We consider one way of doing this is through an empathetic understanding of the perceptions and experiences of fathers regarding the schooling of their children with disabilities. Showing compassion to their views resists the colonial arrogance of pursuing global policies like inclusive education with little regard to the realities of the local (Grech 2015; Walton 2018). Fanon (1967) highlighted how colonialism dehumanises the
colonised and underlined the need to resist such oppression. This might call for reconsidering the pursuit of inclusive education that comes from the human rights discourse which is grounded on individualism (Bannink, Nalugya, and van Hove 2019; Meekosha 2011). The human rights discourse pushed by forces from the global North should consider the perspectives of the colonised – the global South.

In other words, the pursuit of human rights should ‘seek to ground whatever is universal in humanity in the very struggles of the colonised in affirming their humanity’ (Maldonado-Torres 2017, 132). With this understanding, fathers of children with disabilities in African contexts cease being ‘bodies’ (Fanon 1967) – passive consumers of colonising policies – but become *men*; active agents who can question the relevance of the policies sold wholesale to the African context. This study sought to understand how fathers perceived schooling for their children with intellectual disabilities and the impact that this understanding had upon their involvement in education.

**Materials and methods**

A qualitative case study design was used to research one special school in Kenya. The special school is government-owned, located in an urban centre in the Kilifi County of Kenya. It has nine teachers (seven females, two males) and a population of 232 learners (145 males, 87 females) with the age range between four and 34 years. The majority (83%) of the learners at the school have intellectual disabilities.

Teachers (6 females, 2 males) and the mothers (6) were included in the study, in addition to the fathers (8), to provide broader socio-educational perspectives on how father involvement was perceived in this school. Additional demographics of the participants are given in Appendix 1.

Individual interviews of about 60 min each were conducted with the fathers, the head teacher and the deputy head teacher. Focus group discussions (FGDs) of about 80 min each were conducted with the regular teachers and the mothers (each group separately). The venue for the data collection was the school, except for one father who was interviewed at his house upon his request. Smart phones were used to record the conversations and brief notes were taken during the data collection. The conversations were conducted in English, Kiswahili and Kigiriama languages. The first author translated and transcribed the data from Kiswahili and Kigiriama into English. A second person (a teacher) who was proficient in Kiswahili, Kigiriama and English checked the transcribed data against the audio recordings for accuracy. A document review was also conducted to supplement the data from the interviews and FGDs. The reviewed documents included minutes of the school’s board of management, minutes of teachers’ meetings, minutes of parents’ meetings, records of the school’s monthly returns and a school proposal for infrastructure development. Digital photographs were taken of any information on father involvement and notes written about them in a research journal.

Data from the various sources were analysed thematically. The critical theoretical approach guided the data analysis, enabling critiquing the findings in order to expose the power relations at play and to suggest appropriate changes that would lead to emancipation and transformation where necessary (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017; Guba and Lincoln 1989). The four phases of theme development suggested by Vaismoradi et al. (2016) were adopted: initialisation, construction, rectification and finalisation. The
NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to manage the data. The transcripts were shared among the three authors to ascertain the credibility of the themes that had emerged. Participation in this study was voluntary and all participants completed a consent form. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Cape Town (HREC REF: 557/2018) and the National Council for Science and Technology, Kenya (NACOSTI/P/18/92786/26456).

Results

The ambivalence of the purpose of the school

The purpose of the special school was not clear to some fathers. T2, a father, seemed not to see the perceived indicators of educational progress in his daughter who attended the institution:

So I see the school is teaching her well. But on the other side, even writing her name, she doesn’t write it well. Which when I compare it with the regular school, it is different. So I see a challenge there. But I don’t know their system in this school. But I feel like at her age, she should be able to write down her name, her father’s name and things like those.

The father had some expectations of the school that were not being met. It is on the same note that some saw the school as a care home for children with disabilities, rather than an institution for educational purposes to build the potential of the child. T5, a father, felt that the purpose of the school was to relieve the parents of the responsibility and inconvenience of raising the child with a disability at home, just like a day-care centre does. He thought that the school was deceiving them; supposedly teaching their children with disabilities while in fact it was making money just caring for the children:

But in this school, it’s as if we are paying the money just for the children to eat, because they eat here. So it’s just eating and sleeping. When you think of it, the way the school acts, it’s like in this school, they have made it a way of relieving the burden from the parent. It’s better for the child to come and make noise here than to make noise for the parent at home … The parent is paying but he/she doesn’t see the (educational) benefits for the child. So … the teachers consider the responsibility of teaching the children with disabilities as a way of getting what they (teachers) want.

To this father it is as if the interests of the parents and the teachers diverged from those of the learners with disabilities in terms of education. While the fathers were pretending to have sent their children with disabilities to learn at the special school, the school was taking the children and pretending to teach them. Thus, both parties were taking the learners with disabilities for a ride. As T4, a mother, put it, ‘ … she is just a student who comes to the school to eat and to sleep’.

Some teachers stressed the importance of caring for the learners with disabilities, because the children had no future. T8, a teacher, stated, ‘These children do not have a future. Let them be happy. Let them be just happy every time … So the fathers should show them great love’. This echoed, the perception of the fathers regarding the benefits of the special school for the children with disabilities.

Some fathers had accepted this nature of the school, preferring their children to stay at the school rather than have them stay at home. T3, a mother, said:
Mine (child) when he reached age 16, I wanted him to leave school because I felt it was tiring for him. But the father doesn’t want; he says when he stays at home he will misbehave or have bad habits. So he insists that the child comes to school because here, it’s a must that he will be a good boy.

Accordingly, the purpose of the school was to discipline and stop the child from disturbing the peace at home. The father wanted the child to continue attending the school, despite the child’s age, because the alternative would be nuisance, disturbance and learning bad habits at home. T7, a teacher, also expressed this view thus: ‘We need to accept and be with them (children) so that they leave the bad environment out there to come to the good environment here’. It was not clear how long the children were expected to continue coming to the school since approximately 20% were over the age of 18. Thus, the school seemed to be an everlasting care centre for the learners with disabilities, far from its original goal of imparting knowledge and life skills, and expressed in the school motto Knowledge for self-reliance.

Despite the focus on care, T5, a father, thought that the care provided at the school was inadequate:

... They (children) should be at a certain place where there is peace; not coming out, when they see something they run after it. So you can say it’s a hospital, but it’s not a hospital; it’s a school but it’s not a school. Though it is true the children are disabled, but they should at least be attentive.

Additionally, T1, another father, reported that the school environment was no safer for his daughter than at home. ‘Even sometimes she comes and you notice some dents on her skin, sometimes she was hit – maybe during play – sometimes she has some swellings, but she can’t explain what happened…’ This ambivalence between care and education made some fathers distance themselves from the education of their children with disabilities. Some would likely be more involved if the school focused on imparting functional skills.

A focus on functional skills

Some fathers favoured a focus on imparting functional skills to make their children self-reliant. If education failed to impart these skills, it became pointless. T5, a father, stated:

My most important thing is to ask teachers to try hard to make everyone meet his or her goals. If that happens, even us the parents we will see, ‘Our child has gone to a certain place, but as at now, he is doing a certain work’. It will be a relief to us; not that the child is here and he leaves without any hope in life and becomes a burden again to the parents. It won’t be good. But take the example, he leaves the school and I am called by the teacher to be told, ‘These are his certificates. And we have sent him in this job, and if he takes this job seriously, it will support his life.

Thus, according to this father, the acquisition of skills that the children with disabilities could use to support their day-to-day life was important. Many fathers wanted what the children were learning at school to be useful at home. The teachers also appreciated the need to make the education at the school adapt to the functional needs of the children. For instance, it had been stated in a teachers’ meeting minutes that, ‘... Schemes (of work) to be written according to the ability of the child ... Teachers not to focus on classwork but to see that learners are totally transformed’. However, this transformation was not apparent to some of the fathers.
According to T5, there was a sense that the school activities – if present – ended at school, and the home activities ended at home. There was no link between the two environments. For example, T5 noted that his child with a disability functioned well at home in undertaking the tasks he asked her to do. However, when T5 asked the same child about what she had been taught at school, she responded, ‘The work ends at school’. This disheartened the father as he felt that the school was not doing enough for the child to function at home. T5 added that whenever he visited the school, he only saw the children playing. He further stated, ‘So, such things contribute to the way we are ... sometimes we get disturbed by that situation of the children. If we could find them attentive in class being taught, then we could take more responsibility’. If the teachers did their bit, the father would equally make an effort to involve himself in the school.

As mentioned above, when some fathers perceived the school to be not giving their children with disabilities valuable skills, they avoided involving themselves in the affairs of the child at the school. Sometimes, the fathers went ahead to teach their children with disabilities at home the skills they perceived to be valuable. For example, although a father had been reported to have completely ignored his child with a disability’s education at the special school, he had been involved in teaching the child functional skills at home. T4, a mother, said the following about her husband:

... Because he believes that she is not good in academics but she works best using her hands. When my husband is at home in the morning, he tells the child ... ‘Riziki, take this broom and sweep,’ and she usually does as instructed. My husband likes sending her to do manual chores; like if it’s a cup, he says wash this cup, don’t put it there. He says he believes the child is good at manual work. So if you take her to school it’s like bothering yourself. So he likes sending her to do some chores.

Therefore, the father was involved with teaching his child with a disability in the ways he saw best – to impart functional skills. At the same time, this child with a disability appeared to enjoy undertaking tasks requiring the use of functional skills, like fetching water. T4, the mother, said, ‘My child also likes fetching water’. This suggests the belief in an alternative and more effective system of education – a home-based system that focused on the acquisition of functional skills. The question then was why the children would continue attending the school where they were not learning anything. Why not stay at home where they could learn some valuable skills?

Societal pressures and fear of the government appeared to make the parents take their children with disabilities to the special school despite their scepticism about the usefulness of this system. T4, who had not seen the need for formal schooling of her daughter with a disability and whose husband had ignored the formal education of the child, took her to the special school nevertheless following threats by the doctor. The mother said, ‘The doctor insisted that I take her to school and said that if I failed to do so, he would sue me’. Similarly, another mother stated: ‘Like my child, I feel like I am exhausting him. And the government says the child shouldn’t remain at home. So, I don’t understand. It will continue like that till when?’ Despite their reservations, these parents had to continue sending their children with disabilities to school because it was government policy.

Some fathers continued to send their child to school in the hope that they would eventually acquire functional skills and, possibly, marketable skills, like woodwork and metal work. T6, a father, said:
I have not removed him out of school because I am not satisfied that he can be able to survive; although he is able to do laundry, he is able to sweep his house and do manual work and also go to the farm and till the land, though all his tilling requires supervision. So I want him to have more skills in manual work.

T6’s child with a disability was 32 years old and had not left the school. Some mothers and fathers felt that it was of no use for their adult children with disabilities to stay in the school. Such children should work and take on adult responsibilities. T3, a mother, said, ‘So for me, I have been considering stopping him from coming to the school so that the father teaches him any job, even if it’s carpentry, and so forth’. This talked to the idea of the home-based system that emphasised functional skills. However, the issue was still complex. T3 reasoned, ‘But even in carpentry, others use machines. And my child is sometimes forgetful. So I don’t know how it will be, I don’t know how I should help my child. It makes me confused’. The mother was facing a paradox; the special school was no longer beneficial to the child, but at the same time she did not know how the father would assist the child at home. The paradox was expanded on by T4, a mother:

Our children here are those with intellectual disabilities. They do come to school but they are not good in the manual work, and are not good in academics. They are not slow learners. If you ask her to go to the toilet she will go, but the next day she might refuse. So like such cases, they will continue coming to school till when?

While some parents felt that the programmes at the school were not beneficial, the teachers appeared unconcerned about how long the learners with disabilities remained in the school. However, the teachers supported the need to impart functional skills, in addition to academic skills, that could lead to jobs and independent living. According to the teachers, the school was aiming at such success. T7, a teacher, said:

... the goal for the children is not to finish school only, but ... to educate the child, to know what’s life, how can she live without a job (how can she be self-employed)? To ensure self-reliance, can live without a problem. Self-reliance and independence.

Having said this, T7 was aware that learners with disabilities could find it difficult to find formal employment because of stigma and unemployment in the country. Thus, imparting functional skills to the learners with disabilities was necessary to prepare the children for self-employment. Similarly, a record of a teachers’ meeting read:

Handling learners with special needs requires a lot of practical work than written work. It has been a bit challenging to handle the mixed abilities of learners but the teachers tried their best to use concrete teaching materials, where learners touch, feel and do the actual activities like sewing, threading; others doing buttoning, block building, hairdressing, washing and ironing.

Therefore, the teachers and the parents largely agreed on the need to impart functional skills to the children with disabilities. Their views diverged on whether the school was actually teaching the functional skills, how long such an education should take, which functional skills were to be taught and whether the functional skills could lead to a job or not. T7, the teacher, elaborated on the challenge thus, ‘So according to our situation here, the children are many, and the workers are few. So you find that we just persevere because there’s nowhere we can take the children’. The school was overwhelmed by the
needs of the learners with disabilities, and consequently could not meet the expectations of the fathers of education for employment.

On a positive note, there was evidence of children with disabilities who had left the school to work independently elsewhere. T6, a father, stated:

... Because there was my young cousin, my aunt’s child—her children joined earlier and they gained skills for making shoes using beads. After they got those skills, she removed them from the school and bought them the raw materials. They are making the shoes and they are earning their living as usual.

**Discussion**

While the purpose of the special school is to offer an education to the children with disabilities that would enable them to function in the society like anyone else, some fathers feel that the school is not supporting this goal. They observe very little progress in their children with disabilities as a result of the education provided at the school. However, they face a fine of up to $1000 and/or imprisonment for up to one year if they do not oblige (Republic of Kenya 2013). As a result, although fathers may have reservations about the education offered at the special school, they allow their children to attend the school because of the repercussions of going against compulsory basic education for all children. This approach highlights the postcolonial values that tend to elevate individual rights over and above the collective (Bannink, Nalugya, and van Hove 2019; Mosewunyane 2013). The right of the individual child to access the special school is foregrounded with little consideration of what the family or society prioritises. The service utility of the special school appears to be subordinate to the constitutional requirement of compulsory education for every child.

Martin Luther King Jr, the American civil rights activist, wrote about the purpose of education thus: ‘Education must enable a man (sic) to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life’ (King Jr 1947). The findings of this study reveal that some fathers consider the special school as doing little to realise the children with disabilities’ goals of life. The emphasis on functional skills in achieving these goals is not unique to Kenya. Callender (2016), in the USA, suggested that parents valued functional skills instruction for their children with disabilities in the school setting. Similarly, in Singapore, parents/caregivers favoured ‘the teaching of self-help functional life skills significantly more than community-based life skills, functional academics, and social relationship skills’ (Lim, Girl, and Quah 1998, 96). Then again, Hamre-Nietupski, Nietupski, and Strathe (1992) showed that parent’s preferences of what skills to be taught varied based on the child’s severity of disability.

In the current study, it may be helpful to differentiate education from schooling. While parents want their children with disabilities to receive an education to become self-reliant, they do not always agree that schooling is the best way to achieve this. Teachers recognise the need to impart functional skills but are unable to convert these skills into job opportunities. Perhaps, a common ground is possible focusing on the education of children with intellectual disabilities to lead to meaningful occupation and self-reliance on leaving school. It would entail the school appreciating the individual capabilities and weaknesses of learners with intellectual disabilities, instead of reinforcing the concept of normalcy (Baglieri et al. 2011). An indicator of the problematic nature of a
focus on normalisation is the number of children in the school who are now adults (some in their 30s) and who still attend the special school without a transition prospect, destined to attend the school forever, working toward unattainable goals set by the school. There is a disjuncture between the effort to meet these goals and the consideration of requirements enabling such children to transition to either the mainstream school or the community. What is not voiced is that the school has reached a dead-end in trying to ‘cure’ or ‘normalise’ such children.

Some fathers see the school as a safe place that gives the family certain freedoms from responsibility. This echoes Schiemer (2017) and Opoku et al. (2020) who observed that parents got peace of mind from having their children with disabilities attend special schools because the children were looked after at the school. However, Opoku et al. (2020) cautioned that such tendencies risked making the children with disabilities acquire low self-esteem as well as fewer social skills because the protective nature of the special school did not depict the hostile reality in the society. It also does not reflect the reality that the school can equally be unsafe to children and that attention is needed if the children are to be safe in both spaces. In rejecting the everlasting care centre, some fathers ignore the special school altogether and focus on teaching their children with disabilities functional skills at home.

Thus, there is the suggestion that a home-based education system focusing on imparting functional skills could be the solution for some of the learners with disabilities who seem not to benefit from the special education system. This relates to the pre-colonial African value accorded to the family unit as an important structure for the provision and acquisition of knowledge (Mosweunyane 2013; Abilla 1988). Among the Girama – a Mijikenda subtribe that most of the research participants come from – there was ‘dhome’, an arrangement that saw children and adults sit together for instruction and passing of knowledge while the dinner was being prepared. Male adults would talk to male children in the family, while female adults would be in charge of female children. The two genders could converge for common discussions when need be (Beckloff 2009). Like in other African communities, this indigenous education tended to be guided by the values, wisdom as well as expectations of the larger community. The discussions in such gatherings would mainly entail passing of attitudes and functional skills that could be put to immediate use. In contrast, most western forms of education tend to focus on the intellectual development of the individual and to relegate to the background the immediate needs, goals and expectations of the family or society (Bray, Clarke, and Stephens 1986).

This suggests that the resources of the family and indigenous educational methods should be explored. It echoes the suggestion by McKenzie, McConkey, and Adnams (2013) that interventions for people with intellectual disabilities should go through the family, rather than away from it. Taking the children away from the family to give them care and education is disruptive to the functioning of the children at the home. This finding highlights the frustration noted by Jackson and Andipatin (2019) in fathers who taught their children with disabilities functional skills using innovative ways at home but feared that sending the children to the special school would make the children regress. Instead of the school disrupting this effort of the fathers, the two systems could work in synergy rather than in competition or conflict. It could be more beneficial to consider the needs of the family in the education of the children.
with disabilities, rather than removing the children from their peers in the community for special school placement in a mostly fruitless effort to ‘cure’ or ‘normalise’ them. Resources in the community could be used to assist the teachers care for and educate these children in the neighbourhood inclusive schools or at the home – with strong family-school partnerships.

Fathers in this study have not been given the option of sending their children with disabilities to the neighbourhood schools where their nondisabled peers attend because children with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in Kenya are expected to attend special schools (Mutua and Dimitrov 2001), where they are meant to receive specialised resources. However, even in neighbourhood schools, the purpose of the education may be questioned by fathers if it does not lead to economic independence and independent living at the household level. Focusing on household duties is important as, according to Bannink, Nalugya, and van Hove (2019), acceptance and, consequently, inclusion of the child with a disability in the African society seems to happen when the child can manage the duties expected by the family or society. This perspective reflects what McKenzie and Macleod (2012, 1089) called the interactive discourse of conceptualising intellectual disabilities, in which, ‘The intellectually disabled person is in the process of becoming competent through interaction. The judicious provision of support in this process supersedes considerations of autonomy and independent decision-making. Social inclusion and interaction are crucial to the development of competence’. Therefore, in the current African context, concentrating on individual rights of the child to access the special school needs to be interrogated from the perspective of family and community priorities.

That said, caution is necessary, because ‘a communitarian ethic may be used to justify the exclusion of a few for the perceived benefit of the many’ (Walton 2018, 39). A critical consideration of the views of the fathers and society is needed in order not to reproduce oppression that sometimes marks the treatment of children with disabilities in African contexts. In addition, while children with intellectual disabilities need to acquire functional skills, it does not mean that they do not need the other skills offered by the school as well. Suggestions for a functional-skills-only curriculum should be resisted because this could perpetuate a reductionist view of children with intellectual disabilities, and more flexibility within the curriculum should be considered (McKenzie 2021). As families have a lot to offer when it comes to functional skills, a flexible education system will allow children with disabilities to pick up suitable functional skills in their home environments and to gain numeracy and literacy skills within the school environment. The ultimate goal should be to maximise the individual child’s capabilities and promote opportunities for meaningful occupation on leaving school.

**Limitation and recommendations**

A limitation of this study is its focus on one special school and, thus, only theoretical generalisability is possible. We offer the following recommendations:

- The education of children with intellectual disabilities should happen in the neighbourhood school of the children with disabilities’ home where collaboration with fathers or other carers can take place with ease.
· Teachers need to be aware of the power relations that are skewed towards them as the professionals in the partnership with families and strive to be democratic, recognising family members as experts regarding their children with intellectual disabilities.
· Teachers should strive for consensus with family members in the drawing up of plans and decision-making about the children with intellectual disabilities.
· Teachers should collaborate with families to come up with learning goals for the child that take into account the contextual realities of families rather than adopting prescriptive interventions.
· Teachers should give family members opportunities to identify their family needs rather than only the needs of the child with intellectual disabilities, in recognition of the African spirit of ‘I am because we are’.
· The curriculum for learners with intellectual disabilities should be individualised according to learners’ strengths and emphasise the acquisition of marketable practical skills.
· The state should define the number of years that learners with intellectual disabilities may stay in educational institutions before transitioning to independent living.
· Reports on progress made in the education of learners with intellectual disabilities should focus beyond the number of those accessing schools to the number of those transitioning from schools to independent living in the community.

Conclusion

Desired is a family-school partnership that is based on community values that would support social and economic inclusion by developing educational programmes that work toward these values, rather than a western academic ideal. The fathers are asking for not only education but quality education, which is an education that leads to acquisition of functional skills, in addition to academic skills, that result in jobs and independent living for their children with intellectual disabilities. Where this education happens seems not to be a concern for the fathers – it can take place in the special school, the regular school or at home. The COVID-19 pandemic has also made it urgent to consider options for home-schooling. However, the difficulty with proposing home-schooling is that it might appear to go against the Sustainable Development Goal 4 first target on ensuring that, ‘all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes’ (United Nations, 2015, target 4.1). Significant efforts have been made by countries to put children with disabilities in school, and it might appear retrogressive to propose that these children could as well be educated at home. This is a topic that needs to be further explored.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences in collaboration with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa [grant number APS16/1046] and University of Cape Town, Health Sciences Faculty Research Committee Postgraduate Publication Incentive.
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**References**


Beckloff, Randall Dee. 2009. “Local Agricultural Knowledge Construction among the Girama People of Rural Coastal Kenya.” PhD, University of Georgia.


## Appendix 1

### Demographics

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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
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