Leadership and Its Structure in Enhancing Head Teacher-Parent Collaboration 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 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 examined leadership and its structure in enhancing head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education in regular public primary schools in Meru County, Kenya. The objective of the study was to examine leadership and its structure in enhancing head teacher-parent collaboration 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 employed 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 used interview schedules and focus group discussion guides. 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 leadership influenced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. Leadership and its structure enhanced school harmony, a situation that improved head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. It was recommended that, the government should appoint head teachers who are positive about inclusive education and with the ability to work together with all parents for the improvement of schooling for all learners in regular classes.

Key words: leadership and its structure, head teacher-parent collaboration, inclusive education, Meru County.

1. Introduction

Hoopey and McLeskey (2013) argue that the role of school leaders such as head teachers in collaboration with parents, in providing leadership for inclusive processes is crucial. For example, they determine

stakeholders' attitudes towards inclusion. Head teacher-parent leadership is a form of distributed and moral leadership, which is essential for the improvement of inclusive education. School-home leadership is second only to classroom co-teaching as having the most influence on students' learning and improvement of inclusive education (Leo & Barton 2006; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008).

Leaders improve inclusive education indirectly by motivating stakeholders, improving working conditions and distributing leadership for effective collaboration. Further, school leaders contribute to achievement of both academic and social goals by their strategic responsibilities in modifying school environment. Therefore, school leaders impact on improvement of inclusive education (Hoopey & McLeskey 2013). However, there are limited studies that have explicitly explored on head teachers and parents' leadership in their collaboration to improve Inclusive Education (IE). Therefore this study explored the head teacher-parent collaboration leadership context for the improvement of inclusive education. One can argue that there was an even greater need for such research in Meru County, Kenya, where legislations and policies emphasized on quality inclusive education for all learners.

2. 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 has been low improvement of inclusive education in Meru County. It was not clear whether leadership and its structure enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. It was for this reason that the researcher decided to examine leadership and its structure in enhancing head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education particularly with relation to Meru County.

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 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 adopted qualitative research design because it enables in-depth interactions, where participants share their rich experiences and in-depth understanding. Interview schedules and focus group discussion guides 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 to pick the subjects from the target population. Creswell (2009) suggests that, for 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). 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. Individual interviews were audio recorded, while focus group discussions were written. 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.

5. Findings

5.1 Leadership and its structure in enhancing head teacher-parent collaboration
Participants were requested to describe how leadership and its structure had enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration in their respective schools.

5.1.1 Head teachers' responses
When head teacher A was requested to describe how leadership and structure had enhanced harmony in his school, he explained that he used democratic leadership to run the school. He pointed out that this kind of leadership gave all stakeholders a chance to participate in the leadership and management of the school. He said that democracy ensured that, there was harmony in the school. He further explained that the school management structure was clear, starting with head teacher, board of management, deputy head teacher, senior teacher, down to learners' leaders, where each player's duties and responsibilities were clearly spelt out. However, he disclosed that changes on board of management as per the Kenya Basic Education Act of 2013 was giving the school problems where qualifying parents of Board of Management were rare to get. The participant also felt that performance contracting issue was also not well understood though with structural empowerment, it was being embraced, and he said that he believed it would succeed harmoniously.

Participant head teacher B pointed out that, her school democratic leadership had improved discipline and learners' performance. She emphasized that discipline was very good in the school, and that, as a result, there was a lot of harmony in the institution. She further shared that, teacher-pupil relationship was very nice. Head teacher C described her school leadership as being strong, sharing that all relevant leaders, Board of Management members, deputy head teacher, senior teacher, all teachers and prefects were involved in school management. She pointed out that, in the board of management (BOM), one of the members, was a person with disability. She further shared that, together they formed a strong school democratic leadership. This implies that, the composition of the BOM was inclusive and this may have contributed to the strong democratic leadership.

The participant head teacher D indicated that leadership in her school worked very well. According to head teacher E, his school leadership and structure had enhanced harmony in the school, and that cooperation among different school leaders had ensured full participation of the leaders. Head teacher F pointed out that leadership and structure had brought harmony in the school and that all the school leaders knew their roles and executed their mandate diligently.

Head teacher G had observed that his school leadership and structure were good and facilitated in improving collaboration and bringing harmony in the institution. He felt that he had succeeded in being a good leader by being a good role model to all school stakeholders. Head teacher H reported that, his school leadership and structure were doing very well. He said that, the school had no wrangles. He felt that the school stakeholders understood him, especially because he led by example. The participant explained that, he was never late for classes and that parents knew that. He shared the way he identified the learners' needs and tried to address them in collaboration with their parents.

Participant head teacher H emphasized that all the school leaders; board of management (BOM) members, deputy head teacher, senior teacher, teachers and prefects were together in the structure. He pointed out that, he rarely sent children home to call parents when he needed them to pay delayed levies. Most of the parents paid the school levies in good time. Their timely payments sustained remuneration of BOM teachers. He stated, "we work harmoniously with all stakeholders. Those who go astray, I call them and I guide and counsel them". He shared that, his secret in good leadership was that he worked hard and ensured that, the school environment was conducive for learning.

The head teachers were in agreement to each other that, their schools' democratic leadership had improved school discipline and learners' performance. Their leadership and structure had enhanced harmony in the school, and that cooperation among different school leaders had ensured full participation of the leaders. This implies that, leadership and its structure were good. They facilitated in improving collaboration and bringing harmony in the institution. In spite of this, the head teachers' focus group discussion indicated that, head teacher-parent collaboration had made trivial enhancements in improving inclusive education due to inadequate participation by all school stakeholders in the collaboration.

5.1.2 Parents' responses

Parent A felt that the school leadership and structure had made impact in ensuring that head teacher-parent collaboration was good. She shared that the head teacher listened to parents and made decisions together. The participant shared that, one of the decisions they made together was to enroll her child with mental challenge, in standard eight, as a private KCPE candidate so that the school mean score for the school would not be lowered. Private candidates do not belong to any school. The child had the right to sit for the examination in the school. This implies that, the child was denied the right of belonging to the school. The school made misinformed decisions. Critically, the collaboration which was described by the participant as being good was discriminatory and therefore, bad. Discriminations should not be used as measures for embracing mean score syndrome. All learners should be treated equally.

Parent B felt that, good school leadership and structure had influenced head teacher-parent collaboration since it allowed inclusion of learners with special needs, a move that motivated parents to be more involved in working together with the head teacher. Parent C shared that, her school leadership and structure was good, explaining that their board of management members represented parents very well. Parent D reported that, school leadership and structure had supported inclusive education, it allowed, the leaners with special needs, who had been segregated in special institutions, to move to the regular classes. She felt that the move motivated parents of the learners with special needs to work with the head teacher as a team in promoting inclusive education.

Parent E felt that she did not understand the school leadership and structure because she was not part of it. Parent F shared that, the school leadership and structure had made impact in ensuring that head teacher-parent collaboration was good. She shared that the head teacher was a good listener and made decisions together with parents.

According to parent G, parents of learners with special needs in the school were like sheep without a shepherd. She further expressed that, parents of learners with special needs, seemed as if they dumped their children in a dust bin in the morning and picked them in the evening." She further said that, sometimes her children did not always have the opportunity to be in school due to the head teacher's cunningness and insincerity, which she illustrated with an episode that had occurred. The participant shared the incident:

> One time the head teacher of my child with a disability told me not to release the child to school on a certain date because their classroom was to be closed to allow renovation to be done, only to learn later that his classmates were going for an educational trip. For sure, the head teacher was preventing my child from joining the rest for the trip which actually took place. Later, my trip contribution money which I had paid for my son was refunded. How do I cooperate when I am cheated like a child? What kind of leadership is this?

Parent H reported that, the school leadership and structure was okay, and that, parents were involved in the training of their children to learn how to read and write. Majority of the parents concurred with the head

teachers that, the school leadership and structure were good. Most (6 out of 8), of the parents, agreed that, school leadership and structure had made impact in ensuring that head teacher-parent collaboration was good. It allowed inclusion of learners with special needs, a move that motivated parents to be more involved in working together with the head teacher. Consequently, the school leadership and structure had supported inclusive education. It allowed, the leaners with special needs, who had been segregated in special institutions to move to the regular classes. However, a few parents, (2 out of 8) felt that the school leadership was not effective. Trying to prove the ineffectiveness of the school leadership, one parent said that, parents of learners with special needs in the school were like sheep without a shepherd. This implies that, some schools' leadership was not democratic. Further, both the head teachers and parents' focus group discussions confirmed that, although most of the schools had good leadership and structures, the head teacher-parent collaboration had insignificantly improved the inclusive education due to inadequate participation by all school stakeholders in the collaboration.

5.1.3 Teachers' responses

Teacher A shared on how leadership and structure had enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration in his school. The participant felt that, leadership and structure had helped in promoting head teacher-parent collaboration. He explained that the head teacher involved most of the stakeholders and that there was some concern over inclusive education among the stakeholders. Teacher B felt that the School leadership and structure was good. However, teacher C shared that, as a teacher, he knew little about leadership and structure, which was not sensitive to collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. He said that, the leadership and its structure were not sincerely in support of inclusive education. He stated:

> There are two learners whom we cannot control because they are too destructive and they are a threat. We as teachers hope that soon they will be sent out of the school by the leadership. These violent children are a threat to everyone. One of them knocked me down and broke my left hand thumb which you can see I am nursing.

Teacher D shared that, leadership and structure had enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration. She shared that, during board of management meetings, there was a representative pupil and teacher. Teacher E felt that, school leadership and structure had promoted head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. Inclusive education issues were addressed by the leadership of the school in collaboration with the parents and that had made school performance improve. According to teacher F, her school leadership and structure were generally good. She felt that the Parents were well involved in school issues. There was leadership sharing through delegation. However, the school performance was very low and the learners with special needs were blamed over the low performance. This implies that, the leadership should pay attention on collaboration to assist all learners to improve in their school work.

Teacher G shared that, school leadership and structure (Board of management, head teacher, deputy head teacher, senior teacher, teachers, and prefects) was not very effective and it had not adequately brought

parents on board. He remarked, "Most of the leaders were not involved in the school management." Teacher H indicated that, leadership and structure had enhanced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. He, however, felt that, the enhancement was not much, because the leaders were not well informed on inclusive education issues.

The findings revealed that leadership and its structure enhanced school harmony, a situation that improved head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. This finding is similar to the results of Leo and Barton (2006), and Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008), who argued that head teacher-parent leadership is a form of distributed and moral leadership, which is essential for the improvement of inclusive education. School-home leadership, is second only to classroom co-teaching as having the most influence on students' learning and improvement of inclusive education.

The exploration on the head teacher-parent collaboration leadership for the improvement of inclusive education revealed that school leaders influenced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. Most of the participants felt that the school leadership and its structure influenced the head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. This finding is in agreement with Hoopey and McLeskey (2013), who stated that school leadership impacted on the improvement of inclusive education. The findings were also consistent with Peters (2004), who found that context, such as policy and leadership, determines effectiveness of processes. This implies that the role of school leaders such as head teachers in collaboration with parents, in providing leadership for inclusive processes is crucial. All the three focus group discussions confirmed that, school leadership and its structure facilitated development of head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. However, according to the discussions, due to inadequate stakeholders' participation in the collaboration, there was minor improvement in the inclusive education.

6. Conclusion

Leadership and its structure enhanced school harmony, a situation that improved head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. The head teacher-parent leadership was a form of distributed and moral leadership, which was essential for the improvement of inclusive education. Head teacher-parent leadership, an aspect of collaboration, influenced pupils learning and improvement of inclusive education.

The exploration on the head teacher-parent collaboration leadership context for the improvement of inclusive education revealed that, school leaders influenced head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. The school leadership and its structure influenced the head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education. School leadership impacted on the improvement of inclusive education. The role of school leaders such as head teachers in collaboration with parents, in providing leadership for inclusive processes is crucial.

7. Recommendations

The government should appoint head teachers who are positive about inclusive education and who have the ability to work together with all parents for the improvement of schooling for all learners in regular classes. It should discipline the head teachers who deliberately refuse to support the head teacher-parent collaboration for the improvement of inclusive education.

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