

Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools in Morogoro Municipality



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ABSTRACT: The study aimed at investigating the challenges that students with special needs face during the transition from primary special schools to public secondary schools in Morogoro Municipality. The research was conducted in Morogoro Municipality and employed a cross-sectional research design alongside a mixed research approach. The target population included regular teachers and those specializing in special needs education within the municipality. The study sampled 155 respondents, comprising 131 regular teachers and 24 specialized teachers. Data collection was by means of questionnaires and interviews. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study reveals major challenges for students with disabilities transitioning to public secondary schools, such as inadequate teacher training, insufficient curriculum adaptation, and limited support systems, compounded by social stigma, financial constraints, and inadequate preparation. To enhance the educational experience for students with disabilities, it is essential to implement comprehensive teacher training on inclusive strategies, adapt curricula to diverse learning needs, and establish robust orientation programs. Increasing funding for assistive technologies, combating social stigma with anti-bullying policies, and improving peer support networks and accessible transportation will further support these students' integration and development and consequently enhance learning

KEYWORDS: Students with Special Needs, Transition, Primary Special Schools and Public Secondary Schools

INTRODUCTION

The transition from primary special schools to public secondary schools is a pivotal phase for students with special needs, involving more than just a change in educational settings; it signifies a complex shift in support systems and learning environments (McCoy et al., 2020). This phase demands a thorough understanding of the diverse challenges these students face as they adapt to new academic and social contexts. Globally, the transition experiences of students with special needs are shaped by varying educational policies and cultural contexts. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities receive tailored educational services through Individualized Education Programs (IEP), ensuring access to appropriate education (IDEA, 2023). Despite this, challenges persist, as indicated by the 7.3 million students receiving special education services in the 2019–20 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

In Europe, the approach to inclusive education is diverse, reflecting a range of policies and educational practices across different countries (Sander, 2021). This diversity illustrates varying philosophies on the integration of students with special needs, from mainstreaming in regular classrooms to maintaining specialized schools. Such variations underscore the influence of cultural and social contexts on educational practices and the effectiveness of inclusive policies. Similarly, in Africa, including Tanzania, the emphasis on inclusive education is growing, but significant challenges remain. These include inadequate physical infrastructure and limited specialized resources, which impact the academic performance and social integration of students with special needs (The World Bank, 2018; Engelbrecht, 2020).

Specifically, in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania, students with special needs encounter considerable obstacles during their transition to public secondary schools. Issues such as insufficient physical infrastructure and a lack of tailored support services contribute to a challenging transition, affecting their academic outcomes and overall well-being (Possi & Milinga, 2017; Macharia, 2018; Almalki, 2017). This study seeks to examine these challenges in detail, focusing on how environmental factors influence the educational experiences of students with special needs during this crucial phase. By addressing these issues, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into improving the transition process and fostering more supportive educational environments in Morogoro Municipality.

Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools in Morogoro Municipality

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by The Social-Ecological Model (SEM). SEM is a theoretical framework developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner, a prominent psychologist and developmental theorist, aimed to understand the intricate interactions between individuals and their environments. The SEM posits that human development is shaped by multiple interconnected systems, encompassing individual characteristics and broader societal factors.

The SEM emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individuals and their social contexts. It consists of various levels or systems that influence an individual's development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem represents the immediate environments in which individuals directly interact, such as family, peers, and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem encompasses the connections and interactions between these microsystems. The exosystem includes settings that indirectly affect individuals, such as community institutions and social policies. The macrosystem encompasses cultural values, norms, and ideologies, while the chronosystem recognizes the importance of time and historical context in shaping development.

The SEM has relevance across various fields of study, including education, public health, and social sciences. In an educational study, for instance, the SEM provides a comprehensive framework for examining the multifaceted influences on students' academic outcomes and well-being. By considering the microsystem (e.g., classroom interactions), mesosystem (e.g., teacher-parent collaboration), exosystem (e.g., school policies), macrosystem (e.g., cultural beliefs about education), and chronosystem (e.g., changes in educational policies over time), researcher can gain a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to student success or challenges.

The SEM provides a valuable framework for understanding the multifaceted challenges faced by students with special needs during their transition from primary special schools to public secondary schools. This model emphasizes the interplay between individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy levels, highlighting how these layers collectively impact students' experiences. By examining factors at each level (such as individual student needs, family support, school resources, community attitudes, and educational policies) the model offers a comprehensive view of the barriers and facilitators influencing successful transitions. This approach helps identify not only immediate issues but also broader systemic factors that contribute to the challenges faced by these students, guiding the development of more effective, multi-level interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The research concentrated on Morogoro Municipality, utilizing a cross-sectional research design to capture a snapshot of the educational environment at a specific point in time (Levin, 2006). A mixed research approach was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of regular and specialized teachers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study involved a total of 155 respondents, including 131 regular teachers and 24 specialized teachers, with data collected by means of questionnaires and interviews. Validity was ensured by using established instruments and conducting pilot testing, while reliability was addressed through standardized measures and the involvement of multiple researchers (Taherdoost, 2016). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Transition phase presents various obstacles that affect their adaptation and academic continuity. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective support systems that ensure a smooth educational transition and sustained academic progress for these students. Based on the opinions of the respondents, challenges encountered by students with special needs during their transition from primary special schools to public secondary schools are explored, presented in the Table below:

Table 1: Challenges that Students with Special Needs Face During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Lack of trained teachers who can effectively cater to the needs of students with disabilities.	60 (45.8%)	50 (38.2%)	15 (11.5%)	6 (4.6%)
Social stigma and discrimination from peers and teachers.	55 (42.0%)	48 (36.6%)	20 (15.3%)	8 (6.1%)
Academic curriculum not adapted to meet diverse learning needs.	70 (53.4%)	40 (30.5%)	12 (9.2%)	9 (6.9%)
Transitioning from a more supportive environment in primary special schools to a less supportive environment in public secondary schools.	65 (49.6%)	45 (34.4%)	15 (11.5%)	6 (4.6%)

Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools in Morogoro Municipality

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Financial constraints affecting access to necessary assistive devices and technologies.	75 (57.3%)	40 (30.5%)	10 (7.6%)	6 (4.6%)
Inadequate preparation and orientation programs for both students and parents/guardians.	62 (47.3%)	46 (35.1%)	17 (13.0%)	6 (4.6%)
Challenges in maintaining continuity of specialized therapies and interventions from primary to secondary school settings.	68 (51.9%)	50 (38.2%)	8 (6.1%)	5 (3.8%)
Insufficient individualized education planning and support systems in public secondary schools.	71 (54.2%)	40 (30.5%)	12 (9.2%)	8 (6.1%)
Limited availability of vocational and life skills training programs tailored to students with disabilities.	69 (52.7%)	42 (32.1%)	14 (10.7%)	6 (4.6%)
Inadequate transportation options that accommodate students with mobility challenges.	66 (50.4%)	48 (36.6%)	10 (7.6%)	7 (5.3%)
Limited peer support networks and opportunities for social integration.	63 (48.1%)	47 (35.9%)	15 (11.5%)	6 (4.6%)
Differences in teaching methods and classroom management styles compared to primary special schools.	64 (48.9%)	49 (37.4%)	12 (9.2%)	6 (4.6%)
Lack of awareness and implementation of inclusive education policies and practices.	70 (53.4%)	45 (34.4%)	10 (7.6%)	6 (4.6%)

Source: Field Data (2024)

The data underlines a pressing concern: there is a significant shortage of trained teachers capable of addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities, including those with physical, cognitive, sensory, and emotional disabilities. An alarming 84% of respondents acknowledged this issue, revealing a critical gap in educational support. This shortage directly impacts the quality of education for these students. One specialized teacher pointed out, "Without the right training, it is almost impossible to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities effectively." Supporting this, Smith and Tyler (2011) highlight the critical role of specialized teacher training, noting that well-prepared educators are better equipped to implement inclusive teaching strategies tailored to students' unique needs, whether they involve mobility assistance, communication support, or behavioral interventions. Without proper training, teachers may struggle to offer the necessary support, leading to disparities in academic achievement and social integration. The consequences of this shortage are profound, affecting both educational outcomes and the overall development of students with disabilities. Insufficiently trained teachers can result in inadequate instructional methods, less individual support, and a less inclusive classroom environment, ultimately hindering the students' educational experience and social growth. To address this urgent issue, educational institutions and policymakers must prioritize developing and implementing comprehensive training programs for teachers that cover a wide range of disabilities.

Social stigma and discrimination are also significant barriers for students with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and mental health conditions, when transitioning to public secondary schools. According to the findings, over 78% of respondents reported that students with disabilities experience stigma from both peers and teachers, which poses a major obstacle to their integration and acceptance within the school community. These negative attitudes can severely impact the self-esteem of these students, affecting their confidence and participation in school activities. A specialized teacher commented, "The stigma our students face can be overwhelming and often discourages them from participating fully in class activities." Fleming and Wated (2016) emphasize that stigma and discrimination in educational settings contribute to higher dropout rates and lower academic performance among students with disabilities, underscoring the need for more inclusive practices and supportive environments. The implications of these findings are significant, as pervasive stigma and discrimination not only hinder academic progress but also affect social interactions and overall well-being. The reported negative experiences suggest an urgent need for comprehensive anti-bullying policies, sensitivity training for teachers and students, and the promotion of an inclusive school culture that respects and values all types of disabilities.

Another major challenge identified is the adaptation of the academic curriculum to meet diverse learning needs, including those of students with dyslexia, ADHD, hearing impairments, and other specific learning disabilities. Over 83% of respondents expressed concerns that the current curriculum does not adequately address the needs of students with disabilities. This lack of adaptation can severely hinder their academic progress and overall educational outcomes. Harry and Klingner (2014) argue that a curriculum failing to accommodate the varied needs of students with disabilities can lead to disparities in learning opportunities and academic

Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools in Morogoro Municipality

achievement. The absence of tailored instructional strategies and resources often results in reduced engagement and increased frustration, undermining the educational experience of these students. These findings highlight the necessity for inclusive educational practices that adapt the curriculum to support all learners. Failing to modify the curriculum for diverse needs impacts not only academic performance but also student motivation and self-efficacy.

The transition from primary special schools, which typically offer more supportive environments, to public secondary schools poses significant challenges for students with disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy, and visual impairments. About 84% of respondents reported that students with disabilities face difficulties in adjusting to the less supportive environment of public secondary schools, which often increases stress and anxiety, negatively affecting both overall well-being and academic performance. A specialized teacher observed, "Transitioning to a public secondary school can be very stressful for these students, as they lose the specialized support they had in their previous school." Makin et al. (2017) support this observation, noting that such transitions can exacerbate existing difficulties as students encounter new educational and social challenges without the familiar support systems from their previous schools.

Financial constraints also present a significant barrier to accessing necessary assistive devices and technologies for students with disabilities, including those requiring wheelchairs, hearing aids, or specialized software for learning disabilities. Nearly 88% of respondents reported difficulties obtaining these essential resources, which are crucial for supporting educational needs. This financial limitation significantly impacts students' ability to access educational materials and fully participate in classroom activities. McNicholl et al. (2021) concur, highlighting that inadequate access to assistive technology can exacerbate educational disparities, leading to decreased academic performance and reduced engagement.

Both students and parents/guardians face significant challenges due to inadequate preparation and orientation programs before transitioning to public secondary schools, especially for those with emotional and behavioral disorders, intellectual disabilities, and physical impairments. About 82% of respondents highlighted the lack of sufficient programs to prepare them for these changes. Effective orientation programs are crucial for easing this transition and ensuring that students with disabilities receive necessary support from the start. Ochs and Roessler (2001) support these findings, emphasizing that comprehensive orientation and preparation programs can significantly reduce anxiety and improve overall adjustment, leading to better academic and social outcomes.

Maintaining continuity of specialized therapies and interventions, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral counseling, as students transition from primary to secondary school settings is crucial but often challenging. Over 90% of respondents expressed concerns about interruptions in these essential services during the transition. Consistent therapy and intervention are vital for developmental progress; any disruptions can adversely affect overall growth and well-being. A teacher noted, "When there's a break in therapy services, it can really set back the progress students have made." Babbitt and Lee (2016) echo this concern, underscoring that uninterrupted access to specialized services is critical for sustaining developmental gains and supporting academic and personal growth.

A noticeable lack of individualized education planning and support systems in public secondary schools is evident, as highlighted by 84% of respondents. This deficiency points to the need for tailored support to address each student's unique needs effectively, whether they involve physical accommodations, specialized instructional methods, or emotional support. Individualized education plans are crucial for outlining specific goals, accommodations, and support mechanisms necessary for success. Johnson and Taylor (2023) emphasize that individualized plans significantly improve educational outcomes by providing structured and personalized support. Without well-defined and tailored support systems, students with disabilities may struggle to meet academic expectations and fully engage with the curriculum, hindering their academic performance and personal growth.

Access to vocational and life skills training programs tailored to students with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, autism, and physical impairments, remains limited, as indicated by 87% of respondents. These programs are essential for equipping students with practical skills for independent living and future employment. The lack of such opportunities can hinder holistic development, leaving students inadequately prepared for life beyond school. Ayres et al. (2013) highlight the importance of vocational and life skills training in fostering independence and employability among students with disabilities. These programs provide practical skills and build confidence and self-sufficiency, which are vital for transitioning into adulthood. The scarcity of these programs affects students' ability to achieve financial independence and integrate into the workforce, impacting long-term success and quality of life.

Transportation options accommodating students with mobility challenges, such as those using wheelchairs or other mobility aids, are reported as inadequate by 86% of respondents. This shortage significantly limits students' ability to commute to and from school independently, restricting their educational opportunities and social participation. Sorani-Villanueva et al. (2024) emphasize that accessible transportation is crucial for regular school attendance and full engagement in educational and extracurricular activities. Without reliable and accessible transportation, students may experience increased absenteeism and reduced involvement in school life, affecting their academic performance and social integration.

Peer support networks and opportunities for social integration are reported as limited for students with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, and learning disabilities, according to 84% of respondents. Social interaction and peer

Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools in Morogoro Municipality

relationships are vital for the social development and overall well-being of these students. A lack of robust support networks can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion, adversely affecting their school experience. El-Daw and Hammoud (2015) highlight the importance of strong peer support and inclusive social opportunities in fostering a positive school environment, enhancing self-esteem, and promoting social skills.

Significant differences in teaching methods and classroom management styles between primary special schools and public secondary schools present challenges for students with disabilities, such as those with emotional and behavioral disorders, sensory impairments, and physical disabilities, as reported by 87% of respondents. These disparities can affect students' ability to adapt to their new educational environment, impacting their learning experience and academic progress. Wehman (2006) emphasizes that consistent teaching approaches are crucial for maintaining continuity in education and providing effective support during transitions. A lack of awareness and implementation of inclusive education policies and practices is evident, as highlighted by 88% of respondents. Effective implementation of these policies is essential for creating supportive environments that accommodate diverse needs, including those of students with physical, cognitive, sensory, and emotional disabilities. Eleweke and Rodda (2002) stress that inclusive education policies promote equity and enhance the overall educational experience by ensuring necessary support and resources for students with disabilities. Without a robust commitment to inclusive practices, schools may struggle to provide equitable access to education, limiting opportunities for all students.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights significant challenges faced by students with disabilities in transitioning to public secondary schools, including inadequate teacher training, insufficient curriculum adaptation, and limited support systems. The pervasive issues of social stigma, financial constraints, and inadequate preparation further exacerbate these challenges, impacting students' academic performance and overall well-being. To address these critical issues, there is a pressing need for enhanced teacher training, more inclusive curricula, comprehensive orientation programs, and increased funding for assistive technologies. By prioritizing these areas, educational institutions can foster a more supportive and equitable environment that meets the diverse needs of students with disabilities and promotes their successful integration and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the educational experience for students with disabilities, it is recommended that educational institutions implement comprehensive teacher training programs focused on inclusive teaching strategies and support for diverse needs. Curricula should be adapted to accommodate various learning styles and needs, ensuring that all students can engage effectively. Additionally, schools should develop robust orientation programs to better prepare students and their families for transitions between school levels. Increased funding for assistive technologies and resources is crucial to address financial barriers. Efforts to combat social stigma and discrimination through anti-bullying policies and sensitivity training should be prioritized. Finally, fostering strong peer support networks and improving accessible transportation options will enhance social integration and overall well-being for students with disabilities.

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Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs During the Transition from Primary Special Schools to Public Secondary Schools in Morogoro Municipality

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