



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFECTS OF LOW INTELLIGENCE IN COUNSELLING YOUNG ADULTS WITH MENTAL  
RETARDATION- COMMUNITY INCLUSION CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative approach and case study design was used to get rich and in depth information from respondents on how counseling helps them make decisions as they prepare to go back to their communities after school. The study was conducted in the current Butula District which was previously known as Busia District in Western province. 5 teachers and 50 young adults and their parents were selected for the study. Interview guides were used to collect data. The study revealed that low intelligence affects their emotional maturity and hence their adaptive behaviour, independent living, social life and making decisions on all relationships. In addition they experience low understanding of concepts, difficulties in following instructions, short memory, poor concentration and lack of intellectual competencies. Recommendations were made with respect to making counseling more effective by training teachers and parents in counseling skills in order to help young adults better. Counseling services should be provided adequately in all schools for children with mental retardation by providing facilities and necessary resources. In addition young adults should be guided on career development and coping skills to live independently.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental retardation is one of the developmental disabilities which generally refer to substantial limitation on present level of functioning. The limitations of persons with mental retardation are manifested in delayed intellectual growth, inappropriate immature reactions to ones environment, and below average in academic performance. The limitations of persons are also seen in psychological, physical, linguistic and social domains. Such limitation create challenges for individuals to cope with the demands they encounter each day in comparison with other age mates of similar social and cultural backgrounds. Freedom to live and have gainful productive employment and be able to marry is of paramount importance in life and if clients have difficulties in gaining insights in this regard it may slow down the process of achieving these goals. Adaptive behaviour problems are created by intellectual limitations and support is therefore required to assist them achieve independent functioning. Counseling is a skilled and principle use of relationships to develop into self knowledge, acceptance, growth and personal resources. Its main objective is to help individuals live a more fully and satisfying life and be able to resolve specific problems, making decisions, coping with crisis and working through their inner conflicts and relationships with others (BAC, 1990). To live a full and independent life, counseling is one of the support services required by persons with mental retardation.

At school, young adults get prepared for a life back into their community. Their preparation involves training in areas of interest, parents' preparation and visits to their home by vocational teachers. In addition, young adults are sensitized on family, agriculture, budget, coping skills, cookery, hygiene, good grooming and general family issues. Issues on relationships at work and home and general good behaviour are also taught. The preparation takes between one to three years depending on parental wish and young adults' mental ability and readiness.

During this time, the young adult is trained vigorously with close supervision from the teachers to ensure the basic skills in the area of interest are mastered. They are trained in estimation and budgeting and safety measures that go with their vocational career choice. Apart from skill training, their teachers organize frequent talks and group counseling sessions with the young adults on issues concerning them. Parents' seminars and workshops are organized to share experiences and raise concerns on common issues affecting them. In some cases it is necessary and important to train and acquire the same skills their young adults are involved in, to help in management and administration of projects started for the young adults in future. Many of the young adults depend on their parents for decisions in almost everything as they are not able to live on their own even after acquiring the skills. During preparation, one to one counseling is done to individuals who may be having unique needs and difficulties in coping with other people in the community. Many young adults need

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constant guidance and reminder on various issues in order to live fairly comfortable with other people around them. Due to their disability, young adults with mental retardation forget often and keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. Sometimes their psychological states affect their reasoning and it may not be possible to help them much by counseling. Some have medical problems such as epilepsy, psychiatric episodes manifested in emotional disturbances that are beyond their control hence difficult to counsel. Therefore, they require understanding from people who live around them to help whenever need arises. It may also be necessary to put some on medication to control some of these conditions. Knowledge about their condition is important for counseling and support purposes.

Although persons with mental retardation can be trained to be independent and contribute meaningfully to their societies they meet challenges which hinder them from reaching higher levels of independence. Persons with mental retardation need counseling to help them reach and maintain their optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, psychiatric and social function levels. While their intellectual abilities are limited and their understanding and decision making is hindered, they must still be assisted to adjust and make healthy decisions in life. They can be trained to plan and strategize in problem solving to be able to live independently. It is against this background that the researcher wanted to find out low intelligence affects counseling young adults with mental retardation and come up with strategies to help them in decision making.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was guided by the theory by Piaget on stages of development which help us understand the intellectual limitations of persons with mental disabilities. By definition, individuals with mental retardation are distinguished from other people who are not retarded on the basis of intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour (Beirne-Smith, 2002). Adaptive behavior problems are created by intellectual limitations and support is therefore required to assist them achieve independent functioning. A dilemma seen by society in the functioning of the mentally retarded develops when while children they appear normal with family and peers but lag behind age mate's behaviour and are hence misunderstood. He adds that adaptive behavior is a dynamic, ever changing construct and is influenced by cultural norms and age related expectations. The following are the key attributes of the theory by Piaget (1969) and how the mentally retarded can be assisted towards personal growth. The four major stages in development of intelligence are sensory motor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operations and formal operations.

- The sensory motor stage involves a growing and ability to act on the world while in pre-operational stage the child is unable to view the world from any perspective other than egocentric thought. The child is unable to consider the effect of more than one element at a time in understanding outcomes. Children with mental retardation at times of not develop beyond this stage therefore cannot understand outcomes of certain behaviour and are egocentric. Even at a chronological

age of 16 and above their mental age is still at this stage of development.

- In concrete operation stage in Piaget's theory the child can now look at events from the perspective of others. The child understands that events may be influenced by more than one determinant. This is a stage that children with mental retardation have difficulty in attaining even at maturity.
- In formal operation stage a child is able to plan and strategize. He/she is able to solve problems and use formal reasoning. Persons with mental retardation have difficulties attaining this stage in their mental development and that is why they require training and support by teachers and parents to achieve this level. Those children with mild mental retardation may achieve this with a lot of assistance and some have managed to live independently in the past.

One of the most recent developments has been an attempt to teach the youth with mental retardation in planning and strategizing. As observed from experience limited reading and arithmetic impedes school progress but it does not necessarily prelude adequate functioning in other areas and achieving independent adjustment. Counseling is therefore important in helping young adults with mental retardation function productively in nation building. The study adopted a descriptive survey design as it enables one to describe the phenomenon in its context as perceived by individuals (Gall et al, 2003). The design helps to develop an understanding of the complex phenomenon surrounding counseling services. One school in Butula District, western province of Kenya was selected for the study. The school was chosen because it was the oldest school for children with mental retardation in the whole western region, and has trained and prepared over 200 young adults with mental retardation between the age of 16-30 years. The school has a diversity of vocational training programs of different levels of disabilities and therefore attracts students from all over the country. The target population included all the young adults who have been trained in the school and have received counseling services as concerns their vocational career choices. Purposive sampling was used to select so young adults over 16 years that had received training and vocational guidance at the school. Gender balance was considered during selection to get views from both sexes. The five teachers selected for study were those teaching vocation classes in the school and were responsible for the preparation of the young adults before they left for home based programs.

Interview guides were used to get information from both young adults and the teachers. Conducting interviews is a flexible and adaptable way of collecting information in which one can modify motives of enquiry and make follow-ups to solicit in depth information. However interviews can be affected by other factors common to other techniques of data for example unwillingness or inability to offer information. To avoid this, the young adults were prepared well in advance and confidentiality assured. Another limitation is that the method is difficult to standardize the situation so that the interviewer does not influence the respondents to answer questions in a certain way. Care was taken to encourage the respondents to be free and open for effective results (Robson, 1999). Teachers

were asked the same questions to verify certain information from the young adults.

The content validity of the instruments was determined in two ways. First the items of the instruments were discussed with fellow teachers in the school to indicate which items needed correction. Corrections were done after which pilot study was done on different young adults not selected from the final study. The responses were checked against the objectives of the study to find out whether they were relevant (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). Reliability of the instruments was established by using. The instruments were found to be reliable at 0.7. Data was analyzed using descriptive method of analysis. Views from respondents were transcribed and interpreted to get perceptions on issues raised in the interviews.

## RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to find out the effects of low intelligence on counseling young adults with mental retardation. The findings on this objective were that the young adults faced emotional challenges that were similar to their normal peers especially those with mild and moderate mental retardation. Their behaviour in relation to their age was quiet appropriate except when annoyed. Their reactions to people who annoy them include: Crying, keeping quiet, quarrelling with offender, fighting offender, reporting to older person around, talking throughout the day, not eating and getting depressed and feeling like killing self. There was no unique reaction to issues when it comes to the mentally retarded but as i interviewed them further on certain reactions they were not able to give alternatives to their actions. Some of the reactions which I think endangered them and made them look different were like talking throughout the day without ceasing, feeling like killing him/herself and reporting to an older person around them. A reaction like talking throughout the day exposes their limited intellectual ability and manifests in adaptive behavior. This may lead to a number of things i.e. their peers may avoid them, laugh at them, or incite them to keep talking thus leading to aggression towards those who have offended them or those around them in retaliation. This behavior may also lead them to frequent attacks from others. The behavior in itself may be annoying to other people around him/her and lead to isolation. This also shows that they cannot resolve conflicts amicably and resort to a weaker alternative of solving problems which is not effective.

Another reaction that made them prone to bullying was that of reporting offenders to their parents, guardians and teachers. This was a clear indication that they could not face their offenders to put things right instead opted for weaker strategy of reporting. This also encouraged those around them to tease them and bully them. The behavior also indicated immaturity in emotional development in the young adults in comparison to the normal peers at age 14 and above they are able to stand up from their rights and rarely report their conflicts to parents unless it involves a discipline issue. At their age above 16 some of the issues that annoy them are very petty as I found out when interviewing them, some indicated that being denied additional food during meals annoyed them. Making the issue of additional food that important to warrant quarrels, fights and reporting to parents indicated emotional immaturity. To some this denial of additional food was so serious that they felt like killing themselves. For those who talked throughout the

day, this meant they will continually talk and complain about same issue throughout. Counseling is therefore needed to assist them to understand about food ratios in school and that it was not proper to keep taking throughout the day about it. They have to be made to understand that this issue of additional food is not more important than friends etc. But again depending on their mental retardation level some may not understand such regulation on food ratios and this may affect counseling. On the other hand when happy majority of the indicated that they become excited to an extent that they will smile and talk to everybody they meet and explain what has made them happy. Again depending on how it is done the action may make other persons around them resent them and get bored about their repeated stories and on the same issue. This will also reveal their abnormality to those around them and hence lead to rejection. In conclusion there is a clear indication that they are not mature emotionally because in normal circumstances one only shares good moments with close friends and relatives and not just anybody. They meet in counseling therefore they are assisted to identify friends they can share good and bad times with.

### Effects of low intelligence on social life

Majority of young adults with MR had a normal healthy social life. They enjoyed sports, music, dancing and playing with friends. All of them indicated they had friends and their choice of friends depended on factors similar to their normal peers. Their choice of friends depended on their kindness, friendliness, and to those who make them laugh. When asked whether they had enemies, a few indicated that they did not have any enemies and 2 indicated they were not sure. Those who said they did not have enemies I deduce did not know how to differentiate, they were not sure whether their friends were real friends. They did not know how their enemies behaved and this was dangerous when it came to sharing ideas and of food e.t.c. in life one has to know their enemies and friends to be balanced and know how to believe, behave towards different people. When asked whether they had intimate friends of the opposite sex a few indicated they do while majority feared having friends of the opposite sex. On probing further some indicated they did not see the need to have friends of the opposite sex and some indicated that they did not trust persons of the opposite sex especially male friends.

**Table 1. Statistics on their preferred residence after school**

F	%	F	%	F	%	TOTAL	
30	30	50	50	20	20	F	%
						100	100

Findings from Table 1 on why they cannot stay away from home show that about 70% are not comfortable staying away from home. Only a 30% were able to live away from their parents. Reasons given were that they were not used to living on their own. They were afraid of being attacked, they do not know how to budget, and many could not cook well. These are common reasons given on why youth cannot live on their own. One reason of concern here is the fear of being attached as it is expressed by some of the youth. It is true that persons with mental retardation are prone to attacks and abuse even when

they live with their parents so guiding and counseling should therefore help young adults with mental retardation to learn how to avoid attacks and abuse in all environments. Many indicated that they did not have budgeting skills. At school they should be trained on how to budget to learn how to spend their money and take care of themselves. The mentally retarded should be trained in cooking to be able to make simple meals for themselves while they are on their own. Many were not able to prioritize needs and plan for future. They needed a lot of help in fore planning and strategize as many are not able to reach this stage on their own as Piaget (1969) stated in his theory on developmental stages. Findings on the action to take when boss/employer offends them were as follows: Beat him or her; and leave; Report to mum; Report to chief; and Just leave work.

Only 20% of the respondents interviewed indicated that they would discuss the issue with the boss. The above cited reactions were not healthy as they put them in danger and indicated how different they were from their normal peers. In normal circumstances it was not proper to beat up a boss when he offends a worker so it would look quite abnormal to fight ones boss and it was dangerous. For those who were not aggressive some indicated they will report the boss to their mother while others indicated they would just leave the job and go away. These were immature ways of solving issues which made them look different. Vocational/counseling was necessary in helping them deal and handle with such issues at work places appropriately. They also cited some of the issues that annoyed them at work place as being denied permission to be absent or when gossiped about. They needed some guidance on relationships at their work place and to understand the fact that they cannot always have their way while in employment. Some of the ways they suggested for resolving issues with the boss/employer were, demand for their money, warn the person, just keep quiet. These strategies of resolving issues were abit abnormal basing on the fact that it involved their employer. Counseling on work habits and ethics was required to help them in such situations. Findings from Table II on whether they have friends of the opposite sex show that majority did not have boyfriends nor girlfriends. Reasons given were that they feared HIV/AIDS, and sex, some said they did not see the need of having friends of the opposite sex, others felt they were still young and a few others female indicated that they did not trust men. Although most reasons stated were valid depending on the particular experience. Some needed counterchecking to help them develop healthy future relationships.

When asked on how they determine genuine friendships with persons of the opposite sex they stated the following reasons; When the person they meet smiles at them; When they are given gifts by the person; When the person comes to inform their parents; and when the person buys food for them. These were risky ways of getting into relationships as they were prone to rapists and sexual abuse. Recent reports indicated that many are lured into sexual relationships through such baits in western Kenya. One girl I interviewed who was mentally retarded aged 25 ended up having a baby with a herd's boy, after the boy convinced her that he would buy her a car and take her to the city in future. Such were the many cases observed among the mentally retarded. Counseling the young adults on how to determine genuine friendships was

necessary, close monitoring is therefore required to help majority of young adults with mental retardation since many younger forget. This counseling is also important as it will help majority of them make right decisions on marriage issues as majority indicated they wish to be married in future. For majority of the young adults with mental retardation their mothers as their sole decision makers and they depend on them wholly. Majority seemed to trust their mother's decisions on all issues of their lives including decisions on marriage. They also indicated that they would ask their mothers first before they accepted a man or woman for friendship and marriage. This may be seen to be in order but it is also an indication of overdependence and the fact that they cannot be independent.

### Occupation after school

On the question on what they plan to do after school, majority knew exactly what they wanted to do in future and among the vocational activities commonly mentioned were:- Knitting, dressmaking, carpentry, tailoring, weaving, business and farming among others. As a follow-up question on what they had put in place to ensure they accomplished their ambition, many were not sure of any plan and what was required for their future projects. They needed proper preparation and guidance on future plans on projects they wish to do after school. Teachers explained some of the preparations they made at school before the young adults left for home programs. The preparations include; Discussions with parents about appropriate projects for the young adults; Discussions with home around the young adult to solicit support; Discussions with the sponsor to assist young adults; Guiding and counseling on vocational career skills; Training the young adults on life skills; Attachment to project at the institution for practical experience is; and organized in the last year of the preparations. The teacher's observation on the most common challenge affecting young adults with low intelligence as follows:-

*Poor cognitive development; They regress in behavior and social skills after school; Sexual abuse and harassment from community members; Unable to make decisions on their own; Having difficulties in understanding common concepts; Limited knowledge on planning and budgeting; Loitering in the village and idleness while on home based programs; Pregnancy among the girls while on home based programs; Physical abuse/bullying by normal peers in the community; Stigma which leads to neglect and isolation; Neglect by parents leading to deteriorating health problems; and behavior problems leading to indiscipline and lack of friends*

### CONCLUSION

Challenges teachers face while counseling young adults with mental retardation: Forgetfulness; Unwillingness to change/ inability to change permanently; Frequent aggressiveness; Low understanding of issues; Repetition of some mistakes after counseling and inability to get insights on serious issues. There is a significant effect of low intelligence on effective counseling and the general development of young adults with mental retardation. Whereas their fellow peer mates have similar challenges in their daily lives, young adults with

mental retardation are disadvantaged as they take longer to learn from life experiences. They have a low understanding of critical issues in life. They need constant monitoring and continuous guidance from counselors on all issues of life as they forget often. Many are vulnerable and prone to sexual and physical abuse and therefore need protection. Proper management of projects needs to be enhanced to ensure that young adults are engaged most of the time to avoid idleness and toiling in the village. Both girls and boys should be taught family planning methods to prevent unwanted pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. Parents of young adults with health problems should be assisted by the government as some are on expensive drugs which they cannot afford. This will help improve their health status and become more useful in the community. They should be guided and counseled on how to manage certain conditions affecting their young adult. Parents can be assisted by the teachers on acquiring techniques in behaviour modification to manage their children's behavior while on home based programs. Both parents and young adults should be trained in budgeting and fore planning to ensure the home based programs are sustained. Teachers should be trained in guiding/counseling skills to assist both parents and young adults in making appropriate decisions to improve their lives. Recommendations on improvement of counseling services were as follows; Training for teacher counselors; Vocational guidance; Training in budgeting; Training in planning and strategies; Behavior modification; Teachings on family planning; Emphasis on project management; Parents involvement; Diversification of training facilities; Financial Aid from Government to support projects; Allocation of funds for home visits

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