



Teacher Self-Efficacy and Social-Communication Behaviours of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Primary Schools in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract: Despite Kenya's policy commitment to inclusive education, many learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream primary schools continue to experience serious difficulties in social participation and communication. These challenges limit meaningful engagement with teachers and peers, hinder participation in classroom activities, and may negatively affect their learning experiences and educational outcomes. This study examined the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and the social-communication behaviours of learners with ASD in inclusive primary schools in Nairobi County. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted, involving 90 teacher questionnaires and 20 classroom observations across 10 schools. Quantitative data were analysed using Pearson correlation, while qualitative data from classroom observations and headteacher responses were thematically analysed to contextualise the findings. Results revealed strong positive correlations between teacher self-efficacy and social participation ($r = .708, p < .001$) and communication behaviours ($r = .741, p < .001$). Classroom observations confirmed that teachers with higher self-efficacy demonstrated more inclusive instructional practices, facilitated peer interactions, and created supportive learning environments. The findings suggest that strengthening teacher self-efficacy through targeted professional development and practical classroom support may enhance social-communication outcomes for learners with ASD. The study contributes context-specific evidence to inclusive education discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa and recommends policy reforms that prioritise teacher confidence-building within inclusive education frameworks.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, teacher self-efficacy, social participation, communication behaviours, inclusive education.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a global priority, with many countries adopting policies aimed at ensuring equitable educational opportunities for learners with

disabilities. In Kenya, inclusive education has been strengthened through the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the enactment of the Basic Education Act (2013), and the Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities (2018). These policy initiatives advocate for the inclusion

of learners with diverse educational needs, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in mainstream schools.

Despite these policy commitments, the inclusion of learners with ASD remains a major concern. Many learners with ASD continue to experience significant difficulties in social participation and communication, which are essential for academic engagement and successful inclusion. Deficits in social interaction and communication often limit their ability to initiate conversations, interpret social cues, participate in collaborative activities, and establish meaningful relationships with peers and teachers (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Consequently, learners with ASD are at increased risk of social isolation, limited classroom participation, poor peer relationships, and reduced learning opportunities. These challenges suggest that physical placement in inclusive classrooms does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation and educational success.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction, accompanied by restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Social communication difficulties among learners with ASD may include challenges in understanding verbal and non-verbal communication, maintaining reciprocal conversations, expressing emotions appropriately, and responding to social situations. Similarly, social participation challenges often manifest through limited peer interactions, reduced participation in group activities, and difficulties developing friendships. Since learning occurs largely through social interactions and communication, these challenges have important implications for learners' academic achievement and overall development.

Teacher-related factors play a critical role in determining the success of inclusive education. Among these factors, teacher self-efficacy has received considerable scholarly attention. Teacher self-efficacy refers to teachers' beliefs in their capability to organize and execute the actions required to successfully accomplish specific teaching tasks and influence learner outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Teachers with strong efficacy beliefs are more likely to implement differentiated instructional strategies, adapt teaching methods, persist in challenging situations, and create supportive learning environments that promote learner engagement.

Evidence suggests that teacher self-efficacy is particularly important in the education of learners with ASD because these learners often require individualized instructional approaches, structured communication support, and carefully planned opportunities for social interaction. Teachers with high levels of self-efficacy tend to demonstrate greater confidence in adapting curricula, using

visual supports, facilitating peer interactions, and implementing behavioural interventions that promote participation and communication among learners with ASD (Sharma & Sokal, 2020; Zee & Koomen, 2022). Such teachers are also more likely to persist in supporting learners who experience communication difficulties and to maintain positive expectations regarding learners' potential for progress.

Conversely, teachers with lower self-efficacy may experience difficulties responding effectively to the diverse needs of learners with ASD. Research indicates that teachers with limited confidence in their abilities are less likely to implement inclusive instructional strategies, may avoid complex classroom situations, and often report feelings of frustration and inadequacy when teaching learners with disabilities (Furey & Dunne, 2022; Neal & Frederick, 2020). Such limitations can reduce opportunities for meaningful participation and communication among learners with ASD and may contribute to social exclusion within inclusive classrooms.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory provides the theoretical foundation for this study by positing that individuals' beliefs about their capabilities influence their behaviours, effort, persistence, and performance (Bandura, 1997). According to the theory, individuals who possess strong efficacy beliefs are more likely to approach challenging tasks with confidence, persevere in the face of difficulties, and employ effective strategies to achieve desired outcomes. In inclusive educational settings, teachers who believe in their ability to support learners with ASD are more likely to create opportunities for participation, implement instructional adaptations, and facilitate communication and social interactions that contribute to learner development.

Similarly, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction and guided participation in learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory proposes that learning occurs through interactions with more knowledgeable individuals who provide support and scaffolding within meaningful social contexts. For learners with ASD, teachers play a critical role in creating opportunities for interaction, facilitating peer relationships, and providing guidance that enables participation in classroom activities. Teachers with high self-efficacy are therefore more likely to provide the supportive interactions necessary for learners with ASD to develop communication skills and engage meaningfully with peers and learning activities.

Empirical evidence from different contexts demonstrates positive associations between teacher self-efficacy and inclusive educational practices. Studies conducted in Europe, North America, and Asia indicate that teachers with higher self-efficacy demonstrate greater willingness to adopt inclusive instructional practices, provide

individualized support, and encourage learner participation (Neal & Frederick, 2020; Sharma & Sokal, 2020; Zee & Koomen, 2022). Research has further shown that teacher self-efficacy is positively associated with learner engagement, effective classroom management, and instructional effectiveness, all of which contribute to improved educational outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Zee & Koomen, 2022).

Studies focusing specifically on learners with ASD have reported that highly efficacious teachers are more likely to implement strategies that promote social interaction and communication, including peer-mediated instruction, visual supports, social stories, and structured collaborative activities (Neal & Frederick, 2020; Simón et al., 2022). These practices create opportunities for learners with ASD to interact with peers, communicate more effectively, and participate actively in classroom experiences.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, however, teachers frequently encounter challenges that may undermine their confidence in implementing inclusive education. Studies have identified inadequate professional preparation, limited instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient institutional support as major barriers to effective inclusion (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015; Mngo & Mngo, 2018). In Kenya, research similarly indicates that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to support learners with ASD and other disabilities due to limited autism-specific training and inadequate support systems (Irungu, 2024; Oosero et al., 2022). These challenges raise concerns regarding the extent to which teacher self-efficacy influences learner outcomes in inclusive classrooms.

Most studies conducted in Kenya have concentrated on teacher preparedness, attitudes towards inclusion, and challenges associated with implementing inclusive education (Irungu, 2024; Oosero et al., 2022). Although these studies have generated valuable insights, they provide limited evidence on whether teachers' beliefs in their capabilities translate into improved learner outcomes, particularly the social participation and communication behaviours of learners with ASD. Furthermore, few studies have employed mixed-methods approaches that combine statistical analysis with classroom observations to capture how teacher self-efficacy manifests in actual classroom practice.

This study therefore sought to determine the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and the social-communication behaviours of learners with ASD in inclusive primary schools in Nairobi County, Kenya. By integrating quantitative findings with qualitative evidence from classroom observations and headteacher perspectives, the study contributes context-specific evidence on the role of teacher self-efficacy in promoting meaningful inclusion and supporting social-

communication outcomes for learners with ASD in Kenyan primary schools.

1.1 Objective of the Study

To determine the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and the social-communication behaviours of learners with ASD in inclusive primary schools in Nairobi County.

1.2 Research Hypothesis

H₀: There is no statistically significant relationship between teacher self-efficacy and the social-communication behaviours of learners with ASD in inclusive primary schools in Nairobi County.

2. Literature Review

Teacher self-efficacy is widely recognised as an important factor in teachers' responses to diverse learner needs. Bandura (1997) conceptualises self-efficacy as beliefs about one's capability to organise and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes. In education, these beliefs influence teachers' effort, persistence, instructional choices, and willingness to engage with challenging teaching situations. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) similarly position teacher efficacy as a multidimensional construct related to instructional strategies, classroom management, and learner engagement.

Empirical research indicates that stronger teacher self-efficacy is associated with more positive inclusive practices. Sharma and Sokal (2020) found that professional development can strengthen teachers' efficacy beliefs, suggesting that practical opportunities to apply inclusive strategies are important for confidence-building. Zee and Koomen (2022) further demonstrate the importance of teacher self-efficacy in inclusive educational practice. For learners with ASD, teacher confidence is particularly relevant because effective inclusion often requires differentiated instruction, structured communication support, visual supports, and deliberate facilitation of peer interaction (Neal & Frederick, 2020; Simón et al., 2022).

Social participation and communication are central to meaningful inclusion for learners with ASD. Difficulties in reciprocal interaction, interpreting social cues, initiating communication, and participating in group activities can restrict learners' access to classroom learning and peer relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Teachers therefore have an important role in creating structured opportunities for interaction and communication. Evidence suggests that inclusive instructional practices can support participation by providing predictable routines, visual supports, structured peer activities, and differentiated communication opportunities (Neal & Frederick, 2020; Simón et al., 2022).

Evidence from African and Kenyan contexts highlights additional challenges. Inadequate professional preparation, limited instructional resources, large classes, and insufficient institutional support can constrain inclusive practice (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015). In Kenya, studies have documented concerns about teacher preparedness and barriers to the inclusion of learners with ASD (Irungu, 2024; Oosero et al., 2022). However, much of the Kenyan literature has focused on teacher preparedness, attitudes, and implementation challenges rather than learner-level social-communication outcomes. There is consequently limited evidence on whether differences in teacher self-efficacy are associated with observable differences in social participation and communication among learners with ASD. The present study addresses this gap by combining quantitative evidence with classroom observations and headteacher perspectives.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a pragmatist paradigm and an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase established the statistical relationship between teacher self-efficacy and learners' social-communication behaviours, while the qualitative phase provided contextual explanations through classroom observations and headteacher perspectives. This approach was appropriate for addressing the research problem through both statistical generalisation and contextual understanding.

The study was conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya, selected due to its relatively high concentration of inclusive primary schools with formally identified learners with ASD and the availability of assessment and support services. The target population comprised classroom teachers and headteachers in public and private primary schools implementing inclusive education for learners with ASD. Ten schools identified by the Nairobi City County Education Office as enrolling learners with ASD participated in the study.

A sample of 90 classroom teachers was obtained from an accessible population of approximately 200 eligible teachers across the 10 schools. Simple random sampling was used to select teachers from lists of those with minimum one academic year of experience teaching learners with ASD. All 10 headteachers were included through census sampling. Twenty classroom observations were conducted using purposive sampling to identify classrooms with at least one formally diagnosed learner with ASD.

Data collection employed three instruments. The teacher questionnaire, adapted from the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), measured teacher self-efficacy across instructional strategies, classroom management, and learner engagement domains using a 5-

point Likert scale. Social-communication behaviours were assessed through teacher-reported indicators of social participation (peer interaction, group activity involvement, classroom engagement) and communication behaviours (initiation, response, expression, non-verbal communication, augmentative communication use). The headteacher questionnaire collected institutional-level data on school support factors, policies, and professional development opportunities. A structured classroom observation checklist captured direct evidence of learner social-communication behaviours and teacher inclusive practices during 30–40 minute observation sessions.

Instrument validity was established through expert review by specialists in Special Needs Education and educational research, ensuring content and construct alignment with study objectives. Reliability coefficients obtained during pilot testing with 10 teachers were: Teacher Self-Efficacy ($\alpha = .966$), Social Participation ($\alpha = .931$), and Communication Behaviours ($\alpha = .892$), indicating high internal consistency. Inter-rater agreement for the observation checklist exceeded Cohen's Kappa = .70.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation to examine relationships between teacher self-efficacy and social-communication variables. Qualitative data from classroom observations and open-ended headteacher responses were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, with integration occurring during interpretation to explain and contextualise quantitative findings. All analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 27 and manual thematic coding.

Prior to fieldwork, ethical clearance and the required research permissions were obtained. Introductory letters were presented to participating schools and school administrators were briefed on the study purpose and procedures. In the quantitative phase, questionnaires were administered in person to selected teachers and participants were given approximately one week to complete them. Completed questionnaires were collected and checked before coding and entry for analysis. The qualitative phase followed the quantitative phase. Twenty classroom observations were conducted purposively in classrooms containing learners formally identified with ASD, and headteacher questionnaires containing open-ended responses were administered to obtain contextual information on school support and inclusive education practices. This sequence was consistent with the explanatory sequential design and enabled triangulation of the findings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Review Committee of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. A research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Written informed consent

was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 90 completed teacher questionnaires were returned from the 110 distributed, yielding a response rate of 81.8%, which exceeded the 70% threshold considered adequate for research purposes (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The majority of respondents were female (71.1%),

with a mean age of 42.76 years ($SD = 9.19$). Bachelor's degree holders constituted the largest qualification category (42.2%), followed by diploma holders (36.7%). More than half of the respondents (51.1%) had over 15 years of teaching experience, and 62.2% reported having received some form of Special Needs Education (SNE) training.

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the study variables. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	M	SD
Teacher Self-Efficacy	3.26	1.13
Social Participation	2.96	0.93
Communication Behaviours	2.78	0.84
School Support Factors	2.62	0.78

Note. Scores were measured on a five-point Likert scale; higher scores indicate higher levels of the respective construct.

As shown in Table 1, teacher self-efficacy recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.13$), indicating that teachers generally perceived themselves as moderately capable of supporting learners with ASD in inclusive classrooms. Social participation ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.93$) and communication behaviours ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.84$) were comparatively lower, suggesting moderate levels of learner

engagement and communication. School support factors also demonstrated moderate levels ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.78$).

Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among teacher self-efficacy, social participation, and communication behaviours. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Teacher Self-Efficacy	3.26	1.13	—		
2. Social Participation	2.96	0.93	.708**	—	
3. Communication Behaviours	2.78	0.84	.741**	.869**	—

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables ($N = 90$)

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; correlations were statistically significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

As shown in Table 2, teacher self-efficacy was strongly and positively associated with social participation ($r = .708$, $p < .001$) and communication behaviours ($r = .741$, $p < .001$). Social participation and communication behaviours were also strongly correlated ($r = .869$, $p < .001$), indicating that learners who participated more actively in social interactions generally demonstrated stronger communication skills.

Qualitative findings from classroom observations and headteacher responses provided contextual explanations for these statistical relationships. In classrooms where teachers demonstrated high self-efficacy, learners with ASD were more frequently observed initiating communication with teachers and peers, participating in

group activities, and responding positively to social interactions. These teachers consistently used visual supports, simplified instructions, and structured opportunities for peer engagement.

Conversely, classrooms characterized by lower teacher self-efficacy exhibited fewer instructional adaptations and limited facilitation of peer interactions. Learners in these settings were often physically present but socially peripheral, demonstrating minimal spontaneous communication and participation.

The qualitative findings reinforced the importance of teacher confidence in promoting meaningful inclusion. One headteacher observed:

"Teachers who believe they can support these learners are more willing to try different strategies and involve them in classroom activities."

Another headteacher noted:

"Teacher confidence is reflected in how classrooms are organized and how learners with ASD are encouraged to participate and communicate."

Although resource limitations and large class sizes were identified as challenges across participating schools, the qualitative evidence suggested that teacher self-efficacy functioned as a foundational factor influencing the effective implementation of inclusive practices and the social-communication development of learners with ASD.

Discussion

The study established strong positive relationships between teacher self-efficacy and both social participation ($r = .708$, $p < .001$) and communication behaviours ($r = .741$, $p < .001$) among learners with ASD in inclusive primary schools in Nairobi County. The strong association between social participation and communication behaviours ($r = .869$, $p < .001$) further indicates that learners who were more socially engaged tended to demonstrate stronger communication behaviours.

The findings are consistent with evidence from Kenya. Previous Kenyan studies have identified teacher preparedness and confidence as important considerations in implementing inclusive education for learners with ASD (Irungu, 2024; Oosero et al., 2022). However, much of this work has focused on preparedness, barriers, and perceptions rather than learner-level social-communication outcomes. The present findings therefore extend Kenyan evidence by linking teacher self-efficacy with learners' social participation and communication behaviours in inclusive classrooms.

The findings also correspond with evidence from other African contexts. Inclusive education in Sub-Saharan Africa is frequently affected by inadequate professional preparation, limited instructional resources, large classes, and insufficient institutional support (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015). Similar challenges emerged in the present study through headteacher responses. Nevertheless, the positive relationships observed suggest that teachers with stronger efficacy beliefs may be better positioned to use available resources and create opportunities for participation and communication despite contextual constraints.

International evidence provides further support. Research has associated teacher self-efficacy with inclusive teaching practices and professional development outcomes (Sharma & Sokal, 2020; Zee & Koomen, 2022). Studies addressing ASD specifically indicate that structured peer activities, visual supports, and evidence-based instructional practices

can promote learner participation and communication (Neal & Frederick, 2020; Simón et al., 2022). The classroom observations in the present study were consistent with these findings: teachers demonstrating stronger self-efficacy more frequently used visual supports, simplified instructions, structured peer interaction, and differentiated communication opportunities.

The findings can be interpreted through Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997), which proposes that beliefs about capability influence behaviour, effort, persistence, and performance. Teachers who believe they can support learners with ASD may be more willing to adapt instruction and persist when learners experience communication or participation difficulties. The observed association between teacher self-efficacy and learner outcomes is therefore consistent with the theoretical proposition that efficacy beliefs influence teachers' actions in challenging instructional contexts.

The relationship between social participation and communication behaviours can also be understood through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978). Social interaction provides an important context for learning and development, while guided participation and scaffolding can support learners in performing tasks that may initially be difficult independently. In the present study, classrooms where teachers deliberately facilitated peer and teacher interactions provided more opportunities for learners with ASD to practise communication and participate in shared activities.

The moderate mean scores for teacher self-efficacy ($M = 3.26$), social participation ($M = 2.96$), and communication behaviours ($M = 2.78$) indicate considerable scope for improvement. The qualitative findings suggest that teacher confidence is important but does not remove the need for adequate resources, manageable class sizes, and specialist support. Self-efficacy should therefore be understood as one component of an effective inclusive education system rather than as a substitute for institutional support.

The study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation; the findings demonstrate associations rather than causal effects. Second, teacher self-efficacy was measured through self-report, which may reflect perceived rather than actual competence, although classroom observations provided additional contextual evidence. Third, the study was confined to Nairobi County, limiting transferability to other Kenyan counties and educational contexts. Finally, learner social-communication behaviours were assessed through teacher reports and structured observations rather than a single standardised assessment instrument.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several implications for inclusive education policy and practice in Kenya. First, teacher preparation programmes should integrate practical ASD-specific content and inclusive pedagogical strategies. Pre-service and in-service training should provide opportunities for teachers to practise communication supports, peer-mediated activities, visual supports, and differentiated instruction.

Second, continuous professional development programmes should emphasise practical application, mentoring, classroom coaching, and collaborative problem-solving. Such approaches may strengthen teachers' confidence while also improving their capacity to translate knowledge into classroom practice.

Third, school leaders should strengthen the conditions in which teachers implement inclusive practices by facilitating professional collaboration, providing instructional resources, and offering supportive supervision. Teacher self-efficacy is unlikely to operate independently of the broader school environment.

Finally, education policymakers should recognise teacher self-efficacy as an important component of inclusive education and incorporate confidence-building opportunities into broader teacher development and ASD inclusion programmes.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study established a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between teacher self-efficacy and the social-communication behaviours of learners with ASD in inclusive primary schools in Nairobi County. Higher teacher self-efficacy was associated with stronger learner social participation and communication behaviours. Classroom observations further showed that teachers demonstrating stronger confidence were more likely to use adaptive instructional practices, facilitate peer interaction, and create supportive opportunities for learner engagement. The findings suggest that teacher self-efficacy is an important component of meaningful inclusion, although it should be strengthened alongside adequate institutional resources and specialist support.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Teacher education institutions should strengthen ASD-specific and inclusive education content in pre-service and in-service programmes, with emphasis on practical classroom application.
2. The Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission should strengthen continuous professional development through mentoring, coaching, peer learning,

and practical feedback aimed at building teacher self-efficacy.

3. School leaders should provide supportive supervision, facilitate professional collaboration, and improve access to instructional resources that enable meaningful participation and communication for learners with ASD.

4. Future studies should use longitudinal or experimental designs and include multiple counties to examine whether strengthening teacher self-efficacy leads to measurable changes in learners' social-communication outcomes over time.

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