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HEAD TEACHERS' SUPPORT FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES: EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KILOLO DISTRICT, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the support provided by head teachers in implementing inclusive education policies in public primary schools in Kilolo District, Tanzania. The study was guided by the Social Model of Disability and employed a qualitative approach within a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Data for this objective were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 purposively selected head teachers and analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that head teachers facilitate the implementation of inclusive education through instructional supervision, management of teaching and learning resources, teacher professional development and mentoring, promotion of inclusive school environments, collaboration with parents and communities, teacher motivation, and continuous monitoring of learners' progress. These leadership practices strengthen teachers' capacity to address learner diversity and promote equitable participation of learners with special educational needs. However, inadequate teaching and learning resources, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient institutional support constrain the effective implementation of inclusive education policies.

The study concludes that effective implementation of inclusive education depends on strong instructional leadership supported by adequate resources and institutional commitment. It recommends strengthening head teachers' capacity through continuous professional development and increasing investment in inclusive education resources to improve policy implementation in public primary schools.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive education, head teachers, instructional leadership, policy implementation, public primary schools, Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a globally recognized approach that promotes equitable access, participation, and quality learning opportunities for all learners regardless of disability or other forms of diversity. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize the need for education systems to eliminate barriers and provide supportive learning environments for all learners (UNESCO, 2020; Winzer & Mazurek, 2020). Despite these commitments, many countries continue to experience challenges in translating inclusive education policies into effective classroom practice.

Previous studies have identified inadequate infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, limited teaching and learning materials, insufficient assistive devices, and inadequate financial resources as major barriers to implementing inclusive education, particularly in developing countries (Dalton et al., 2021; World Bank, 2020). Conversely, effective school leadership, continuous professional development, and institutional support have been found to strengthen policy implementation (Revelian & Tibategeza, 2022; UNICEF, 2026). However, existing studies have largely focused on individual factors or national policy frameworks, with limited attention given to the combined roles of Ward Education Officers, head teachers, and classroom teachers, especially in rural Tanzanian contexts.

Although Tanzania has established policies supporting inclusive education, implementation remains constrained by inadequate resources, limited teacher preparation, weak supervision, and insufficient specialized support. Furthermore, empirical evidence from Kilolo District is scarce, creating a knowledge gap regarding how district-level administration, school leadership, and classroom practices interact to influence policy implementation.

This study assessed the implementation of inclusive education policies in public primary schools in Kilolo District, Iringa Region. Specifically, it examined the support provided by head teachers, assessed the influence of Ward Education Officers, and explored the challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education policies. The findings provide context-specific evidence to inform policy implementation and strengthen inclusive education practices in Tanzania.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study was guided by the Social Model of Disability, whose foundation originated from the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS, 1976) and was later developed by Oliver (1983, 1990). The model argues that disability results primarily from social, environmental, and institutional barriers rather than individual impairments. In education, it emphasizes the responsibility of schools to provide accessible infrastructure, inclusive teaching practices, appropriate learning materials, assistive technologies, and supportive learning environments to ensure equal participation for all learners (Shakespeare, 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

Although the model has been criticized for giving limited attention to individual impairments and medical needs, it remains appropriate for this study because it focuses on institutional factors influencing the implementation of inclusive education policies. The theory guided the selection of study variables, formulation of research objectives, development of the conceptual framework, and interpretation of findings by emphasizing that effective implementation depends on strengthening institutional support systems. Compared with the Medical Model of Disability, the Social Model is more suitable because it explains how the support of head teachers, the role of Ward Education Officers, and teachers' experiences contribute to removing or reinforcing barriers to inclusive education in public primary schools.

Empirical literature review

Head Teachers' Support in Facilitating the Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies

Empirical evidence indicates that head teachers play a critical role in facilitating the implementation of inclusive education policies through instructional leadership, professional support, supervision, mentoring, resource management, and collaborative decision-making. Studies by Timperley (2021), Mitchell (2020), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023), and the World Bank (2023) consistently show that effective school leadership strengthens teachers' capacity to implement inclusive teaching practices by promoting continuous professional development, classroom supervision, and supportive school environments. Although these studies identify different leadership practices as being most influential, they agree that strong instructional leadership is essential for successful implementation of inclusive education.

However, most previous studies were conducted in developed education systems with relatively adequate resources and established support structures. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how head teachers support the implementation of inclusive education policies in rural public primary schools in Tanzania, where schools operate under resource and infrastructure constraints. In addition, existing Tanzanian studies have focused more on teacher preparedness and resource availability than on the specific contribution of head teachers to policy implementation. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the support provided by head teachers in implementing inclusive education policies in public primary schools in Kilolo District.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the support provided by head teachers in implementing inclusive education policies in public primary schools in Kilolo District, Iringa Region, Tanzania. The study involved 13 head teachers purposively selected from 13 public primary schools to provide detailed information based on their experiences and practices in supporting inclusive education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their roles, experiences, and challenges in supporting the implementation of inclusive education policies.

The interviews were analysed thematically by systematically coding the data, identifying recurring patterns, and developing themes related to head teachers' support for inclusive education. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through careful development and review of the interview guide, probing during interviews, and comparison of responses across participants. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and approval from the relevant authorities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Head Teachers' Support in Practicing Inclusive Education Policies in Public Primary Schools

The study examined the support provided by head teachers in implementing inclusive education policies in public primary schools in Kilolo District. Qualitative data from interviews with 13 head teachers were analysed thematically. The findings identified seven main areas of support: instructional supervision, resource management, professional development, creation of inclusive school environments, collaboration with parents and communities, teacher motivation, and monitoring of learners' progress.

Head teachers described instructional supervision as an important aspect of their support for inclusive education. They reported regularly observing classroom instruction, providing professional guidance, and encouraging teachers to adopt teaching strategies that accommodate learners with diverse educational needs. They also supported continuous professional learning by encouraging participation in training programmes and facilitating peer mentoring among teachers. These practices were perceived to strengthen teachers' confidence and competence in addressing diverse learner needs, despite limited opportunities for formal professional development.

Resource management was another important area of head teachers' support. Participants explained that they managed and allocated available teaching and learning materials to support inclusive practices. However, shortages of specialised instructional materials limited their ability to respond adequately to the needs of learners with special educational needs. Head teachers also reported promoting inclusive school environments by encouraging equal participation, reducing discrimination, and ensuring that learners with special educational needs were involved in school activities.

The interviews further highlighted collaboration with parents and local communities as an important strategy for supporting inclusive education. Head teachers described engaging parents and community members to improve awareness of inclusive education and strengthen support for learners. Teacher motivation was also identified as an important administrative responsibility. Participants reported using encouragement, teamwork, open communication, and recognition of teachers' efforts to sustain teachers' commitment to inclusive practices.

Monitoring learners' progress and attendance was another key form of support. Head teachers reported working with teachers to identify learners experiencing academic or participation difficulties and to coordinate appropriate interventions. These practices enabled schools to respond more closely to individual learner needs.

The findings demonstrate that head teachers play a central role in translating inclusive education policies into school-level practices through instructional leadership, professional support, resource management, stakeholder collaboration, teacher motivation, and learner monitoring. Nevertheless, their efforts were constrained by inadequate specialised teaching and learning resources and limited opportunities for continuous professional development. The findings therefore suggest that strengthening institutional support for head teachers and teachers is necessary to improve the implementation of inclusive education policies in public primary schools.

Discussion of the Results

The findings demonstrate that head teachers play a central role in implementing inclusive education policies through instructional supervision, teacher professional development, resource management, creation of inclusive school environments, collaboration with parents and communities, teacher motivation, and monitoring of learners' progress. These practices position head teachers as important school-level actors in translating policy expectations into everyday inclusive practices. However, their capacity to fulfil these responsibilities is constrained by inadequate teaching and learning resources, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient institutional support.

The findings are consistent with Ainscow (2020), who emphasises that effective school leadership contributes to inclusive school cultures through teacher support, resource coordination, and stakeholder collaboration. They also correspond with Timperley (2021), who highlights the importance of instructional supervision and continuous professional learning in strengthening teachers' practices, and Sharma (2021), who associates supportive leadership with greater teacher confidence and commitment to inclusive education. The present study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that, in rural public primary schools, head teachers undertake multiple and interconnected responsibilities beyond conventional administrative leadership. They provide school-based mentoring, mobilise scarce resources, engage parents and communities, motivate teachers, and monitor learners' progress, thereby attempting to address gaps in formal institutional support.

The findings also provide support for the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1983), which views exclusion as arising largely from social, institutional, and environmental barriers rather than solely from individual impairments. The practices reported by head teachers, particularly the promotion of inclusive school environments, teacher support, stakeholder engagement, and learner monitoring, demonstrate efforts to reduce such barriers within schools. However, the persistence of inadequate instructional resources and limited professional development indicates that school-level leadership alone cannot remove structural barriers to inclusion. The study therefore suggests that effective implementation of inclusive education requires head teachers to be supported by education authorities through adequate resource provision, continuous professional development, and stronger institutional mechanisms for inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that head teachers play a critical role in implementing inclusive education policies in public primary schools in Kilolo District, Tanzania. Through instructional supervision, teacher mentoring, resource management, promotion of inclusive school environments, stakeholder collaboration, teacher motivation, and monitoring of learners' progress, head teachers translate policy expectations into school-level practices and support teachers in responding to learner diversity. However, their efforts are constrained by inadequate instructional resources, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient institutional support. Effective implementation of inclusive education therefore requires not only committed school leadership but also sustained support from education authorities through adequate resources, continuous professional development, and stronger institutional mechanisms for inclusive education.

Recommendations

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and local government authorities should strengthen the capacity of head teachers through continuous professional development programmes focusing on instructional leadership and inclusive education management. Adequate financial resources, assistive devices, and teaching and learning materials should be provided to enable schools to implement inclusive education policies effectively. Furthermore, education authorities should strengthen collaboration among head teachers, Ward Education Officers, parents, and local communities to enhance coordinated support for learners with special educational needs and promote sustainable implementation of inclusive education policies in public primary schools.

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