

HEAD TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN REGULAR PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

By

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Abstract

Through appropriate communication among head teachers and parents, inclusive education (IE) is improved. The purpose of the study was to analyse communication among head teachers and parents for the improvement of inclusive education in regular public primary schools, in Meru County, Kenya. The objective of the study was to examine communication among head teachers and parents for the improvement of inclusive education. The significance of the study was to inform education policy makers, who need the study results to evaluate the current policies on inclusion and formulate appropriate ones for promoting head teacher-parent communication to improve the status of inclusive education for all learners. The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory and Peters' input-process-outcome-context framework of Inclusive Education. Qualitative research approach method was predominantly used. The target population was 101,612. Through purposive sampling, 24 participants were selected. The study instruments used included; open-ended questionnaires, interview schedules, focus group discussion guide, observations and documents' analysis schedules. Qualitative data analysis was done with the help of computer package, ATLAS. ti. The study findings were presented using narratives within themes generated from the collected data. It was found that, though, many head teachers communicated with the parents, challenges contributed to minimal improvement of inclusive education. It was recommended that; the school stakeholders should be well sensitized on communication for the improvement of inclusive education.

Key words: Communication, head teacher-parent, inclusive education, Meru County.

1. Introduction

Communication is an interactive collaboration between two or more parties for the purposes of passing on information. There is need to have open and effective communication between the head teacher and the parent for strong collaboration. When schools improve the level of communication, parents often respond reciprocally, resulting in strong teamwork (Richardson, 2009). This translates into strong head teacher-parent collaboration. Thompson (2008), pointed out that effective and efficient head teacher-parent communication has been found to be a very effective tool in increasing learner performance. This is supported by Githinji, Kanga, Mwirichia and Mugambi (2016), who emphasized the importance of effective communication. They found that, effective communication contributed to students' improved school performance in public secondary schools.

According to Epstein (2010), positive parent involvement plays a major role in influencing learners' outcomes, such as, increase in learner achievement, motivation, attention, retention, and self-

esteem. He further suggests that in order to make communication between school and home as effective as possible, teachers must maintain a positive and professional attitude when dealing with learners. This school of thought is further supported by Thompson (2008), Harnis, Nelson and Jayanthi (2001).

According to Sanders (2009) strong communication is central to building strong teamwork between home and school. In these changing times, head teachers must develop and expand their techniques in order to maximize effective communication with parents. Montgomery (2005) came up with variety of techniques for communicating with parents about their learners' progress, decisions affecting their learners, and school programmes in general. These techniques include head teacher-parent conferences, open houses, phone contacts, report cards, and newsletters.

Parents should be informed and empowered to communicate with schools for various activities, such as, in making decisions affecting education of their learners. Xu and Gulosino (2006) observe that the teacher-parent communication is more important to improving student achievement than any other measure. Cowan (2003), assert that the role of the parent is not just fund raising or attending an occasional student function, but the active participation in all aspects.

Schools need to recognize the primary role of the family in education and advocate for families and schools to work together as a team. Sanders (2009) argue that different structures in school and family relations developed in the early 20th century. He further points out that separate tasks and responsibilities were delegated to the school and the home. Communication is believed to contribute to improvement of learners' academic performances, as well as, their wellbeing at school. Barbour (2009) recognizes that the parent is the child's first teacher and the home serves as the first classroom, therefore, continued communication between the parent and the learner's school is crucial. For continued communication, Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2007) concluded that parents' interests should be put into consideration when head teachers are managing their partnerships with parents of learners with special needs. Marsh and Vorbeck (2009) agree with other scholars when they observed that, there is need for communication among the head teachers and the parents concerning the learner's learning ability and behaviour for effective learner development. They explain this kind of communication as a dance, a subtle message of letting each other know what other's needs are and how they can help each other. Today, due to socio-cultural and economic changes, many parents have abdicated their roles to the teachers and mass media whereby teachers may sometimes find it difficult to communicate and correct some anomalies that may have been learnt from mass media, or from peers.

It should be understood that teachers or parents on their own cannot adequately address all the needs of the learners in regular public primary schools. Family-school communication contributes to maximizing success for learners (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Epstein (2010) further elaborates on a comprehensive view of communication where the family, the school and community interacts, as a team to meet the needs of the learners.

In contemporary societies studies carried out have revealed the value of head teacher-parent communication. Ssewamala, Bannon & Ismayilova (2009), found a strong relationship between parents' involvement in communication and performance of learners. Mwanza (2010), observed that, parents of learners with special needs lacked adequate sensitization on the same, which negatively affected the way the head teachers worked together with the parents.

In view of the above the role of the parent and head teacher communication cannot be underpinned, especially in this technological error and changes as stipulated, for example, in Kenyan Education Act of 2013 which spells out the role of teacher and parent in schools (Republic of Kenya, 2013). By the time of this study, little research had been carried out to analyse communication among head teachers and parents for the improvement of inclusive education, a gap that this study sought to address.

2. Statement of the Problem

Appropriate communication among head teachers and parents improve inclusive education. In Meru County, Kenya, there appeared to have been ineffective school-home communication, which was linked to poor status of inclusive education. There seemed to be ineffective head teacher-parent communication that resulted in poor status of inclusive education in public primary schools in Meru County (Meru County Director of Education Office, 2016).

Communication among head teachers and parents, is what this study sought to analyse to address the low improvement in inclusive education. Addressing low improvement in inclusive education through head teacher-parent communication may result in all learners having opportunities to develop socially and economically, making it easy to achieve the sustainable development goals. It was for this reason that the researcher decided to carry out a study on “Head teacher-parent communication for the improvement of inclusive education in public primary schools in Meru County, Kenya”.

3. Significance of the Study

The study findings are of great use 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 communication 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 communication to enhance head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

4. Methodology

The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems theory and Peters’ input-process-outcome-context framework of Inclusive Education. Qualitative research approach method was predominantly used. The target population was 101,612 (772 head teachers, 6,840 teachers and 94,000 parents). Out of the target population, there was a unique population of 218 (77 head teachers, 68 teachers and 73 parents) who were actively involved in inclusive education in 77 inclusive public primary schools in Meru County (Meru County Director of Education Office, 2016). Through purposive sampling, a number of eight (8) regular public primary schools and a sample size of 24 participants were selected from the population. Creswell (2009), suggest for sample size in the range of 5-25 as being adequate for collecting qualitative data. The researcher adopted the Creswell (2009) recommendation to select the 24 participants.

The study instruments used included; questionnaires, interview schedules, focus group discussion guide, observations and documents’ analysis schedules. The tools were piloted for reliability and validity in Isiolo County, Kenya. Data was collected by the researcher through meeting with the participants face-to-face, which ensured whole response return rates. Qualitative data analysis was done with the help of computer package, ATLAS. ti. The study findings were presented using narratives within themes generated from the collected data.

5. Findings: Communication

All the head teachers indicated that, communication enhanced their unity in their head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of IE. This implies that, communication should be emphasized in education programmes. Improved communication can strengthen the head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of IE. During focus group discussions, head teachers felt that, communication was not effective enough in their collaboration with parents and that contributed to dismal developments in inclusive education in their schools.

Majority of the parents agreed with the head teachers that, communication was crucial for strong head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of IE. In agreement with the head teachers, parents' focus group discussion further confirmed that, communication for collaboration among head teachers and parents was not effective in most of the schools. Effective communication creates common understanding. The parents felt that, communication needed to be improved, by addressing parental marginalization that was experienced in some schools. They felt that ineffective communication in the head teacher-parent collaboration contributed in minimal inclusive education improvement in the regular public primary schools in Meru County, Kenya.

The teachers, concurred with both the head teachers and parents that, communication was ineffective in the collaboration among head teachers and parents, yet, it was key in enhancing head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of IE. This interviews' information was consistent with the information from all the three categories of focus group discussions and the teachers' open-ended questionnaires. However, one teacher disagreed with this school of thought.

The findings indicated that many head teachers communicated with parents by making announcements during assemblies and asking pupils to pass the information to their parents. This is indirect communication with minimal value. This led to ineffective communication, with message distortion. Some participants felt that, there was need to have means of having direct communication through use of technology such as use of computers to typeset and print enough meetings' invitation letters. This indicates the value attached to direct communication as supported by Fix-Turkowski (2003) who highlighted the value of direct communication.

The findings further revealed that, some parents were stigmatized by the head teachers and this led to communication breakdown. For example, one participant explained that, she was blamed over cerebral palsy that her child suffered from, and that she was bitter about it since the problem was congenital and doctors never gave her the reasons for the condition. She felt that, being blamed over the challenge faced by her child was enough reason to keep off from the head teacher and the school. This implied that some head teachers and parents were in need of guidance and counselling. Need for guidance and counselling is supported by Mwangi (2013) who posited that guidance and counselling policies in schools should be strengthened to improve communication.

The results indicated that some parents were never invited for school functions. One parent noted, "I do not recall being invited for any activity concerning planning or even implementation of inclusive education programmes, which I believe would indicate head teacher-parent partnership." Mwanza (2010) made a similar observation that, parents were not invited for implementation of inclusive education. In this study, during focus group discussions, participants made it clear that, there was lack of rapport between the head teachers and the parents due to lack or poor communication. Participants felt that, invitation builds rapport, for successful collaboration, and yet, the invitation

for parents by the head teacher, sometimes, was poor, inadequate or lacked. This is supported by Staples and Diliberto (2010) and Wanat (2010) who observed that, the fundamentals of parent communication needed for successful head teacher-parent collaboration within a school environment included building parent rapport by reaching out to them through invitations, which make them feel valued. This resulted to some parents not participating in school activities. Mwanza (2010) also concurs with this finding, pointing out that, majority of the parents; do not participate in school activities when they are not communicated to do so.

The results also revealed that, parents' views were not sought for consideration by head teachers when planning for learners in inclusive schools. This was emphasized during parents' focus group discussion. Parents felt that, their views needed to be valued and considered by the head teachers for effective communication with them. This finding concurs with Kalabula (2005), who stated that, parents' views should be considered in designing educational programmes because they should be taken on board by professionals as partners. This implies that, head teacher-parent collaboration can be facilitated by change of school communication culture to promote inclusive education. In conclusion, communication was inefficient and ineffective in most of the schools, while, in some others, it enhanced school-home unity in the head teacher-parent collaboration and there was slight improvement of inclusive education.

6. Conclusion

Communication was inefficient and ineffective in most of the schools, while, in some others, it enhanced school-home unity in the head teacher-parent collaboration and there was slight improvement of inclusive education.

7. Recommendations

The school stakeholders should be well sensitized on the importance of communication for the improvement of inclusive education. The Ministry of Education should seriously create awareness about the communication to all education stakeholders.

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