JRIIE Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education
Center for Research Implications & Practice

Website: www.jriiejournal.com ISSN 2520-7504 (Online) Vol.10, Iss.4, 2026 (pp. 1233 - 1242)

Exploring the Content and Delivery Methods of School-Based Professional Development for Teachers Supporting Learners with Autism in Kongwa District, Tanzania

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Abstract: *School-based professional development (SB-PD) is intended to bring teacher learning closer to classroom realities, yet its usefulness for inclusive education depends on the relevance of its content and the way learning activities are delivered. This study examined the content and delivery methods of SB-PD initiatives implemented in public primary schools in Kongwa District, Tanzania, with particular attention to their capacity to support teachers who work with autistic learners. The study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods orientation. For the objective reported in this paper, quantitative evidence came from 52 teacher questionnaires across three public primary schools, while school professional-development records were reviewed to corroborate reported practices. Quantitative data were summarized using frequencies and percentages, and documentary evidence was analysed thematically. Results showed that 59.6% of teachers reported SB-PD occurring once a month and 23.1% less frequently. Content concentrated on subject-matter refreshers (76.9%), lesson planning (65.4%) and classroom assessment (51.9%), whereas behaviour management (25.0%) and technology integration (13.5%) received limited attention. Whole-staff workshops or lectures dominated delivery (92.3%), while peer observation (23.1%), demonstration lessons (21.2%) and teacher learning circles (5.8%) were uncommon. School records contained no documented autism-specific training hours or materials. The study concludes that SB-PD is present but insufficiently specialized and practice-based for inclusive autism support. It recommends institutionalizing autism-focused modules, peer coaching, demonstration lessons and sustained follow-up within school-based professional learning.*

Keywords: *Autism, Inclusion, Content and Delivery Methods, Teachers, Professional development.*

How to cite this work (APA):

Mwasongwe, S. I. & Kavina, A. (2026). Exploring the Content and Delivery Methods of School-Based Professional Development for Teachers Supporting Learners with Autism in Kongwa District, Tanzania. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education, 10*(4), 1233 – 142. **https://doi.org/10.59765/lkw75j**

1. Introduction

Teacher professional development is central to the improvement of instructional quality because curriculum reforms and inclusive education policies ultimately depend on what teachers are able to enact in classrooms. Contemporary scholarship increasingly treats professional learning as most productive when it is sustained, connected to teachers' work, focused on relevant content, and organized around active learning rather than one-off transmission of information (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). School-based professional development is particularly important in resource-constrained systems because it can reduce travel costs, make use of local expertise and allow professional learning to address problems that arise in specific schools and classrooms.

In Tanzania, school-based teacher development has been promoted for more than a decade as a strategy for widening access to in-service learning. Evidence from a national pilot showed that school-based training can contribute to more interactive pedagogy when it is supported by structured materials, facilitation and follow-up (Hardman et al., 2015). Earlier Tanzanian research also emphasized that teachers value professional development when it is relevant to classroom practice and when opportunities exist for collaboration and professional exchange (Komba & Nkumbi, 2008). Nevertheless, policy aspirations do not guarantee that school-level professional development is frequent, specialized or pedagogically rich. The source study describes persistent concerns regarding irregular provision, resource constraints and limited specialization in professional development for inclusive education.

These concerns become more consequential when teachers are expected to support autistic learners in mainstream classrooms. Autism-related professional learning requires more than general awareness. A systematic review by Petersson-Bloom et al. (2023) found that professional development for teachers of autistic students is strengthened by autism-specific knowledge and practice-based learning that addresses challenges teachers encounter in their own schools. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) identified practical exercise, performance feedback and on-site coaching as important components of in-service training in evidence-based practices for students with autism and developmental disabilities. Professional development that concentrates mainly on general subject content or administrative routines may therefore leave teachers without the specialized strategies needed for communication, behaviour support, visual structuring, differentiated instruction and classroom participation.

This study investigated the effectiveness of school-based teacher professional development in public primary schools, and its first specific objective was to determine the content and delivery methods of existing SB-PD initiatives. The present paper isolates that objective to provide a focused account of what teachers are being trained on, how frequently training occurs, and which delivery approaches are used.

The study was guided by the following research question: what content and delivery methods characterize School-Based Professional Development currently implemented in Kongwa District public primary schools? Addressing this question is important because the design features of professional development provide an early indication of whether SB-PD is likely to build usable classroom competence. The paper therefore contributes localized evidence to debates on how school-based professional learning can be aligned with inclusive education and autism-support needs in Tanzanian primary schools.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

When adopting inclusive education in Tanzania, teachers often felt stressed, and contextual factors like the absence of assistance makes them feel even more stressed. This is why in Tanzania, Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014(URT, 2014) explicitly specifies the institutionalization of Teacher Resource Centers (TRCs) and professional development centers as school clusters as a feasible approach for effective SB-INSET and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in Tanzania. However, the data that is currently available suggests that school clusters have little to no role in the CPD equation and that TRCs are dysfunctional as a result of a lack of funding (Shuma et al., 2025).

Additionally, it is unknown how Tanzania's educational system's administrative and governance frameworks relate to the institutional organization of TRCs in order to address the issue being studied (Mitchell et al., 2024). Moreover, the TRC Coordinators are government-employed teachers, despite the fact that neither the central Government nor Local Government authorities provide funding for the TRCs' planned function of offering teachers professional support.

Nonetheless, the Tanzania Government, through the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST), has implemented SB-PD for teachers' professional development in addition to traditional programs in response to the difficulty of teachers' in-service abilities needed to cope with children learning in school. It is anticipated that the SB-PD model could enhance teachers' access to professional development (MoEST, 2017).

Furthermore, a number of policy documents, including the National Framework for Continuing Professional Development for Practicing Teachers (MoEST, 2017) and the Teacher Education Management and Development Strategy (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2008), attest to Tanzania's adoption of the SB-PD model. All of these regulations mandate that management and school officials oversee the execution of SB-PD activities for teachers' professional development. With the specific claim that "teacher learning which is embedded in the context of schools tends to address the relevant needs of teachers, students, and schools," the National Framework for Continuing Professional Development advocates SB-PD (MoEST, 2017). According to all of these initiatives, SB-PD is regarded by Tanzania as a key component of teaching and learning quality enhancement and as the foundational method for educators.

Again, Makgato (2018) and Warnes et al. (2022) contend that teachers have expressed a variety of concerns about the involvement of students who face learning obstacles, especially those who have learning impairments, through

the media. According to Zwane and Malale (2018) and Molakeng and Möwes (2020), these concerns include teachers' challenges in managing a diverse student body in their classrooms, inadequate training, challenges in adjusting to a customized curriculum, a lack of funding, inadequate support for teachers, a lack of time, a lack of knowledge, excessive workloads, and inappropriate policy development issues.

It is unclear what could be happening at the school level in terms of implementing inclusive education given the difficulties teachers have experienced. Additionally, Walton et al. (2014) and Nel et al. (2016) discovered that teachers frequently experienced stress when implementing inclusive education, and that contextual variable like the Education Department's lack of support increased their stress levels. In this context, these researchers promoted classroom assistance, the adoption of suitable and consistent teacher training programs, and teacher retraining to enable them to carry out inclusive education in classrooms. There is limited implementation of SB-PD for supporting teachers of learners with autism in Tanzania. Thus, this becomes the motivation behind this study which seeks to investigate the content and delivery of school-based continuous professional development initiatives in dealing with learners with autism in Kongwa District public primary schools in Tanzania.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Structural Design and Contextual Dynamics of Effective School-Based Professional Development

Scholarships on teacher professional development increasingly distinguishes between passive attendance and professional learning that meaningfully transforms classroom practice. Effective school-based professional development (SB-PD) relies on critical core features, notably content focus, active learning, coherence, sufficient duration, and collective participation (Garet et al., 2001; Desimone, 2009). These structural elements shift the evaluation of teacher training from mere attendance metrics to the deliberate design of learning opportunities.

Furthermore, professional growth does not occur in isolation; it emerges from reciprocal interactions between individual teacher beliefs, school organizational structures, and the specific characteristics of the learning activity (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). In low-resource environments, contextual realities—such as time constraints, leadership support, resource availability, and local expertise—heavily dictate whether innovative pedagogical concepts transition into institutionalized daily practice.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Tanzania, where empirical evidence demonstrates both the potential and structural vulnerabilities of continuous teacher training. Intentional, school-based professional development programs can significantly enhance pedagogical practices and foster positive teacher attitudes toward interactive learning (Hardman et al., 2015). However, traditional teacher development across Tanzania has historically been hindered by episodic, one-off workshops and seminars that lack sustained follow-up, collective problem-solving, rehearsal, and constructive feedback.

2.2 Content Specificity, Active Delivery, and Inclusive Pedagogy for Autism Spectrum Needs

While generic pedagogical training provides a necessary foundation, effective professional development for inclusive education requires high content specificity tailored to specialized learner needs. For teachers supporting autistic learners, general instructional strategies are insufficient without targeted, autism-specific knowledge directly linked to classroom challenges (Petersson-Bloom et al., 2023). High-impact in-service training systematically incorporates modeling, practical exercises, structured performance feedback, and on-site coaching alongside didactic instruction to implement evidence-based practices effectively (Wang et al., 2024).

The necessity of contextually grounded, specialized training is further corroborated within Sub-Saharan Africa, where structured autism-focused development programs have significantly enhanced teachers' domain knowledge and evidence-based intervention selection (Zeleke et al., 2021). Synthesizing specialized content with active, collaborative delivery forms the cornerstone of impactful SB-PD. However, a significant localized evidence gap remains regarding the extent to which school-based professional development in Kongwa District operationalizes these core features. Evaluating current local practices requires examining the delivery frequency, content profiles, active instruction methods, and official school documentation to verify whether institutionalized support for autism and inclusive pedagogy actually exists in practice.

2.3 Theoretical Literature Review

This study is theoretically grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Development, which posits that human cognition and higher mental processes are inherently social and cultural rather than isolated individual phenomena (Kozulin et al., 2003). According to Vygotsky, all higher cognitive functions manifest socially

on an interpersonal plane before being internalized on an intrapersonal level through social interaction. To systematically explain the genesis and mechanisms of cognitive growth, this framework relies on four interrelated constructs: (1) the social origin of mental functions, asserting that consciousness remains fundamentally social; (2) the unity of behavior and consciousness, establishing mind and action as an integrated system; (3) mediation, which details how psychological tools facilitate the transition from social interaction to internal mental processing; and (4) psychological systems, which reflect developmental progress. Within school-based professional development (SB-PD) for teaching learners with autism, this theory highlights how social interactions shape teachers' attitudes toward inclusive practices. SB-PD serves as a vehicle for mediated learning, equipping educators with psychological tools (Kozulin, 2003) to adapt their instructional behavior and effectively address diverse classroom needs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employed a mixed-methods concurrent design, allowing quantitative data and qualitative documentary evidence to be collected within the same operational timeframe. This design is particularly appropriate when research aims to pair measurable, descriptive patterns of practice with a contextual understanding of how those practices are structured and institutionalized within schools (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Study Location, Population, and Sampling Strategy

The research was conducted across three public primary schools in Kongwa District, located within the Dodoma Region of Tanzania. The quantitative strand utilized responses from n = 52 primary school teachers. Teachers were selected using simple random sampling to ensure objective representation, while purposive sampling was applied to select key school-level informants (heads of school) for the broader study.

3.3 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data collection relied on two complementary primary instruments:

3.3.1 Teacher Questionnaire

A structured survey designed to measure key parameters of School-Based Professional Development (SB-PD). It captured respondents' teaching experience, the frequency of attended SB-PD sessions, specific training topics covered over the preceding 12 months, instructional delivery modes, and self-perceived improvements in teaching competence.

3.3.2 Document Review

An archival review of official school records across two participating institutions was conducted to triangulate and corroborate self-reported survey findings. The document analysis evaluated the presence or absence of official SB-PD schedules, autism- and inclusive-education-specific training modules, instructional materials, annual hours dedicated to specialized training, and active support or mentoring structures. This strand was vital for distinguishing formally institutionalized professional development from ad-hoc or informal activities.

3.4 Data Analysis, Instrument Validity, and Reliability

Quantitative questionnaire data were processed using SPSS. version 31 software and analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. Documentary evidence was categorized based on record availability (presence/absence) and analyzed thematically according to training regularity, specialization, and structural support.

To ensure instrument quality, the questionnaire underwent expert review and pilot testing prior to administration. Internal consistency and reliability were established using Cronbach’s alpha, maintaining a standard threshold above .70.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to institutional research standards. Formal ethical approvals and clearance permits were secured from St. John’s University of Tanzania and the Kongwa District Authorities. Participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and respondents retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Profile of Teacher Respondents

The results indicate that all 52 teacher respondents whose data were used for this objective had ten or fewer years of teaching experience. Of these, 32 (61.5%) had taught for 0–5 years and 20 (38.5%) for 6–10 years. The concentration of relatively early-career teachers increases the importance of accessible, frequent and practice-oriented professional learning because professional routines are still being consolidated during this stage of teachers' careers.

Table 1: Teaching Experience of Teacher Respondents (n = 52)

Teaching experience	Frequency	Percentage
0–5 years	32	61.5
6–10 years	20	38.5
Total	52	100.0

Source: Field data 2025

4.2 Frequency of School-Based Professional Development

The frequency of SB-PD was limited. As shown in Table 2, 31 teachers (59.6%) reported that sessions were held once a month, while 12 (23.1%) reported sessions occurring less frequently. Only three teachers (5.8%) reported weekly sessions and six (11.5%) reported fortnightly sessions. Thus, more than four in five respondents experienced SB-PD no more often than monthly.

Table 2: Frequency of SB-PD Sessions (n = 52)

Frequency of sessions	Frequency	Percentage
Once a week	3	5.8
Once a fortnight	6	11.5
Once a month	31	59.6
Less frequently	12	23.1

Source: Field data, 2025

This pattern raises questions about duration and continuity. Effective professional development is not defined by a single ideal number of sessions, but the literature consistently emphasizes sustained engagement and opportunities to revisit practice (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Monthly or less frequent meetings can still be useful when they are part of a coherent cycle of planning, implementation, observation and feedback. The study, however, describes a system dominated by workshops and limited follow-up, suggesting that frequency and delivery form combine to reduce opportunities for sustained learning. This contrasts with the Tanzanian pilot reported by Hardman et al. (2015), where structured school-based development was associated with changes in classroom pedagogy.

4.3 Content Covered in SB-PD

The content profile was strongly oriented toward general instructional and administrative competence. Subject content knowledge refreshers were the most commonly reported topic (76.9%), followed by lesson planning or schemes of work (65.4%) and classroom assessment techniques (51.9%). Learner-centred methodologies were reported by 34.6% of teachers. By contrast, student behaviour management was reported by only 25.0%, curriculum interpretation by 23.1%, and technology integration by 13.5%.

Table 3. SB-PD Topics Covered in the Previous 12 Months (n = 52)

Content area	Frequency	Percentage
Subject content knowledge refresher	40	76.9
Lesson planning/scheme of work	34	65.4
Classroom assessment techniques	27	51.9
New learner-centred teaching methodologies	18	34.6
Student behaviour management	13	25.0
Curriculum interpretation	12	23.1
Technology integration in teaching	7	13.5

Source: Field data, 2025

Note: *Percentages exceed 100% due to multiple responses allowed per participant*

The emphasis on subject content, planning and assessment is understandable because these areas support routine instructional quality. However, the pattern reveals a specialization problem when judged against the needs of inclusive classrooms. Autism-support practice often requires teachers to understand behaviour, communication, environmental structure, visual support, individualized adaptation and evidence-based intervention. The low coverage of behaviour management is therefore particularly important. Petersson-Bloom et al. (2023) found that autism-specific knowledge and practice-based learning are central features of professional development intended to improve education for autistic students. Similarly, Dynia et al. (2020) identified visual support and behavioural strategies among frequently used evidence-based practices in early childhood special education settings serving autistic children.

The findings therefore suggest that teachers in Kongwa are receiving professional development that strengthens general teaching functions but does not systematically build specialized inclusive competence. This is not an argument for abandoning subject content or lesson planning. Rather, these areas should be connected to differentiated planning, communication supports, behaviour-support strategies and adaptation for learner variability. In a sociocultural view of teacher learning, professional knowledge develops through mediated participation in socially organized activity (Vygotsky, 1978). If autism-related classroom problems are absent from the shared professional-learning agenda, teachers have few structured opportunities to convert general inclusive principles into situated practice.

4.4 Delivery Methods Used in SB-PD

Delivery was dominated by whole-staff workshops or lectures. Forty-eight percent of the 52 teachers (92.3%) reported this method. Collaborative lesson planning was reported by 42.3% and mentoring or coaching by senior teachers by 32.7%. More practice-intensive methods were substantially less common: peer observation and feedback were reported by 23.1%, demonstration lessons by 21.2%, and both teacher learning circles and self-study/online modules by only 5.8%.

Table 4: Delivery Methods Used in SB-PD (n = 52)

Delivery method	Frequency	Percentage
Whole-staff workshops/lectures	48	92.3
Collaborative lesson planning	22	42.3
Mentoring/coaching by senior teachers	17	32.7
Peer observation and feedback	12	23.1
Demonstration lessons	11	21.2
Teacher learning circles/study groups	3	5.8
Self-study/online modules	3	5.8

Source: Field data, 2025

The dominance of workshops indicates a transmission-oriented model in which professional knowledge is primarily presented to teachers rather than developed through repeated cycles of enactment and feedback. Such a model sits uneasily with the evidence base on effective professional learning. Garet et al. (2001) and Desimone (2009) emphasize active learning and collective participation, while Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) highlight modelling, coaching, collaboration, feedback and reflection. For autism-related professional development, Wang et al. (2024) similarly identify modelling, practical exercise, performance feedback and on-site coaching as important training components. The comparatively low use of peer observation and demonstration lessons in Kongwa therefore represents a substantive design weakness rather than merely a preference for one training format over another.

The result is also important in the Tanzanian context. Hardman et al. (2015) demonstrated that school-based professional development can support more interactive classroom practice, but the effectiveness of such provision depends on its design and implementation. Workshop delivery may be administratively convenient and may efficiently communicate policy or content updates, yet it provides limited evidence that teachers can perform complex classroom practices. In inclusive education, where teachers may need to notice individual responses, modify tasks, use visual support and manage behaviour sensitively, professional learning needs opportunities to observe, rehearse and receive feedback.

4.5 Perceived Improvement in Teaching Skills

Teachers' overall assessment of improvement was modest. Nineteen respondents (36.5%) reported that their teaching skills had improved only slightly and 12 (23.1%) reported no improvement. Sixteen teachers (30.8%) reported moderate improvement, while only five (9.6%) reported significant improvement. Although this measure reflects perception rather than direct observation of classroom practice, the pattern is consistent with the limited intensity and practice-based character of the SB-PD described above.

Table 5: Perceived Improvement in Teaching Skills (n = 52)

Perceived improvement	Count	Percentage
Slightly improved	19	36.5
Moderately improved	16	30.8
Not improved	12	23.1
Significantly improved	5	9.6

Source: Field data, 2025

The findings should be interpreted cautiously because self-reported improvement does not establish causal impact. Nevertheless, it provides an important signal about the perceived usefulness of the current model. Opfer and Pedder (2011) caution that teacher learning depends on the interaction between the learning activity, the individual

teacher and the school context. A predominantly lecture-based model with limited opportunities for practice may therefore produce knowledge exposure without sufficiently supporting changes in instruction. The systematic review by Petersson-Bloom et al. (2023) strengthens this interpretation by showing that teacher development for autism is most useful when it addresses the challenges teachers encounter in their own school contexts.

The review reinforced the survey findings. Available records from two schools showed that an official SB-PD calendar existed, but meetings were irregular and largely monthly. No records were found of sessions specifically focused on autism or inclusive pedagogy, no autism-focused training materials were documented, and no annual training hours were explicitly allocated to autism or inclusion. A school-based support team was recorded, but minutes indicated infrequent meetings. Specialized teaching aids for autism were absent from inventories, and formal guidance on curriculum or assessment adaptation was not identified.

Table 6. Selected Document Review Findings

Document/record indicator	Status	Evidence reported
Official SB-PD schedule/calendar	Present	Irregular; mostly monthly meetings
Autism/inclusive-education sessions	Absent	No specific autism entry in logs
Autism-focused training materials	Absent	General teaching manuals only
Annual hours for autism/inclusion	Absent	No specific hours identified
Functioning school-based support team	Partly present	Exists on paper; meetings infrequent
Curriculum/assessment adaptation guidance	Absent	General regulations used
Specialized autism teaching aids	Absent	No sensory/visual tools recorded

Source: Field Data, 2025

The documentary evidence is critical because it shows that the specialization gap is institutional rather than only perceptual. A school can conduct regular professional development while still leaving autism support outside the formal learning programme. Where no dedicated content, materials, hours or follow-up structures are recorded, autism-related competence is likely to depend on individual teacher initiative or informal peer assistance. Evidence from Ethiopia shows that explicit professional development on autism can strengthen educators' knowledge and intervention selection (Zeleke et al., 2021). International reviews likewise suggest that autism-specific knowledge should be paired with school-based practice and coaching (Petersson-Bloom et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). The Kongwa pattern therefore points to a need to redesign SB-PD not simply to increase its frequency, but to strengthen its specialization, active-learning components and institutional follow-through.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that School-Based Professional Development is operational in the sampled public primary schools in Kongwa District, but its current content and delivery are not sufficiently aligned with the specialized demands of inclusive autism support. SB-PD occurs mainly monthly or less frequently, emphasizes subject content, lesson planning and assessment, and is delivered overwhelmingly through whole-staff workshops. Collaborative and practice-based methods such as peer observation, demonstration lessons and teacher learning circles are comparatively uncommon. Documentary evidence further shows that autism-specific training is not formally institutionalized through dedicated sessions, materials or annual professional-learning hours. Consequently, the existing model provides a general professional-development platform but leaves a substantial gap between broad teacher development and the specialized competence required for supporting autistic learners.

5.2 Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, working with PO-RALG, should incorporate a clearly defined autism and neurodiversity strand within school-based professional development. The strand should address communication support, positive behaviour support, differentiated instruction, visual supports, classroom participation and assessment adaptation. The emphasis should be on practical classroom application rather than awareness alone.

2. District education offices and school leaders should rebalance delivery methods away from near-exclusive reliance on whole-staff lectures. Each SB-PD cycle should

include modelling or demonstration, teacher practice, peer observation, feedback and a follow-up discussion. Low-cost peer coaching and lesson-study approaches are especially feasible where external specialist support is limited.

3. Schools should formally document inclusive professional learning through annual SB-PD plans, attendance records, topic logs, materials and follow-up evidence. Such documentation would make it possible to monitor whether autism-focused professional learning is sustained rather than episodic.

4. School-based support teams should be linked directly to the professional development programme so that difficulties identified in classrooms can become the agenda for subsequent SB-PD sessions. This would help ensure coherence between teacher learning and actual learner needs.

5. Future research should move beyond self-reported participation and perceived improvement by observing classroom practice before and after structured autism-focused SB-PD, examining implementation fidelity, and including outcomes reported by autistic learners and their families. Such evidence would provide a stronger basis for determining which school-based professional-learning models are both feasible and effective in Tanzanian public primary schools.

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