

AVAILABILITY OF HEAD TEACHER-PARENT COLLABORATION POLICIES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN REGULAR PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MERU COUNTY

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Abstract

This is a part of a larger study that was set out to investigate information on head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education in regular public primary schools in Meru County. The study investigated head teacher-parent collaboration policies available for the improvement of inclusive education in regular public primary schools, in Meru County, Kenya. The objective of the study was to establish head teacher-parent collaboration policies available for the improvement of inclusive education. The study was to inform education policy makers, who were expected to use the study results to evaluate the current policies on inclusive education and formulate appropriate policies for promoting head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. The study used qualitative research design. The target population was 97 head teachers, 136 teachers and 2040 parents. Twenty four participants were selected to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling was used; to select the respondents from the target population. The study employed interview schedules, focus group discussion guides, and documents' analysis schedule, as well as, a questionnaire. The study employed qualitative methods and techniques of collecting and analyzing the data. The findings of the study were presented using narratives and themes. It was found that available head teacher-parent collaboration policies for the improvement of inclusive education were mainly the informal ones. The informal policies made dismal enhancement towards head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. It was recommended that, the government should formulate clear inclusive education policies and make them available to all schools.

Key words: Policies' availability, head teacher-parent collaboration, inclusive education, Meru County.

Introduction

Context determines effectiveness of processes (Peters, 2004). Policy context influences head teacher-parent collaboration process for the improvement of inclusive education. Policies evolve as necessitated by emerging situations. International efforts to recognize the right of persons with disabilities started way back after Second World War and the United Nations organization formulated universal declaration for human rights of 1948 which culminated in the establishments of elementary care of persons with disabilities and rehabilitation in institutions (UN, 1948). This was as a result of neglect, ignorance, superstitions and fear of persons with disabilities. Over the years, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 was declared to continue the recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities. It stated that children were to be guaranteed effective access to education where they were to achieve fullest possible social integration and individual development (UN, 1989).

The Jomtien conference was a landmark in recognition and consolidation of the previous thinking about the rights of all children, including those with disabilities and special needs (UNESCO, 1990; Vlachou, 2004). The thinking was further reinforced by UN standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities' education (UN, 1993). Additionally, Salamanca statement and Framework for action on special needs education of 1994 embraced the thinking of inclusive education by laying down four fundamental principles. The principles included accommodation of all children by schools, community participation and attendance of neighbouring schools by all children, flexible curriculum and cost effectiveness of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994).

During the review of Education for All Agenda in 2000 at a world education conference in Dakar, one of the challenges that faced national governments included non-reflection on children with educational needs on account of disability and provision of education in regular classrooms (UNESCO, 2000). Consequently, the United Nations organization committed itself to EFA goals by drafting the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were to be achieved by the year 2015. The goals were interpreted as a broader commitment towards a better world in the 21st Century. They included elimination of global poverty, promotion of gender equality, education and environmental sustainability, among others. These were the measures the countries world over were to take for a better world. Education was one of the main strategies to achieve these goals. All children were to be taught together irrespective of their condition in regular schools (UNESCO, 2000). The MDGs have recently been replaced with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals, to complete the work of the MDGs and ensure that no one is left behind. Sustainable Development Goals have seventeen goals which include: quality of education, gender equality and reduced inequalities, among others (UNDP, 2015).

Kenya Government ratified the cited international documents and in line with them it has from time to time set up various educational commissions since independence up to date which have been tasked with the mandate to look into the welfare of persons with disabilities and special needs

among other educational mandates. These commissions have recommended the integration and or inclusion of learners with special needs and disabilities in regular schools (Republic of Kenya, 1964; 1976; 1981; 1988 & 1999). As a result, laws and policies have been written to effect the recommendations made. The laws and policies include: The Disability Act (Republic of Kenya, 2003), Children's Act (Republic of Kenya, 2001), Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) document (Republic of Kenya, 2005), Special Needs Education (SNE) Policy Framework (Republic of Kenya, 2009) and Kenya Constitution Article 43 (Republic of Kenya, 2010) all of which have emphasized inclusive education for all learners. The Ministry of Education has embarked on putting in place structures including training of teachers to implement inclusive education to match the trends in inclusive education internationally (Republic of Kenya, 2008). In line with the global policies the government has come up with several legislations and policies such as Children's Act (Republic of Kenya, 2001), Disability Act (Republic of Kenya, 2003), SNE Policy Framework (Republic of Kenya, 2009) and Constitution of Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2010) to support inclusive education. Limited research had been done to explore the availability of policies which guide head teacher-parent collaboration in raising IE status. Thus, the study investigated availability of policies that governed head teachers and parents in their collaboration for the improvement of IE in regular public primary schools in Meru County, Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

Kenya is a signatory to several international policies and legislations such as the Salamanca Statement of 1994, Dakar Conference of 2000, UN Conference of 2007 and United Nations Development Programme of 2015 that support inclusive education. Further, Kenya has a number of policies in support of education, such as The Disability Act of 2003, Children's Act of 2001, Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) document of 2005, Special Needs Education Policy Framework of 2009 and Kenya Constitution of 2010, Article 43, all of which have emphasized inclusive education for all learners. Despite both the global and national policies supporting inclusion, there was low improvement of inclusive education in Meru County. It was not clear under what policies, the schools' head teachers and parents collaborated for the improvement of inclusive education. It was for this reason that the researcher decided to examine the available policies, owned by schools, for the head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

Significance of the Study

The study findings are valuable to education policy makers, who need the study results to evaluate the current policies on inclusion and formulate appropriate ones for promoting head teacher-parent collaboration to improve the status of inclusive education for all learners. The study findings give crucial information to leaders and managers of inclusive schools on the need to have appropriate formal inclusive education policies to enhance head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative research design because it enables in-depth interactions, where participants share their rich experiences and in-depth understanding. Interview schedule, focus group discussion guide and questionnaires, as well as, document analysis schedule were used to collect data. The choice of the research design is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Creswell (2007) and Bloomberg and Volpe (2008). The study targeted all the 97 active, inclusive regular public primary schools, with 97 head teachers. There were 136 teachers and 2040 parents, who were actively involved in inclusive education in the 97 regular public primary schools in the county.

Purposeful sampling, unique or criterion sampling were used. Creswell (2009), suggest that, for a sample size in the range of 5-25 as being adequate for collecting qualitative data. The researcher adopted the Creswell (2009) recommendation and selected 24 participants (eight head teachers, eight teachers and eight parents) purposefully.

Data was gathered through in-depth interviews (both individual and focus group discussions), observations, document analysis and an open-ended questionnaire. To answer the research questions put forth in the study a total of twenty four; (eight head teachers, eight teachers and eight parents) subjects were interviewed. Three focus group discussions were held, for each of the three groups. School environment and facilities were observed and policy documents were analyzed. Further, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to the teachers. Responses from individual interviews were audio recorded, while focus group discussions, observations and document analysis were written. Teachers wrote essays as was guided by the questionnaire. The researcher collected the data by personally meeting the subjects physically and that ensured high response return rate. All the participants responded. Qualitative data analysis was carried out.

Findings

Available policies, owned by the schools

Participants gave accounts on: policies owned by schools

Participants; head teachers, parents and teachers were interviewed on the question, “What policies do you have for your school? Please explain.” Their responses were presented in the following narratives;

Head teachers’ responses

When participant head teacher A was asked to tell what policies he had for his school, he said that the school had both formal and open-door policies. He gave examples of legal policies as the Basic Education Act, Children’s Act, Disability Act and Special Needs Education Policy Framework of 2009. He disclosed that he had neither read them nor seen them but knew that they were available somewhere in school for reference, if need arose. He felt that, what was most important to him was open-door policy, where the school stakeholders did justice to all learners on the basis of

humanitarian grounds. This implies that, the participant was ignorant on formal policies. Claiming that, the school had the policies which he had never seen, was a sign of ignorance.

Participant head teacher B stated that her school had policies, though she could not be able to point out what they were. Head teacher C shared that her school had informal policies on; education accessibility for all, feeding programme and changing school site plan to use minimum buildings' area. She explained that her school parents knew and supported the policies. The participant pointed out that, she was not aware of any formal government policy.

Head teacher D could not identify what policies she had in her school. She explained that, on policy issues, she consulted with Educational Assessment and Resource Centre (EARC) and teachers so that they could do the right thing. She also consulted with parents. She claimed that, she had heard about special needs policy framework of 2009, but she had neither seen it, nor known its contents. She shared that, to place children in regular classes, she got guidelines from EARC. Head teacher E shared that, in his school there were various policies such as academic performance improvement, wholesome growth of the child, nutrition policy and acceptance of learners with special needs to fight stigma and discrimination.

Participant head teacher F identified his school-made policies as; testing policy of three examinations every term, school opening policy with opening assembly and readiness to serve all children without discrimination irrespective of their differences. Head teacher G shared that, his school had policies which were made by teachers and board of management (BOM). He described the policies as rules for learners, parents and BOM, with each group having its own guidelines formulated by its respective members. Head teacher H reported that, on the provision of inclusive education the policy he had was "LOVE." He explained that, love of school stakeholders was crucial in bringing togetherness and providing support for collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

All the head teachers shared that, they had informal policies in their schools as opposed to formal policies. Only two head teachers seemed to have been aware of the existence of formal policies, which they did not have for their schools. This implies that, the head teachers were in favour of informal policies, while, being ignorant of the formal policies. During the head teachers' focus group discussions, all the participants' were in agreement that, collaboration had made minor enhancements in improving inclusive education due to policy crisis, use of informal guidelines in the collaboration.

Parents' responses

Parent A shared that, as a parent she had no idea whether there were any policies that were followed in school, while parent B indicated that, his school had no policies. He said that the school just decides on what to do, adding that the head teacher and parents were very cooperative. Parent C

stated that; she had heard from the school head teacher that there were policies which advocated for equal rights of all children.

Parent D reported that, the policies she knew were school routines, where parents were free to enroll their children with special needs in regular classes. She shared that, the parents accompanied their children to school during admission, to give background information to the head teacher. The participant explained that, the information assisted the teachers in preparing individualized education programmes (IEP's) for the learners with special needs. Parent E felt that, his school had policies, which he described as "love and care" for learners with special needs. Meanwhile, Parent F shared that, she knew of no policies, but said that, the head teacher had always informed parents on what was expected of them, like contributing food stuffs to the school for feeding programme.

Parent G shared that, parents of learners with special needs were never called in school and had never been informed of any policies concerning the school, while, parent H stated that, he had never heard of any policies in the school but things did run smoothly.

Some parents were aware, while others were not aware of the existence of any kind of school policies. This differs with the head teachers' awareness on the availability of the policies, in that; all the head teachers had informal policies, despite majority of them being ignorant on the existence of formal policies. This implies that, there were some parents who were more ignorant than their head teachers over the awareness on the school policies. Parents' focus group discussions indicated that head teacher-parent collaboration had made minor enhancements in improving inclusive education due to lack of school policy awareness among most of the parents in the collaboration

Teachers' responses

Participant teacher A shared that, he did not know of any policies for his school. In concurrence, teacher B said that, she knew of no policy concerning her school. Teacher C reported that, his school had no policies, but shared that the school was guided by a policy, "all children should get education from a school near their home," that is believed to have emanated from the government. However, he disclosed that the policy was followed only when the child would benefit from an ordinary school near their home. The participant disclosed that, most of the children with severe challenges were still being placed in special schools and units.

Teacher D shared that, there were policies that were used in informing inclusive education, citing an example of where learners, suspected of having special needs, were assessed by Educational Assessment and Resource Centre (EARC) officers who advised on appropriate placement such as regular classes. She, however, reported that, the school had no written policies from the government on inclusive education. Teacher E shared that, his school had feeding programme and guidance and counselling policies, while, teacher F indicated that, she had not heard of any policies for her school.

Teacher G opined that, as a class teacher, he was not aware of any policies in his school. He noted, "Policies supporting inclusive education in our school is something I have never heard of or even known." Teacher H shared that, the policies of his school were just what stakeholders agreed upon. He noted that one of the policies on identifying the children with special needs and informing the parents for participation in assessment and placement, had challenges. He felt that, some of his colleague teachers did not care whether children with special needs existed in regular classes. He lamented that, some of the learners made minimal progress and they were forced to remain in the same class for years.

Similar to the parents' situation, some teachers were not aware of any form of their schools' policies, despite the head teachers counteracting them that, the schools had informal policies. Majority of the teachers, during their questionnaire responses, further confirmed that, they were not aware of any school policies. This implies that, both some parents and teachers were ignorant of the existence of school policies.

Many participants, especially the head teachers were aware of their school policies that were mainly open door guidelines. Some participants were not aware of the existence of any school policy. Some of the policies that the schools had in their minds were: formal policies- Basic Education Act, Children's Act, Disability Act and Special Needs Education Policy Framework of 2009, all mentioned by one school. Some other schools claimed of having informal policies which included; feeding programme, changing school site plan, academic performance improvement, wholesome growth of the child and nutrition. The other policies were, testing, school opening, readiness to serve all children, rules for stakeholders and "LOVE".

The majority (7 out of 8), 88% of the schools had no formal policies. The research results revealed that, most of the policies that schools had were informal and were mainly what some stakeholders had agreed to embrace as their guidelines in collaborating to promote inclusive education. Majority (23 out of 24), 96% of the participants reported that, their schools had open-door policies, which were not written anywhere, as confirmed during the document analysis.

One participant mentioned formal, legal, policies and confessed that he had never seen the policies, knew too little on their contents. Despite the participants reporting that their schools had policies, some of them had no information concerning the policies. This implies that, even the few schools who knew about formal policies were not conversant with their contents. During the head teachers, parents and teachers' focus groups discussions, it was found that head teacher-parent collaboration had made slight enhancements in improving inclusive education due to formal school policies' awareness challenge in the collaboration. The findings were consistent with Peters (2004), who found that context, such as policy, determines effectiveness of processes. However, the fact that, there were no formal policies implies that, it was difficult to compare one school with another in relation to policy implications.

Conclusion

The regular inclusive primary schools in Meru County were ignorant over the formal inclusive education policies, where the majority of the schools operated without formal policies, in their efforts to collaborate for the improvement of inclusive education. This implies that, there was policy crisis.

Recommendations

The government should formulate clear inclusive education policies, with implementation support systems, and induct all the school stakeholders on their implementation.

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