

Head Teacher-Parent Collaboration Policies' Usefulness for The Improvement of Inclusive Education in Public Primary Schools in Meru County, Kenya

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Abstract

Through head teacher-parent collaboration, Inclusive education can be improved. The purpose of the study was to analyse the usefulness of head teacher-parent collaboration policies for the improvement of inclusive education in regular public primary schools in Meru County. The objective of the study was to examine the usefulness of policies that govern head teacher-parent collaboration 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 collaboration 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; 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. The findings indicated that head teacher-parent collaboration policy context enhanced the improvement of inclusive education. Most of the schools used informal policies. It was concluded that, head teacher-parent collaboration policy context is crucial to the improvement of inclusive education. It was recommended that the Ministry of Education should formulate appropriate inclusive education policies.

Key words: Policies, head teacher-parent collaboration, inclusive education

1. Introduction

Internationally, there are a number of policies on ensuring children with special needs more effectively access and benefit from inclusive schooling. Recently, UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with seventeen (17) goals and in particular goal number four (4) strongly renews focus on inclusive education. The goal number four is on quality education, which aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning for all (UNDP, 2015). Many countries are trying

to comply with the international and domestic inclusive education policies. However, despite the efforts to implement the IE, its improvement has been slow.

Sweden, which is often regarded as having one of the most inclusive school systems in the world, has put in place school policies to avoid segregation by educating all pupils in the same classroom (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2013). Further, for several decades, Swedish politicians have expressed the principle of ‘A school for all’ (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2011). However, according to Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson (2011), the inclusiveness in Sweden, is not yet perfect since the system allows schools to place learners in segregated settings.

Countries like; England, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, USA and Canada, have reformed schools, according to inclusive education policies, in ways that extend their capacity to respond to diversity (Hunter, 2004, Kalabula, 2007, UNDP, 2015). Inclusive education (IE) policies facilitate strengthening of head teacher-parent collaboration in improving IE status in regular schools (Szwed, 2007).

In Africa, Kenya included, there are significant concerns about usefulness of IE policies (Levin & Lockheed, 1993). These realities exist in spite of the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), Salamanca Statement, Dakar Conference and more recently, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. Statement of the Problem

Head teacher-parent collaboration policy context improves inclusive education. Inclusive education improvement through effective head teacher parent collaboration policy context was evident in many other countries such as; Great Britain, Netherlands, Indonesia Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and United States.

In Meru County, Kenya, there appeared to have been ineffective school-home collaboration which was linked to poor status of inclusive education. There seemed to be ineffective head teacher-parent collaboration policy context that resulted in poor status of inclusive education (stakeholders’ level of acceptance to work together to provide quality education for all learners in ordinary schools) in public primary schools in Meru County (Meru County Director of Education Office, 2016).

Head teacher-parent collaboration policies’ usefulness 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 collaboration policies 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 collaboration policies’ usefulness 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 may 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.

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 purposively 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 on usefulness of policies that govern head teachers in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs for the improvement of inclusive education

The head teacher respondents were interviewed using the question, "Are the school policies which govern you in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs to improve inclusive education useful? Please explain their usefulness." Further, the parents gave descriptions on the item "Are the school policies which govern you in collaborating with head teachers to improve inclusive education useful? Please explain their usefulness." The teachers gave narratives on the question, "Are the school policies which govern head teachers in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs for the improvement of inclusive

education useful? Please explain their usefulness.” The participants’ responses were presented in the following descriptions;

5.1 Head teachers’ data narratives on usefulness of policies that govern the collaboration

When the participant head teacher A was requested to comment on the usefulness of the school policies which governed him in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs to improve inclusive education, he said that they were useful, but to a small extent. He further explained that there was need for legal people, who are conversant with law, to take school stakeholders through legal documents, pointing out and interpreting sections that provide for collaboration and inclusive education. He emphasized that, in his opinion, open-door policies were more useful than the formal policies.

Respondent head teacher B said that her school policies were relevant and useful, pointing out that they guided them on what they did with the learners and their parents. She gave an example of Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) policies that allow for separate registration of learners with special needs for Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). Head teacher C asserted that her school policies that governed her in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs to improve inclusive education were very useful because they were promoting education access for all children.

The participant head teacher D felt that all policies should be useful although she said that she had not taken time to have any copy of the documents in use in her school. Head teacher E said that, his school informal policies (academic performance improvement, wholesome growth of the child, nutrition policy and acceptance of learners with special needs to fight stigma and discrimination) were useful because the acceptance of the learners with special needs and their health had improved and consequently enhanced provision of inclusive education. He shared, “Also the children without special needs have accepted to settle in the same class with the ones with special needs ready to assist them in anything they require in their studies according to their capabilities.” This head teacher supported the usefulness of the policies with illustrations. This implies that, he understood the worth of the policies. Participant head teacher F asserted that her school policies that governed her in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs to improve inclusive education were very useful because they promoted good relationship among school stakeholders to educate all learners.

Head teacher G explained that his institutional policies were useful because they assisted in bringing school stakeholders together in improving inclusive education. He added that the policies had not yet been fully implemented. This participant seemed to contradict himself when he thought that, there was partial implementation of the policies and yet their worth was experienced. This implies that, if the policies were fully implemented, they could have been more useful.

Head teacher H reported that, the policies on love were very useful because learners felt at home in school. The participant shared that, most of the learners did not absent themselves from school since they had the urge to be in school to share with all other learners. He said that, they took lunch together, and they loved school, which they viewed as an extension of their home. The head teacher felt that, to many of the learners, school was even better environment than their homes, where they missed many meals. He further shared that, learners with special needs were really loved by other “normal” learners. He remarked, “During the

holidays, the learners miss the care they get in school”. All the head teachers indicated that, the informal policies in their schools were useful. This implies that, they were conversant with their school guidelines. However, during the head teachers’ focus group discussions, it was indicated that though the informal policies were useful, they were ineffective in raising head teacher-parent collaboration, which consequently had resulted in insignificant enhancements in improving inclusive education.

5.2 Parents’ data narratives on usefulness of policies that govern the collaboration

Parent A jokingly said, “Even without policies, we educate our children”. However, parent B felt that, when his child’s school gets policies, he would be able to learn their usefulness. This implies, there may be no outcome for evaluation in the absence of the policy context. Parent C shared that, the school governing policies were useful, they guarded against some children being ignored despite their differences. She further felt that all children were able to access education in regular classes, giving an example of her child with physical handicap who was in standard six.

Parent D felt that, school routines were useful for they ensured that, there was good coordination among stakeholders. Parent E was of the opinion that his school policies which he described as “love and care” for learners with special needs were useful in that, they guided the parents and head teacher to do the right thing in their collaboration to improve inclusive education. Parent F indicated that, since she knew of no policies, she would not discuss usefulness of any of them. This parent concurred with parent B, in that; there is no worth of what does not exist. According to parent G, since the school had no policies, then there was no usefulness of the non-existence policies. This parent was in agreement with parent B and F.

Parent H felt that, since he had no information concerning policies in the school, the issue of usefulness of policies to him was immaterial. Respondent parent H could not evaluate the usefulness of the policies due to lack of information. This implies, there is need of having information to enable one in judging the worth of the policies. In contrast to the head teachers, the parents were not familiar with the school guidelines. However, during the parents’ focus group discussion, the participants indicated that, the school guidelines were ineffective in developing head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

5.3 Teachers’ data narratives on usefulness of policies that govern the collaboration

Teacher A felt that, he had nothing to share on usefulness of policies which governed head teachers in collaborating with parents of learners with special needs for the improvement of inclusive education, since he was not aware of the school policies. Teacher B indicated that, he could not talk about usefulness of non-existing policies concerning her school. Teacher C shared that, the policy, “all children should get education from a school near their home”, was useful because it gave direction to the head teacher and parents on the right thing to do. The participant explained that, any child had right to be included in regular schools irrespective of his or her differences according to the policy.

Teacher D felt that, the policies were very much useful, for example, placement issues were made clear by the policies. She explained that the policies also clarified the roles of stakeholders in the provision of inclusive education and thus the head teacher knew how to collaborate with parents of learners with special

needs in the implementation of individualized educational programmes (IEPs). Teacher E indicated that, the policies had enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. He explained that, the feeding programme relieved parents from the burden of preparing lunch for their children and that made parents feel closer to the school than before. He also felt that, the programme promoted learners retention in school too. The participant felt that, the guidance and counselling policy provided the necessary impetus to improve on the collaboration.

Teacher F felt that, she could not share about usefulness of the policies that governed her head teacher in collaborating with parents for the improvement of inclusive education since she had not heard of any policies for the school. Teacher G shared that, he was not aware of any policy or its usefulness in the school. Teacher H felt that, the policy, “what we agree,” was not very useful due to negative attitude of the head teacher and parents of learners with special needs. He felt that, the policies “on what we agree” could be very useful if the negative attitude issue was addressed. This implies that, negative attitudes of the school stakeholders could be a barrier towards the implementation of policies. The teachers agreed with the head teachers that, the school policies were useful. Their focus group discussion however indicated that, despite the informal policies being useful, head teacher-parent collaboration had made negligible developments in improving inclusive education due to ineffectiveness of the policies for the collaboration. Nevertheless, one teacher seemed ignorant like the parents, who could not identify the usefulness of the policies. This implies that, there was need of bringing the parents and some teachers on board on school guidelines. They needed to be sensitized on school policies.

The findings revealed that most of the policies were useful. They enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. Some participants could not discuss about the usefulness of the policies since they knew nothing about the policies. Most of the participants, especially the parents and the teachers, were ignorant and unaware of policy issues. The findings indicated that, some participants were not able to share on the usefulness of policies which guided head teacher-parent collaboration in raising IE status, since the policies did not exist in the schools, in the context of the participants’ experiences, understanding and interpretations. This implies that, policies were not accorded seriousness in the schools. The results differed with study findings of Hunter (2004), Kalabula (2007) and UNDP (2015), who reported that, the seriousness accorded to the international policies by individual countries like England, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, USA and Canada, have modified schools, according to policies, in ways that extend their capacity to respond to diversity.

6. Conclusion

Most of the policies were informal, but, useful. They enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. However, most of the participants especially the parents and the teachers were ignorant and unaware of the usefulness of policies which guided head teacher-parent collaboration in raising IE status. Policy issues were not taken seriously in the schools. This contributed to minor enhancement on head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

7. Recommendations

The government should formulate clear inclusive education policies, with implementation support systems, and induct all the school stakeholders on their implementation. It should create awareness about inclusive education to all stakeholders and also increase support in promoting the inclusion. It should be more serious in offering and treating inclusive education as a normal practice. Further researcher should be carried out to establish the usefulness of the policies in public secondary schools.

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