

TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF TEACHING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN TANZANIAN REGULAR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The study employed a phenomenological design with semi-structured interview to explore teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges of teaching children with autism (CWA) in regular primary schools. A sample of 16 teachers from three regular primary schools in Dar es Salaam region were interviewed along various aspects related to their knowledge and perceived challenges of teaching CWA. The study revealed that most of the primary school teachers had low knowledge about children with autism. The findings also found that there were many factors some of them being lack of in-service training and lack of seminars which were among the challenges towards teaching CWA in regular classes. The study further found that unlike other factors, provision of regular in-service training and workshops could help many teachers gain appropriate knowledge and skills in teaching CWA in different regular classes. It is concluded that effective inclusive education is still facing a lot of challenges to make it a reality. Therefore, the study recommends that different educational stakeholders should work hand in hand with teachers so as to let every child with and without autism learn and enjoy the benefits of education in regular schools.

Keywords: Knowledge, perceived challenges, children, autism, regular primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Educating all learners in regular schools continues to face some challenges related to learners' developmental problems. Some developmental problems among children have been acting as challenges in teaching these children in inclusive settings. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) simply called Autism is one of such problems which have left some children out of regular classes. A number of teachers have failed sometimes to recognize and accommodate children with autism (CWA) in their regular classes. Reasons for such exclusion have been associated with attitudes, knowledge, perceptions and willingness of teachers and other stakeholders including parents towards teaching CWA together with other students who are normal in regular classes (Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Jan, & Lyons, 2012).

In most areas, the word autism is rarely understood by a number of individuals including educational stakeholders particularly teachers though they are the ones to handle CWA in school context particularly in regular classes. However, autism is a generic term that is used to describe a group of complex developmental brain disorders known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) or Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The PDDs include autistic disorder, Asperger Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder –Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. Given that autism is a neurological disorder, it affects the normal functioning of the brain and its symptoms typically appear during the first

three years of life (Busby et al., 2012; Soto-Chodiman, Pooley, Cohen, & Taylor, 2012; Carpenter, 2013).

Moreover, CWA are more likely to have language, communication, repetitive patterns of behaviour and social skills problems (Jones & Frederickson 2010; Hayers, 2013; Lindsay, Proulx, Scott & Thomson, 2014). Communication deficits exhibit in responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, CWA may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items. Conversely, the symptoms of people with ASD will fall on a continuum, with some individuals showing mild symptoms and others having much more severe symptoms (Carpenter, 2013). These symptoms suggest that there is a need to explore whether teachers in regular classes understand if children with the same characteristics exist and whether they perceive some challenges to teach them in inclusive classes or not.

Some data depict that one in every 150 children has an ASD, with males outnumbering females by four to one (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). In this circumstance, autism is not just a regional problem rather it is also an international problem because it affects individuals of all race, ethnic, and social categories, including families of varying income levels, lifestyle choices, and educational levels (Autism Society of America, 2008; Busby et al., 2012; Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013).

In many literatures there is a general consensus that, the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting is a successful approach for ensuring that those students develop skills in many different areas of academic achievement, social development, and general communication (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). So the same can be said to CWA, since most of them experience deficit in those areas, therefore teaching them in regular classes may help them acquire and master skills in those areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is indeed positive that educational professionals recognize that students with disabilities require higher rates of interactions than do children without disabilities (Cameron et al., 2011). In this regard, educational stakeholders, teachers in particular need to have a comprehensive knowledge of autism disability and be able to manage the manifested overt behaviours (Hart & Malian, 2013). This implies that handling CWA in regular classes needs teachers who have knowledge and skills of inclusive settings.

However, some other studies conducted outside Tanzania reveal that regular class teachers have low knowledge regarding inclusive education than those in special education. They further reveal that teachers' perspectives on their knowledge on inclusive education of young children suggest a feeling of frustration and stress in terms of providing appropriate support to children with disabilities because the teachers were not adequately prepared to teach in an inclusive programme (Sukbunpant et al., 2013). The study suggests that teachers' understanding in relation to appropriate services to be provided in an inclusive class is not yet promising since they have undergone less inclusive training both pre-service and in-service.

In consensus with some other findings, Busby et al., (2012) found that all participants reported minimal or no training or experience regarding teaching CWA. Also they revealed that teacher education candidates had few opportunities for experiences in teaching CWA. This show that most of teachers who happen to teach classes where CWA are included, they are less likely to handle them appropriately because of the minimum skills they posses towards teaching CWA in regular classes.

Conversely, in the study conducted by Soto-Chodiman et al., (2012) participants indicated that not all of their allocated education assistants were sufficiently trained to provide them with the required level of support. They further concluded that adequate training was considered by the sampled teachers as a key component in effectively facilitating inclusive schooling. Moreover, the teachers perceived the successful implementation of inclusive education to be largely dependent on the provisioning of professional development training for teachers prior to and during the period they have a student with ASD in their mainstream class. Likewise, Jinale-Snape et al., (2005) concluded that teachers should have adequate autism-specific training because enables them to conduct individual assessment of the child hence can design an individual education programme that take account of the individual profile and personality of the child. Their conclusions seem to suggest that knowledge and perceptions of teachers who may teach teacher regular classes of CWA are paramount aspects in creating a school with inclusive environment.

Even though there is much support provided to CWA in the inclusive class, there exist several obstacles of inclusion for these children (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). Similar aspects have been revealed in a number of studies. A study by Busby et al., (2012) reveals some challenges that some teachers perceive in teaching children with autism. In this study, teachers perceived the teaching of CWA as a highly individualized and specialized process. The other challenge was associated with the collaboration that teachers should make with parents of CWA which is also seen as time-consuming and difficult. Also teachers perceived that since behaviours of CWA are atypical, complex and potentially very destructive, they were also perceived as other challenges. In this regard, they perceived children with autism exhibiting abnormal or aberrant behavior that would not be seen in the average or “normal” classroom students therefore making the teaching so difficult especially when put together by others without such behaviours.

They also believed that autistic students would disrupt the routine of the classroom with special needs for misbehavior, time constraints, and extra assistance needed for work. Similarly, participants assumed that most general education teachers lack the basic knowledge and skills needed to fully include children with autism in their classrooms. All of these perceived challenges suggest that CWA are more likely to be excluded in regular classes as most teachers may feel difficult to handle both CWA and the without.

Addressing a different theme on some aspects that can be seen as challenges in teaching inclusive classes, Sukbunpant et al., (2013) revealed that some teachers reported a lack of confidence in teaching children with disabilities in the regular classroom. Teachers’ own abilities were perceived as barriers relating to inclusion in the sample. Also, some respondents revealed that the training that they received was too theoretical instead of being practical. Regardless of such perceptions, some interviewed teachers being helpers, taught children with disabilities in

regular classes with their normal peers but with some modified classroom activities to suit the children's own abilities. The suggestion is that, in spite of the difficulties that might be perceived by teachers when it comes to teaching children with disabilities particularly those with autism, teacher if knowledgeable enough can easily reorganize existing variations in the class and handle every student appropriately regardless of the differences.

Soto-Chodiman et al., (2012) found that not only teachers but also students in regular classes find some CWA with features such as the stereotypic utterances, physical mobility and problematic interactional behaviours upsetting. The outperforming perceived challenge was the issue of increased workload related stress which the study's participants stated that they experienced when attempting to modify their class curriculum and teaching techniques to meet the language, communication and behavioural needs of their students with ASD which were also perceived as challenges.

A number of factors such as good teachers' training, promotion of inclusion policy, support system, parental involvement, availability of inclusion resources like safe and calm learning environment, educational materials, school budgets, and teacher assistants, have been suggested in different studies as means to increase teachers' ability to teach CWA in inclusive classes (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012; Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013; Sukbunpant et al., 2013; Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson & Cambridge, 2014; McMaster, 2014). Though these studies seem to be in consensus, they somehow vary in some aspects in their attempts to address inclusive culture especially teaching CWA in regular classes.

Nevertheless, provision of school psychologists in inclusive schools is also proposed in some studies as a supportive way of stabilizing teachers' perceptions in teaching CWA in regular classes (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012). Using a slight different emphasis, Jindale-Snape et al., (2005) have the view that a strong and accommodative inclusive environment for all children is realized when there is the modification of the curriculum to emphasize communication and social skills in the work of the school. In addition, dialogue between parents and professionals to work out what's best for the child need to be practiced.

Tanzania like other countries which adhere the fundamentals of human rights especially the right to education to all people, it also acknowledges the benefits of teaching all children in regular classes regardless of their differences. However, little is still known as to what extent teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges are associated with teaching CWA in Tanzanian inclusive schools or regular classes. This is because, in most of the literature reviewed on this topic, the topic has been addressed in different perspectives and contexts while Tanzanian context left unaddressed. Therefore, this paper addressed this gap by exploring teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges in teaching CWA in regular primary schools in Tanzania.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to explore teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges of teaching CWA in Tanzanian regular primary schools.

In this regard, the purpose of this study was explored along three key questions; 1. Do teachers have enough knowledge in handling CWA in regular classes?, 2. What challenges do teachers perceive in teaching CWA in regular classes?, 3. What can teachers do to meet the perceived challenges?.

Methods

Study Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design which is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual to explore teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges in teaching CWA in regular classes. Since phenomenological design is also good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard, teachers teaching CWA in regular classes were therefore expected to tell whether they understand ASD in children together with the experience they perceive as challenges in teaching these children in regular classes as well as the measures they would propose if well addressed can rectify the challenges.

Study Participants

A purposive sample was used to select 16 interviewees who gave their responses in this study. A total of 14 female and 2 male regular primary school teachers from two districts (Ilala and Temeke) in Dar es Salaam region who willingly accepted to participate in this study were interviewed. The interview guide was initially written in English but since most of the primary school teachers in Tanzania are well conversant to Kiswahili than English language, then the researcher decided to hire an expert for translation from the Department of Kiswahili of the University of Dar es Salaam.

Prior to the face to face interview clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the coordinator of Postgraduate Studies in the School of Education of the University of Dar es Salaam. Prior to admission of interview guide, the researcher asked consent from respondents that are teachers teaching in some of regular schools in Dar es Salaam region. All respondents who took part in this study were assured that all information they were to provide would be only used within the scope of this study unless otherwise stated.

Data collection

The day to interview, the researcher reported to the head of the school with the clearance letter then a private room for conducting an interview was provided in each school where respondents were interviewed along questions which were already arranged thematically reflecting the categories. The interview questions were grouped into four categories. The first group of questions required respondents to provide their demographic information along their age, years of working experience and educational levels. The second category sought to explore the knowledge teachers' have regarding teaching CWA in regular classes. In this category a couple of questions were provided to them so that they at least tell if they know exactly what ASD is, the features which characterize it as well as the possibility of having such students in their regular classes.

Similarly, the third category of questions required participants to outline some of the factors that they may perceive if any as challenges in teaching CWA in their regular classes. In this category some questions were provided which required respondents to tell and mention some aspects in the learning context which are perceived as challenges in realizing inclusive education for CWA. Additionally, the fourth and in fact is the last category of the interview explored some measures which respondents liked to propose so as to come through the challenges provided in third category. The measures to be proposed were ensured that they match with the challenges posed. In all categories the key form of asking questions was providing probing questions.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed to reveal themes that were running through the categories, which illustrated qualitatively different ways teachers are knowledgeable about ASD and CWA in regular classes. Likewise, themes that are perceived as challenges which can differ from one teacher to another were analyzed by ensuring that all categories are formed along with the ones which were similar and for the different ones were analyzed separately. On top of that, themes emanating from the proposed measures to meet the perceived challenges were analyzed too along categories which were identified. In the results section, those categories of themes report some results on teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges on teaching CWA in regular classes.

Results

Demographic characteristics of respondents

A total of sixteen respondents were interviewed. There were 14 (87.5%) female while 2 (12.5%) male teachers who willingly accepted to be interviewed. The interviewees' age ranged between 27 to 55 years. A few of them had completed a bachelor degree 5(31.3%) while majority of them 11(68.72%) were diploma and certificate holders. Most of the teachers 12(75%) had a maximum of 10 and above years working experience whereas a few of them had 4(25%) years had less than 10 years working experience.

Teachers' knowledge on autism and children with autism in regular classes

When teachers were asked to tell whether they had children with ASD in their regular classes, at the first time many of them failed to understand the meaning of ASD. Conversely, the researcher introduced the meaning and general characteristics of ASD. The respondents were then allowed to tell whether they had children with such typical characteristics in their regular classes. Based on that information, respondents also managed to identify some specific characteristics which normally define CWA. Results reveals that more than half (62.5%) of teachers were less knowledgeable to associate directly the atypical characteristics of CWA and ASD specific characteristics. They reported that some children with ASD features are present in their regular classes but they did not know exactly if those characteristics meant that someone suffers from ASD. Speaking in this confusion, one teacher reported that:

“I know that some children with severe communication, behavioural and social problems like those we have in our classes, their problems in those aspects are caused by their families. Children showing those features, if you happen to trace their life history,

their pregnancies were attempted to be aborted but the abortion did to succeed. Some are orphans, sexually abused, delinquents, rejected by their guardians or parents while others come from single-parent families”.

Some of teachers reported that CWA are isolates, hard or difficult to communicate, selfish, hard to cope with the environment, lazy, less cooperative, coward, lower achievers, slow learners, antisocial, have few friends, less confident, and easy to forget. Interestingly, almost one third of respondents (75%) reported that CWA are academically poor. In the course of exploring these characteristics, one teacher reported that:

“When I started teaching this class I found one child with abnormal behaviours. This student is all the time alone, never involves actively in lessons like others, performs well like others, and responds appropriately as others do. All the time this student is just interested doing his own business especially drawing. This has been his routine. Frustrating enough, I normally waste a lot of time because of handling him. In this situation teaching becomes a very tough business”.

However, a few of them reported that some CWA are achieving well in other activities than in academic area. They went further reporting that CWA may be performing well in some activities in other contexts than school. They are even regarded to be of much help in their home activities as indicated by an experienced female teacher:

“I real like my student. Regardless the fact that he is not performing academically well but at least he has learned some other skills which he performs them perfectly”.

Furthermore, many teachers reported that they used different alternatives aversive and non-aversive to ensure that that even these students learn and benefits from regular classes. Most of the teachers responded that showing love, involvement, close relationship, even material support made these learners participate in their lessons. When it happens that a CWA has been shown all these but seems less concerned and interested, sometimes teachers admit of using corporal punishments like sticks.

Although these teachers had low knowledge about CWA yet they reported that there were some benefits of teaching CWD in regular classes. They reported that when CWA are taught together with others who are normal they are likely to feel equal, learn easily, secured and normal. One of the respondents said:

“In fact, if we teach CWA in regular classes they are more likely to acquire knowledge and different skills easily because they are more encouraged by the normal ones. They are also likely to feel more happy, secured, loved and equal”.

On the other hand, some respondents (31%) had a different opinion. They said that it is better to take CWA in special need schools in their early years, then after socializing, take them to regular schools. This statement is evident from the following quote from a regular primary school female teacher:

“I see that there is no any benefit at all if you educate a child with this type of impairment in a regular class. The pupil will end in failure because this student is hard to catch up anything from a regular teacher who has no knowledge of special education. It is better to take children of this nature in special education schools.

Teachers' perceived challenges of teaching children with autism in regular classes

Several challenges evolved in response to the question, “What challenges can you expect when teaching children with autism in regular classes?” Most of teachers (88 %) responded that poor pre-service training, lack of seminars, limited time, lack of relevant teaching and learning materials, lack of cooperation between parent of CWA and teachers, and general curriculum are perceived to be major challenges when it comes to teaching CWA in regular classes.

Surprisingly, regardless the fact that these teachers were in-service, majority of them (76%) complained that they were not trained to accommodate all learners. They further said that the training they got in teacher education colleges were not directly meant to help teachers accommodate all learners in the same class, however many pre-service trainings (certificate or diploma) are aimed mostly to cater the needs of the normal students. One teacher who was employed as a certificate holder thereafter went for diploma studies and graduated and was back to the working station had these to say:

“I don't see if there is a real training for teachers if the government wants to promote inclusive education. Just see, when I was pursuing my certificate training (Grade- A), I and my fellows were not trained to handle children with special needs including those with CWA like those who study other colleges with that component. Even when I upgraded to diploma it was the same training and so the same experience.....”

Worse enough, about (75%) of respondents had not received any seminar or in-service training on handling diverse learners including CWA in regular classes. One teacher responded in details that:

“...this is my 20th year since my employment in the teaching profession, no any seminar I have attended regarding teaching CWA in regular classes or even teaching any other pupils with different developmental problems. Sometimes, I just happen to be educated by some of my fellow teachers on different things they got in some of the seminars about invigilation of national examinations and entrepreneurship but not on learners with diverse needs or with autism”

Proposed measures from teachers to solve the provided teachers' perceived challenges

Participants were also asked to suggest some measures that would help to solve these challenges. Respondents provided several suggestions that they thought that could be solutions to perceived challenges they provided. They proposed that all government stakeholders including heads of schools should: have school committees for raising parental involvement in making sure that they take to school CWA if they happen to be in their families, provide in-service training, provide relevant teaching and learning materials, raise awareness to build a sense of cooperation,

ensure early recognition at family and school level, build mutual friendship with CWA, structure the curriculum to accommodate the needs and abilities of every individual learner.

Unlike other measures, in-service training, provision of adequate and appropriate teaching and learning materials as well as provision of seminars were the most factors which were proposed towards reducing teachers' perceived challenges of teaching CWA in regular classes. For example, one female teacher said that:

“What I believed is that, if we will be receiving in-service training and being involved in various seminars regarding education inclusion focusing on CWA and even on other children's problems which hinder their learning nothing will go astray. Also, if we will be provided with appropriate learning materials, we will easily and comfortably teach all children regardless of their problems”

Most of the measures towards the perceived challenges were positive towards promoting the teaching of CWA in regular than in special schools. However, a few of teachers proposed that it would be better if parents and the government will directly take CWA and those with some other learning difficulties to special needs schools. One of the interviewee was quoted that:

“Teaching CWA in regular schools is a waste of time because they will never catch-up, enjoy... like the norm ones do. Therefore, it is better to take them early in special schools where they will get other children who are alike and well trained special school teachers who know them and so can handle them accordingly”

DISCUSSION

This study explored teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges of teaching CWA in regular primary schools.

The findings of this study revealed that regardless of demographic differences among regular primary school teachers, majority of them were less knowledgeable about ASD and its associated features among children. The findings are similar to past research, which revealed that teachers' lack a specific body of knowledge to the nature and needs of students with special needs (Newton et al., 2014). Also, another study adds that a lack of understanding of how to do in inclusive environment have lowered down teachers' abilities to accommodate all learners in inclusive classes (Hayes et al., 2013). This is also related to teachers' report that sometimes they used even aversive punishment to ensure that even CWA learn and benefits from regular classes. This suggests that inappropriate teaching and treatments may be done by teachers only because of lack of specific knowledge about certain developmental problems among learners.

The results also showed majority of teachers were positive about teaching CWA in regular classes. They provided several benefits a CWA is likely to obtain when taught with others who are not autistic in regular classes. Conversely, a few of them reported that it is better to take CWA in special need schools than in regular schools. The current findings are consistent with past research, showing that all teachers who participated in the study believed that students with mild disability could find success in regular classrooms O'Rourke & Houghton (2010).

Furthermore, educating students with disabilities in an inclusive general education setting has been shown to increase academic achievement, increase peer acceptance, increase self esteem, create a richer friendship network, and have positive lifetime benefits such as higher salaried jobs and independent living (Drame, & Kamphoff, 2014). This suggests that even CWA are more likely to succeed when taught in regular classes.

Furthermore, majority of teachers (76%) reported that they were not trained appropriately to accommodate CWA in regular classes. The findings are in consistence with a study conducted by Busby et al., (2012) revealed that all participants reported minimal or no training or experience regarding teaching children with autism. Likewise, responded reported that in order for a teacher to teach effectively the CWA, the teacher is required to be highly trained in that particular area. In addition to that, regular classroom teachers were regarded to lack specialized skills needs to address ASD. Therefore, participants indicated that teachers would need specific qualities to successfully meet the needs of CWA.

In-service training, provision of adequate and appropriate teaching and learning materials as well as provision of seminars were the most factors towards enhancing the teaching of CWA in regular schools. Some previous studies have also revealed that more formal training in working with students with ASD and importance of advocating for necessary resources among others were essential prerequisites to successfully include students with ASD (Lindsay et al., 2014). Furthermore, some literature have added that regardless the perceived poor training among teachers, teacher preparation and development are paramount factors towards inclusive education (Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson, Cambridge, 2014; Hart & Malian, 2013).

However, a few of teachers proposed that it would be better if parents and the government will directly take CWA and those with some other learning difficulties to special needs schools. The findings relate with previous studies which revealed that some teachers acknowledged that meeting the needs of all students in mixed ability classes was difficult because teaching CWA is a highly individualized and specialized process that requires highly specialized skills and personal attributes (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2010; Busby et al., 2012).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Regardless of the fact that educating all children in regular schools is currently much advocated, it does not guarantee that teachers in those schools already have appropriate knowledge and skills that can help them realize the needs of all learners including CWA. This situation often creates a challenge for teachers (Lindsay et al., 2014). The study generally found that poor knowledge, lack of appropriate training, lack of in-service training among teachers, are highly associated with teachers' perceived challenges in teaching CWA in regular classes. Despite the challenges being perceived by teachers still most of them believed that regular classes are beneficial to promoting and enhancing learning among CWA.

Following these findings, this study confirms and extends those findings that existing teacher education training programs often do not adequately prepare teachers to resolve challenges associated with teaching CWA in regular classes. The findings of this study suggest that the current teacher preparation program in Tanzania is inadequately preparing teacher education

graduates to deal effectively with the teaching of CWA in regular classes. Therefore, teacher training programs must change to meet the current needs of all children specifically CWA in regular classes. The results of this study provide insights to educational stakeholders especially policy makers, teachers and parents to see the needs and value the benefits of teaching CWA in regular classes.

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