

Management of Primary School Education for Pupils with Autism in Arusha City, Tanzania

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Abstract: This study is about the management of primary school education for pupils with autism in Arusha City, Tanzania. The study employed the case study design, with a sample of 27 participants. The study used one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions as data collection strategies. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Based on the findings, the study concluded that autism is a complex developmental condition in which individuals demonstrate challenges in various ways, such as social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. In response, home visiting and collaborative leadership are key strategies in enhancing special education teachers' competency for the autistic pupils. The study recommended that school leaders should enhance collaborative leadership in supporting teachers and creating favorable environment for autistic pupils.

Keyword: Leadership; autism; strategies; teachers' competency-enhancement.

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Introduction

This study is about leadership competency enhancement strategies for primary school teachers of Autistic pupils. Empirical studies have clearly stipulated several challenges that inclusive groups do encounter in various levels of education (Beco et al (2019; MacDonald, 2014; Tungaraza, 2014). Thus, this study aimed to find out strategies that school leadership applies to enhance competency to teachers of autistic pupils.

According to Ghazi (2018), Autism is regarded as a mental condition, present from early childhood, characterized by difficulties in communicating and socializing with people in using language and abstract concepts. Autistic pupils refer to the pupils or individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum

disorder (ASD). This condition normally comes to the awareness of parents while a child is at the age of two or three years old (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). The development of such a problem is not an abrupt rather a gradual one and a child may developmentally grow slowly at a very normal pace (Wallace, 2014).

According to Kathleen, (2020), autism has a heritable tendency known as neurodevelopment disorder. It is believed that more than 100 genetic polymorphisms have been associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Genetic studies in Africa have reported cases on the ASD as a genetic matter, associated with stigma, adverse discrimination, abuse, severe isolation and lack of access to support

like moral and material (Kathleen, 2020; Elsabbagh, 2012).

History reveals that autism condition can be explained into phases starting from 1930's to 1960's, 1960's to 2013's, and 2013's to the present. These phases provided different situations of how autistic children were handled in the community. The first phase of autism was between the year of (1930's and 1960's). Within this period, disability conditions were just commencing to become recognized in the community. In America, for instance, children who were noticed to be disabled, were frequently instituted, ignored, or neglected. In the second phase of autism (1960's-2013), the autistic children were valued and provided with some lawful rights. For instance, the Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for disabled, which mainly stands for protecting the rights of the disabled children (Karim, 2018). The prolongation of time at school for such children was also taken into consideration. Parents with disabled children were also at liberty to be provided with all the rights in the entire special education process (Karim, 2018). The third phase was from 2013 to the present. In this phase more emphasize is put on protecting rights of autistic children such as right to education, security and health, educating them and ensuring all children get other basic needs.

In Tanzania, Autism is becoming more common, yet the experts critically suggest that there is shortage of basic clinical services, low quality care and inadequate investment in teachers for children with special needs. Education needs have to be accessible by every child. Screening of children and teachers is a paramount factor when the nation wants to help autistic children. In addition, Rupareli (2021) suggests that it has a lot of significance when autistic children are not segregated or discriminated as well as stigmatized. They always need higher rates of interaction than do children without disability.

It is universally accepted that education is the fundamental right for every individual and is recognized as one of the human rights. In South Africa, education is a right to every person, as per the constitution. In the United States of America, education is a fundamental right to every person regardless of their actual or perceived race, color, national origin, citizenship or status. Education is additionally conceptualized as an emancipation tool for empowering individuals, including those in

special needs and other marginalized groups towards combating ignorance, poverty and diseases. The fact is that via appropriate education policies and reforms, autistic individuals can have enough access to, participate and ultimately gain plenty of success in future (Hayes & Bulat, 2018), hence, becoming a part in national building. To make this possible, policies and reforms have been seriously analyzed to pave ways for education accessibility to every child, despite various disabilities (Possi & Milinga, 2017). This leads to an important point that teachers and school leadership at large are necessitated to have deeper knowledge on autism disability so that they can remain quite supportive to such a group.

Shambay and Ugyen (2022) carried out a study on home visit effectiveness on students' classroom behavior and academic achievement. The findings show that home visits and family participation or engagement have positive impacts on students' academic achievements and attitudes at schools. The study added that home visit enables special education teachers to develop good partnership with parents of children with autism disability. The more they keep visiting them at their homes, the closer and realistic parents become before them. The study indicates that home visits provide teachers and other professionals with a unique opportunity to learn firsthand information from parents who agree to share their experiences and stories about the strengths, differences and challenges of raising a child with disability. Both special education teachers and other professional stakeholders should jointly collaborate in advising responsible agencies on the readjustment of the policy to suit the challenging children (Sabit, 2019).

Furthermore, Kimmie (2016) conducted a study in the United States of America on teacher leadership in special education: exploring skills, roles and perceptions. The study revealed that transformational leadership leads to more inputs in the program and it calls for critical research in the process of assessing and evaluating issues touching special education teachers; the study led to the improvement of curriculum content knowledge in how to help the autistic pupils. Additionally, it speeds up collaboration or teamwork in problem solving.

The Tanzanian Government has been taking positive measures for pupils with disability: enacting plentiful disability policies including Person's

(employment) Act of 1982, the Disabled (Regulation) Act of 1985 and the Disability Act of 2004 (United republic of Tanzania, 2010). Additionally, the Government of Tanzania established inclusive schools in 1998. The schools enroll both abled and disable pupils. For the disabled pupils, the schools address the disability stigma and improve teacher training (Daudi, 2020; Education for All, 2015). Despite the opportunities and efforts made at international and national level, inclusive education, specifically for pupils with autism, seem to have not been given close attention for their improved education attainment like any other pupil in primary schools.

In 2022 the researcher in this study witnessed vividly that many autistic pupils are locked outside the classroom by teachers while the rest are busy taking their academic studies. This practice has negatively affected mostly the autistic children who are noted to be aggressive. Furthermore, empirical studies have stipulated several challenges that inclusive groups do encounter but not focusing on autism (Beco et al. (2019); Tungaraza, 2014). The studies suggested that such challenges facing pupils with disabilities are propelled by factors like perception, culture, economic status, accessibility to education, kinds of disability the pupil have and in particular inefficient leadership strategies for the case of this study. This study therefore, investigated leadership strategies that school leadership use to support special education teachers to enhance their abilities and skills in teaching autistic pupils in primary schools.

Methodology

This section presents the methodology and procedures that were used in this study.

Design

This study employed the qualitative approach, which is concerned with exploring, examining and understanding complex phenomena associated with human behavior (Creswell, 2018). The qualitative approach aided in purposive sampling to pick particular participants who would provide the needed information. The study employed the case study design. This design provided in-depth information and helped to provide solutions to the study problem. According to Taylor (2017), the design allows for an intensive or in-depth investigation of the problem at hand and brings out a deeper understanding of situations.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in Arusha City, the area with two public primary schools that enroll pupils with Autism. Both schools participated in the study, with a sample of 27 participants, which included 2 head teachers, 2 head of units, 2 academic teachers, 6 special education teachers and 15 parents.

Data Collection Methods

The study used one-to- one interviews and focus group discussions in data collection. Interview schedule in the form of one-to-one or face to face questioning took place with Head teachers, Academic teachers, Heads of Units and Parents. The Focus Group Discussion took place with six teachers who teach autistic pupils.

Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data. Data were coded into major themes guided by the study objectives. Sub themes emerged from the major themes. The major themes and sub-themes created meaningful units of analysis. The thematic analysis helped to identify patterns or themes within the qualitative.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed ethical requirements that researchers must observe, such as getting an introduction letter from relevant authorities, such as the District Education Officers. Consent form was provided to research participants in order to inform them about the research and requested them to voluntary participate in the study if they accept the request. The researcher further followed ethical procedures for data analysis and discussion as well as in report writing.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, based on data collected from the field.

Perception about Autism

The study sought to find out participants' awareness of autism. Through the interview, participants expressed their understanding of autism. One of the respondents' defined autism as "complicated, lifelong condition that includes problems with communication and behavior" (interview with HoU01-sA, 13th March 2024). Similarly, another participant (ACT01-sA) explained that autism is a "disability that affects a pupil's ability to socialize, sometime speaking and interact with others" (Interview on 13th March, 2024) as well as "a condition that affects pupil's brain and thus a pupil

lacks interaction, socialization and sometimes does repetitive behaviors.” Responses from the heads of schools were that “autism is a neurological disorder characterized by challenges in terms of social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication” (Interview with HoS01-sA, 13th March, 2024). Another one reported that autism is “a lifelong condition that requires ongoing support and accommodations as individual transition through different life stages” (Interview with HoS01-sB, March, 15th 2024).

World Health Organization (2023) matches the findings that autism has a diverse group of conditions related to development of the brain. The persons with autism are characterized by some degree of difficulty with social interaction and communication.

Arguments from parents were like: “autism is a type of disorder which affects learners’ interaction in various ways, especially in communication” (interview with P04-sB, 11th March 2024). Another parent reported, “Autism is the basis of impairments in social interaction, impairments in communication and repetitive and stereotypic behavior” (Interview with P03-sA, 12th March 2024). Another parent reported, “Autism is a type of disability that affects a child in his/ her brain; due to this effect the child lacks communication with others and may not be able to interact” (Interview with P03-sB, 11th March 2024).

The responses from FGDs had similar definitions like the ones given by individual interviewees, all teachers in their discussion agreeing that autism is a developmental disorder that impairs the individual’s ability to communicate and interact for various purposes. National Institute of Mental Health (2022) coincide the findings by presenting the fact that autism is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn and behave.

The understanding expressed by the participants, detailed that autism is a complex developmental condition that affects individuals in various ways, such as social skills, repetitive behavior, speech and nonverbal communication. The findings imply that the participants were adequately aware of the concept of autism, which is a very important basis before responding to other themes in the study.

Benefits Special Education

A home visit is an interaction where teachers go to the homes of their autistic pupils to foster relationships and improve communication between teachers and parents. The main goal of home visit is to create a supportive environment that encourages parental participation in their autistic pupils’ education. Data from participant P01-sA explained that “home visits increase parenting knowledge, parent child interaction and involvement; teachers are also able to detect potential health concerns and developmental delays of their pupils.” A participant continued to report “home visits helps to prevent child abuse and neglect and it makes parents to feel appreciated or valued by their pupils’ teachers” (Interview of 13th March, 2024).

The findings reveal that through home visits, teachers get knowledge on how to guide and communicate with autistic children and are able to detect potential health concerns. In addition, visiting pupils with autism at their homes helps teachers to know the history or background of pupils. The interview revealed that “when teachers visit pupils with autism at their homes, they establish history of the pupils’ condition, kind of the environment the pupils live and kind of nutrition suitable for the pupils” (Interview with P02-sB, 15th March, 2024).

Likewise, one participant (HoS01-sA) said, “When teachers visit pupils’ homes, they have an opportunity to learn about family’s cultural backgrounds and traditions.” One more participant reported, “This knowledge can help teachers to incorporate diverse perspectives into their lessons and make connections between the child’s experiences and the curriculum. Additionally, understanding the cultural context helps teachers identify potential barriers to learning and adjust their teaching methods accordingly” (Interview on 13th March, 2024).

The findings detail that home visit enables teachers to know the nature of autistic pupils based on home history. Child’s history is necessary in supporting teachers in solving faced problems and ensures effective teaching and learning. Paulick and Hover (2020) support the findings that pupils’ primary place is their home. Therefore, teachers have opportunities to learn how to better foster pupils’ strengths, support them with their challenges and teach in an effective way. Likewise, Ilhan et al. (2019) reported that home visits and family

engagement have positive impact on pupils' academic achievements, which can assist teachers in improving the pupils' academic performance.

Furthermore, it was reported that visiting pupils with autism at their homes helps teachers to build trust and comfort and identify pupils who have not been sent to school. A parent participant reported,

By visiting pupils with autism at their homes, teachers might be able to find other pupils who have not been sent to school with same problem of autism and then teachers will be able to advise parents the type of nutrition to be given to the pupils (Interview with P07-sB, 15th March, 2024).

The findings reveal that home visit helps teachers to identify children with autistic nature, who have been denied the right to education by their parents and surrounding community. This is necessary in increasing the number of enrollments for autistic pupils in primary schools.

Participants T03-sA and T06-sB emphasized that teachers visiting pupils with autism at their homes can significantly contribute to building trust and comfort between the teacher and the pupils. Furthermore, teachers interact with the pupils in an environment where they feel safe and secure, which can help to reduce anxiety and promote a more positive learning experience.

The findings indicate that home visit help teachers, pupils and parents to build trust and comfort which is necessary in enhancing the effective teaching and learning process for autistic pupils. In addition, building trust between teachers and parents may increase parents' participation on their autistic pupils' education matters.

Participants in the FGD were of the same opinions as they conquered with the other participants that "teachers benefits because they will be able to know pupils' progress when at home and this makes a plan for improving the pupils' academic progress" (FGD-sA&sB, 15th March, 2024).

The findings show that home visit helps teachers to know the autistic pupils' academic progress at home. This may also enhance the establishment of important initiatives for supporting the autistic pupils' learning at homes. For example, educating parents on the role of assisting autistic pupils in

academic matters may have positive impacts on the autistic pupils learning process. Similarly, participant HoU01-sA was of the view that,

If a child has difficulty transitioning between activities, teachers can work with the family to develop strategies to help the child manage these transitions more effectively. Furthermore, observing interactions between family members can provide clues about the child's social skills, communication abilities and emotional regulation (Interviewed on 13th March, 2024).

The findings provide that through home visit, teachers have opportunities to know the autistic pupils' faced difficulties and are able to establish appropriate strategies in enhancing effective teaching and learning activities. Ogochukwu (2024) matched the findings that, special education teachers plan home visits to pupils with Autism in order to reach the intended learning outcomes of areas which are to be learned by the pupils. At the same time, the autistic pupils are assisted or nurtured by their teachers according to their needs related to autism.

This is substantiated by the contingency theory of leadership by Fiedler (1993), which emphasized the importance of considering situational factors when determining the most effective leadership style. Understanding and applying the principles of contingency theory, special education teachers can apply various teaching strategies, including visiting homes of their students to better meet the needs of their pupils. This verifies that through home visits, special education teachers are in a good position of helping pupils with Autism and have opportunity of adapting appropriate approaches that ensure effective teaching. Therefore, a service-learning curriculum becomes useful to enhance competency to special education teachers because it links teacher, education theory and practice and cultural and social matters considerations (Munisi, 2017).

Therefore, home visits are vital for special education teachers to help pupils with autism. With regard to the results from the findings, when teachers visit pupils at their homes, they are able to build trust and comfort, observe the pupil's natural environment and promote their teaching strategies and individualized plans. Home visits, in addition, enhance communication and relationships, which are very important for effective teaching and academic progress of the pupils with autism in primary schools.

Collaborative Leadership for Special Education

Collaborative leadership is a style of management that encourages teamwork, shared decision-making, and collective problem-solving. This approach involves leaders who facilitate collaboration among diverse groups, encouraging inputs from all stakeholders, such as parents to achieve common goals. While autistic pupils often face challenges in social interactions and communication, the collaborative leadership approach fosters an inclusive environment, where these pupils are valued and understood. This is possible through group activities and discussion by stakeholders, including parents, teachers and school administrators.

Responses indicate that collaborative leadership is practiced in enhancing teachers' competency in handling autistic pupils in primary schools. The FGD supportively explained that the practiced of collaborative leadership is done through shared vision and goals and participatory practices that involve distributing responsibilities among different stakeholders based on their expertise and interests." A group participant added, "Engaging families as partners enhances effective communication between homes and schools" (FGD sA&sB, 15th March 2024). A participant, through interview had similar views that:

Our leadership encourages collaborative teams for addressing and fulfilling various duties in promoting conducive learning environment for children with autism. For example, we have a school boards comprised of representatives from teachers, school administrative, parents and community members. These boards work together to ensure that schools reach common goals in helping autistic pupils' learning activities (Interview with AT01-sA, 13th March, 2024).

The Role of Collaborative Leadership

Participants from the FGDs concurred with their fellow participant by reporting that "collaborative leadership enhances personalized learning, flexible learning environment, inclusive culture, improved communication and ensures that teachers develop in their profession. An emphasis was made that "these plans are developed through collaborative efforts that involve teachers, parents, and specialists to address unique learning styles and challenges of the children" (FGD on 15th March, 2024).

The study established that, leadership uses the strategy of collaboration to support teachers of children with Autism. During the interview, it was reported that:

Collaborative leadership encourages professionals from different field work together to support the pupils with autism. In addition, the participants emphasized that collaborative leadership ensures that the pupils receive comprehensive support that addresses not only academic needs but also social, emotional and behavioral aspects (Interview on 15th March, 2024).

The findings show that, collaborative leadership promote teachers' knowledge and skills and is a factor that enhancing comprehensive support to autistic pupils in primary schools. Collaborative leadership style inspires employees to work hard even beyond expectations in order to reach mission and vision expected or planned by the employer (Ogochukwu, 2024). Bagley and Tang (2018) stated that transformational leaders demonstrate consistency in leadership by advocating, facilitating, innovating and administrating community needs for the purpose of meeting objectives of their institutions.

The findings reveal that collaborative leadership enhances flexible learning environments for autistic pupils. According to contingency theory by Fiedler (1993), effective leaders must assess their specific context before deciding on a leadership approach. Collaborative leadership aligns with this principle as it allows for flexibility in addressing individual teacher needs, including professional development opportunities while fostering a supportive community. Applying the principles of contingency theory with transformational leadership can enable special education teachers to become more competent, creating flexible environments in handling autistic pupils.

In addition, participants from the FGD explained that, "collaborative leadership brings together individuals from different professionals and create a comprehensive support system that addresses all aspects of the pupil's development." Moreover, participants' from the FGD pointed out that "collaborative leadership promotes professional development for educators and staff to enhance

their knowledge and skills in supporting pupils with autism” (FGD-sA & sB 15th March, 2024).

These findings are in line with Ezekiel and Ephraim (2023), who reported that effective collaboration between teachers, parents, government and other educational stakeholders help to support education for pupils with Autism. In a similar line, Heenan et al. (2023) reported that transformational leadership has positive impact for school staff; increased motivation and fostering of more positive culture were found to be the leading impact of transformational leadership. Initiatives geared towards supporting effective implementation of education for autistic pupils must interrogate leadership ability of school leaders and develop them as critical ingredients in turning around schools into effective learning environments for autistic pupils (Opiyo, 2019).

Collaboration within and Outside Schools

This study sought to establish the collaboration within and outside the schools through Focus Group Discussions. In the study, government organizations, private institutions and private sectors were mentioned as collaborators with special education teachers. For instance, it was reported that “the government allocates funding and resources to support special education programs for autism pupils.” Another person reported, “This includes funding for specialized training for teachers, educational materials, assistive technology, and food. By providing adequate resources, the government enables special education teachers to effectively meet the diverse needs of pupils with autism” (15th March, 2024).

Furthermore, private institutions offer specialized training programs and workshops for special education teachers, focusing on pupils with Autism. A participant reported that “training programs provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support pupils with autism in the classroom; for example, SIBUSISO has frequently provided us with training support” (FGD on 15th March, 2024).

Another participant reported,

Private institutions, such as SIBUSISO and Lions club offers specialized service, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioral therapy and counseling that can complement the support provided by special education teachers. These services

help to address specific challenges faced by pupils with autism and enhance their overall learning experience. (FGD on 15th March, 2024).

The study further revealed that private investors and individuals act as collaborators with special education teachers in issues related to pupils with autism. A participant supported the view when explained, “Private investors and individuals provide funding for specialized programs tailored to meet the unique needs of pupils with autism. These programs include individualized education plans, sensory integration activities, social skills training and other interventions that have been proven effective” (Interview on 15th March, 2024).

Another participant explained that private investors and individuals support teachers through “funding professional development opportunities focused on autism education; this includes workshops on how to assess pupils, seminars on how to prepare individualized education plans and training sessions on physical exercise for pupils with Autism” (Interview on 15th March, 2024). Daniel and Govender (2022) support the findings, showing the need for more parental education and training, which will aid in enhancing the development of skills in children.

Supports Provided to Children with Autism

This section sought to report the support provided to pupils with autism. The findings show that school leaders provide support to children with autism by helping teachers in ensuring availability of instructional facilities, first aid services and school infrastructure and by ensuring that the environment is supportive. For instance, the Focus Group Discussion revealed, “Our school leaders encourage teachers to minimize clutter, reduce noise levels and provide access to calming spaces within the classroom.” This includes designated quiet areas, weighted blankets, or sensory toys” (FGD, sA & sB, 15th 2024). Another participant had this to say, “School leaders work with teachers to adjust lighting conditions, such as dimming lights or using soft, natural light.” The participant also added, “Using calming colors like blue or green helps create a more soothing atmosphere” (Interview on 13th March, 2024). Another participant reported, “School leaders, providing tactile and visual supports, help pupils with autism better understand and navigate their environment. School leaders further encourage teachers to incorporate visual schedules,

tactile cues and other sensory supports into the classroom design” (Interview, HoU01-sA).

The study further revealed that school leaders ensure the availability of food and water for pupils with autism. Through focus group discussions, a participant revealed “school leaders collaborate with parents and caregivers to develop meal plans that accommodate unique needs and preferences of pupils with autism. This includes dietary restrictions, food allergies or sensory sensitivities.” A participant reported, “School leaders encourage consistency between home and school routines related to mealtime behaviors. These help pupils with autism feel more secure and confident in their abilities to navigate mealtime activities in both environments” (FGD, 15th March, 2024). According to Mcraw et al. (2021), school leaders should give training and support to teachers on guiding skills and instructional based practices in supporting effective learning for pupils in primary schools.

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A participant reported, “School leaders encourage consistency between home and school routines related to mealtime behaviors. These help pupils with autism feel more secure and confident in their abilities to navigate mealtime activities in both environments” (FGD, 15th March, 2024). Bagley and Tang (2018) state that transformational leaders demonstrate consistency in leadership by advocating, facilitating, innovating and administrating community needs for the purpose of meeting objectives of their institutions. In a similar line, Lafferty and McNamara (2023) reported that transformational leadership increases motivation and fosters positive culture by providing necessary needs for autistic pupils.

Overall, collaborative leadership supports autistic pupils through ensuring the availability of teaching and learning resources for autistic pupils, provision of training for teachers and ensuring that autistic pupils get all necessary basic needs. By ensuring this support, collaborative leadership enhances favorable environment for autistic pupils in primary schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that autism is a complex developmental condition in which individuals demonstrate challenges in various ways, such as social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. Home visiting and collaborative leadership are key strategies that can be adopted by school leadership in enhancing special education teachers’ competency for autistic pupils in primary schools. Under collaborative leadership, government, parents and private investors are essential parts in fostering favorable teaching and learning environments for autistic pupils.

Recommendations

The study recommended that school leaders should enhance collaborative leadership in supporting teachers and creating favorable environment for autistic pupils. Teachers should have frequent home visiting in order to know autistic pupils’ background and promote effective communication with parents. This is necessary in creating conducive learning environment for the autistic pupils. Policy makers should restructure appropriate policies that support collaborative leadership and home visiting to foster teachers’ competency and create favorable teaching and learning environment for autistic pupils.

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