



IMPEDIMENTS TO EFFECTIVE VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR LEARNERS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

Doreen Wawira¹ⁱ,
George Mathenge Wairungu²,
Rachel Kangethe²

¹Master's Student,
Department of Early Childhood and Special Needs Education,
Kenyatta University,
Kenya

²Lecturer, Dr.,
Department of Early Childhood and Special Needs Education,
Kenyatta University,
Kenya

Abstract:

Transitioning learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder into broader societal contexts involves preparing them for various aspects of adult life, including education, employment, and independent living. Research indicates that individuals with autism face barriers such as limited social skills, difficulties in communication, and a lack of access to tailored vocational training. The current study aimed at examining challenges faced by an elected vocational rehabilitation centre while preparing learners with ASD for transitioning to society in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The study employed a mixed-methods research design. Results revealed that learners faced a myriad of challenges, such as anxiety, stigma, social skills deficits, and communication barriers, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and societal awareness programs to facilitate successful integration. Learners with autism require structured, individualized, and sensory-friendly training approaches to enhance their employability and independence.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, impediments, vocational rehabilitation, transitioning, social skill deficit, communication barriers, interventions, mixed method research

ⁱ Correspondence: email doreenwesh@gmail.com

1. Introduction and Background to the Study

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by difficulties in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The incidence of autism has been steadily rising, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) reporting that approximately 1 in 54 children in the United States are diagnosed with the disorder. As these individuals transition into adulthood, it is crucial to implement effective strategies that support their integration into society (Chen *et al.*, 2021). However, significant gaps exist in the research regarding the preparedness of educators, families, and social systems to facilitate a successful transition.

Transitioning learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into adulthood is a global issue, with each country facing unique challenges in preparing these individuals for independent living. In the United States, research by Test, Fowler, Wood, and Brewer (2018) highlights notable concerns about the preparedness of students with ASD for the complexities of adult life, particularly regarding employment and independent living. Despite legislative frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates transition planning and services, studies show that many students with ASD do not receive the necessary support in their final years of schooling. Additionally, both families and educators often lack specialized training tailored to the unique challenges of autism, which undermines effective transition efforts (Cimera, 2019). This gap underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, evidence-based strategies within the American educational system to ensure that autistic learners can successfully navigate their transition to adulthood.

Similarly, in Australia, a study by Hilton *et al.* (2020) revealed that while supportive frameworks like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) have been implemented, there are still notable weaknesses in transition practices for young people with ASD. Issues such as a lack of tailored transition planning and inconsistent statewide implementation persist, despite improvements in access to essential supports and services through the NDIS. Many stakeholders, including educators and service providers, often express uncertainty about how to effectively implement transition strategies that cater to the diverse needs of learners with autism. Systemic barriers, including fragmented services and a shortage of trained personnel, further complicate the transition process (Burns *et al.*, 2021). These challenges highlight the pressing need for enhanced training and resources to improve the transition process for autistic individuals across Australia.

Learners with ASD encounter distinct challenges that hinder their transition into society in Kenya. The existing research specifically focused on the transition of autistic learners in Kenya is minimal (Kagiri *et al.*, 2018), leading to a poor understanding of the transitional landscape. Knowledge gaps exist regarding the roles of teachers, parents, and community members in facilitating this process. Many educators report feeling unprepared to meet the unique needs of learners with ASD due to limited training and

resources (Kinyua *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, societal stigma against autism often results in isolation and a lack of acceptance, complicating the transition even further. This study aimed to identify the specific knowledge gaps related to the preparedness of stakeholders in Kenya for transitioning learners with autism into society by examining their perspectives on effective transition practices and barriers to success. By addressing these gaps, the study contributed to a better understanding and the development of comprehensive transition plans tailored to the needs of autistic individuals in Kenya.

In Nigeria, one out of every 125-150 children is living with this condition. This amounts to about 600,000 Nigerian children. The burden this places on the child, his/her family, society, and the nation at large is unquantifiable, and not only on the nation's social services but also on its GDP. The greater cost is the loss in harnessing the potential in individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) due to inaction and neglect. The depletion of family finances and its effect on the other members of the family; the loss of productivity through time spent on care, instead of engaging in gainful employment; and the loss of future potential of the child (there is ability within every disability). The greatness of a nation is often measured by the premium it places on its weakest members. Currently, Nigeria does not have a policy in place for neurodevelopmental disorders, probably because most are hidden, despite the fact that no social class or economic status is spared. There are major gaps in the knowledge about autism and in the care of children affected, as well as demands on the availability and accessibility of screening as well as diagnostic tools, the cultural determinants of health-seeking behavior, and the availability and spread of facilities where children can receive care and the support available to children and families with autism-related conditions require urgent attention.

2. Objective of the Study

The research examined the challenges faced by a selected vocational rehabilitation center that serves learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Nairobi County, Kenya.

3. Brief literature review: Challenges Faced in Preparing Learners with Autism for Societal Integration

A research by Kuo, Lee and Hsieh (2021) analyzed 40 studies spanning multiple countries to identify common challenges experienced by learners with autism during the transition to adulthood. This review employed a meta-analytic approach and focused on target populations comprising young adults with autism and their families. The findings revealed that inadequate vocational training, social skills deficits, and limited family support systems were prevalent challenges, obstructing successful societal integration. Despite providing a comprehensive overview, the review lacked a deep contextual understanding of specific geographical factors affecting the transition process,

particularly in low-resource settings like Kenya, thereby presenting a methodological limitation.

Krauss *et al.* (2022) conducted a qualitative study in the United States, focusing on the lived experiences of 30 families transitioning children with autism into adulthood. Utilizing in-depth interviews, the research highlighted significant struggles related to navigating bureaucratic systems, securing appropriate educational opportunities, and managing systemic stigma. While this study provides valuable insights into the contextual challenges families face, its findings cannot be entirely generalized to the Kenyan context due to differing cultural perceptions of disability and societal resources. The knowledge gap here underscores the need for research focused specifically on local cultural factors that influence these transitions in Kenya.

Mhando *et al.* (2021) investigated the accessibility of transition programs for youth with autism within secondary schools in Tanzania. Through a mixed-methods approach involving both surveys of educators (n=50) and interviews with parents (n=20), the study found that there was a significant lack of training among educators regarding autism, leading to inadequate support for learners. The findings illustrated that the absence of structured programs directly impacted the preparedness of learners for integrated community life post-education. Although the study's methodology provided rich qualitative insights, the relatively small sample size posed challenges in generalizing the findings beyond the specific context of the schools involved. This indicates a contextual limitation when trying to formulate broader claims about transition challenges in East Africa.

A study by Omondi *et al.* (2022) explored the challenges faced by families of learners with autism regarding societal integration, using a mixed-methods design that surveyed 200 family members and conducted focus groups with 30 parents. Major findings revealed that societal stigma, lack of awareness about autism, and minimal community support made it difficult for learners to find acceptance in society. The mixed-methods approach provided a robust dataset; however, it also illustrated a knowledge gap concerning the intersectionality of socio-economic factors and their impacts on support and integration, suggesting a need for further research into how to adapt strategies to different socio-economic backgrounds.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design.

4.1 Sampling Techniques

This study employed a probability-based stratified sampling technique. In this case, the population was stratified based on key stakeholder groups involved in the transition of learners with autism. These groups included: special needs trainers, parents or guardians of learners with ASD, and learners with autism. Additionally, the purposive sampling

technique was used to select one of the vocational training center offering training to learners with autism.

4.2 Sample Size

The sample size for the study comprised 45 respondents. Thirty learners, six trainers and 9 parents. The sample size is determined based on the principle of saturation in qualitative research, as suggested by Guest *et al.* (2006). Saturation occurs when additional data does not lead to new information. Anticipating this, a preliminary sample size of 30 learners, 9 parents, and 6 trainers is proposed, subject to adjustment based on the saturation point.

Table 3.1: Sample Size

Category	Number
Trainers	6
Parents	9
Learners	30
Total	45

4.3 Research Instruments

The study employed an interview schedule and a questionnaire as data collection instruments. The questionnaires were constructed for learners with ASD. An interview schedule was prepared for both the trainers and the parents of learners with ASD.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Challenges Faced in Preparing Learners with Autism for Societal Integration

Table 4.9 summarises the findings of learners, trainers and parents about the challenges that learners face during their transitions into society.

Table 4.2: Respondents' Views on Challenges that Learners Face During the Transitions Process

Challenges	Learners		Trainers		Parents	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Anxiety and depression	26	72.2	5	83.3	9	100.0
Stigma	25	69.4	5	83.3	8	88.9
Social skills deficits	25	69.4	4	66.7	7	77.8
Communication barriers	24	66.7	3	50.0	7	77.8
Educational gaps	21	58.3	3	50.0	6	66.7
Limited social support	20	55.6	3	50.0	5	55.6
Job readiness	19	52.8	2	33.3	4	44.4

Source: Field Data (2025).

The findings presented in Table 4.9 revealed that a significant percentage of learners 26 (72.2%), trainers 5 (83.3%), and all parents 9 (100%) identified anxiety and depression as a major challenge. This high prevalence suggests that emotional well-being is a critical

aspect of the transition process for learners with autism. These findings align with those of Camacho *et al.* (2019), who noted that individuals with autism often experience higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to their neurotypical peers due to the difficulties they encounter in social situations and adjusting to new environments. Similarly, a study by Hall (2020) highlighted that transition periods, particularly moving from structured environments like vocational rehabilitation centers to society, can exacerbate mental health issues.

Stigma was another significant challenge identified by a large percentage of respondents: 25 (69.4%) of learners, 5 (83.3%) of trainers, and 8 (88.9%) of parents. This suggests that societal attitudes toward autism continue to pose barriers to successful integration. The stigma associated with autism often leads to social exclusion, making it harder for individuals to gain employment or engage in community activities (Alba, 2018). Research by Koyama (2021) further supports this finding, showing that stigma significantly affects the self-esteem and social integration of individuals with autism, particularly during transition periods.

Social skills deficits were reported by 25 (69.4%) of learners, 4 (66.7%) of trainers, and 7 (77.8%) of parents. This finding underscores the social challenges faced by learners with autism during their transition. Social communication difficulties are one of the core characteristics of autism, and these deficits can hinder their ability to interact with peers, colleagues, and others in society (Baron-Cohen, 2020). A study by Minshew and Williams (2018) also showed that the lack of social skills can create difficulties in developing meaningful relationships, which is a key factor in successful transitions.

The findings indicate that 24 (66.7%) of learners, 3 (50.0%) of trainers, and 7 (77.8%) of parents highlighted communication barriers as a key challenge. This finding is consistent with research by Orsmond *et al.* (2013), who noted that communication challenges are a persistent issue for many individuals with autism, particularly when transitioning from educational settings to employment or community roles. These barriers result in miscommunications or a lack of effective expression, further contributing to anxiety and depression.

Educational gaps were noted by 21 (58.3%) of learners, 3 (50.0%) of trainers, and 6 (66.7%) of parents. Learners with autism often face gaps in educational attainment, particularly when there is a lack of specialized support or tailored educational programs (García-Villamizar & Dattilo, 2014). Limited social support was identified as a challenge by 20 (55.6%) of learners, 3 (50.0%) of trainers, and 5 (55.6%) of parents. The lack of robust support networks led to feelings of isolation and limited learners' ability to effectively manage the challenges of transitioning into society. Research by Lau (2016) demonstrated that social support is crucial for individuals with autism, particularly during transition phases, as it provides both emotional and practical assistance in overcoming barriers.

Job readiness was mentioned by 19 (52.8%) of learners, 2 (33.3%) of trainers, and 4 (44.4%) of parents. This finding suggests that while some learners may feel unprepared for the workforce, trainers and parents may not fully recognize the scope of this challenge. Job readiness for individuals with autism often involves not just vocational

skills but also social and communication skills, which can require specialized training. A study by Schall (2013) highlighted that job readiness is a significant challenge for individuals with autism, especially when there is a lack of job-specific support and workplace accommodations.

One common challenge identified by parents is the difficulty learners with autism experience when trying to integrate socially. Many parents noted that their children struggle with understanding social cues, making meaningful connections, and building friendships.

One parent noted that;

"My child has always been a loner. He finds it hard to start conversations or maintain friendships, and this affects his ability to interact meaningfully with peers. In a society where people are judged by their social skills, this is a major barrier."

Parents admitted that they often felt excluded from the transition planning process and received little to no guidance on how to support their children at home. The lack of structured communication between the centres and families resulted in gaps in continuity, where skills learned at the centres were not reinforced in the home environment. This disconnect undermines the holistic development of learners and weakens the support system that is essential for their successful integration.

Several parents pointed out that while their children may have developed some verbal communication skills, they still struggle with expressive and receptive communication, making it hard to navigate complex social or professional interactions.

Another parent explained that;

"Even though my child can speak, he struggles with understanding what others are saying, and he doesn't always express himself clearly. This could affect his performance in a work environment, where communication is key."

Many reported that the facilities were poorly equipped, lacking sensory-friendly environments, functional vocational training tools, and appropriate learning materials tailored to the needs of autistic individuals. Some parents also cited overcrowded classrooms, which make it difficult for instructors to give personalized attention to each learner.

Another prevalent concern among parents is the high levels of anxiety and emotional distress that learners with autism experience when faced with unfamiliar situations or changes in routine.

One parent described their child's reaction to new environments:

"Whenever we try something new, my child gets very anxious. The thought of leaving the familiar environment of home or school makes him overwhelmed. This anxiety could be a

major obstacle to successfully transitioning into society, where there is uncertainty every day."

Parents emphasized that the limited financial resources allocated to vocational rehabilitation centres hinder their capacity to deliver quality training and hire qualified personnel. In some cases, parents reported that they were required to provide supplementary materials or pay for services that should have been covered by public funding. The lack of consistent governmental backing not only places financial strain on families but also signals a broader systemic neglect of autism-related needs in public policy and service provision.

5.2 Additional Support and Resources Needed to Address Challenges

To successfully integrate into society, learners with autism require additional support and resources to address specific challenges they face. Table 4.10 presents findings of learners about the support and resources needed to address the challenges.

Table 4.3: Learners' Views on Additional Support and Resources Needed to Address the Challenges

Additional support and resources	Frequency	Percentage
Mental health services	28	77.8
Autism-specific job training	25	69.4
Social skills training	23	63.9
Family support and education	22	61.1
Autism-friendly recreational activities	21	58.3
Social clubs and groups	20	55.6
Mentorship programs	20	55.6
Sensory-friendly environments	19	52.8

Source: Field Data (2025).

The findings presented in Table 4.10 revealed that the highest percentage of learners, 28 (77.8%), indicated a need for mental health services, emphasizing the crucial role of psychological well-being in the transition process. This finding aligns with research by Spain and Happé (2020), who found that individuals with autism frequently experience heightened anxiety, depression, and emotional distress, particularly during transitions. Without proper mental health support, these learners may struggle with self-confidence, motivation, and the ability to adapt to new environments. Kerns *et al.* (2015) similarly noted that vocational rehabilitation centres must incorporate counselling and mental health interventions tailored to individuals with autism to ensure a smoother transition into society.

A significant proportion, 25 (69.4%) of learners expressed a need for autism-specific job training, highlighting gaps in vocational programs. Many traditional vocational training curricula may not be adequately structured to meet the learning and working styles of individuals with autism (Wehman *et al.*, 2016). A research by Burke, Andersen, Bowen, Howard and Allen (2020) has shown that customized employment

training programs that consider sensory sensitivities, structured routines, and clear task expectations significantly improve job readiness and retention for individuals with autism.

Social skills training was identified as a necessary support by 23 (63.9%) of learners. Social deficits are one of the defining characteristics of autism, making it crucial for vocational programs to include structured training on workplace etiquette, teamwork, and communication. A study by Gantman *et al.* (2012) supports the effectiveness of targeted social skills programs in improving interpersonal relationships and professional interactions among individuals with autism. Without this support, learners may struggle with job retention, peer collaboration, and social integration in work environments.

A total of 22 (61.1%) of learners identified family support and education as a crucial resource. Families play a key role in supporting individuals with autism throughout the transition process, yet many lack the necessary knowledge and resources to assist effectively (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). Research by Poon *et al.* (2021) indicates that structured family training programs can enhance parents' ability to advocate for their children, reinforce vocational skills at home, and provide emotional support. This suggests that vocational rehabilitation centres must integrate family education programs into their transition frameworks to ensure holistic support.

Over half 21 (58.3%) of learners expressed a need for autism-friendly recreational activities. Recreational opportunities not only promote well-being but also provide critical platforms for developing social and independent living skills (Shattuck *et al.*, 2011). Vocational centres that incorporate structured recreational activities, such as sensory-friendly outings, inclusive sports, and creative arts programs, enhance the overall quality of life and social inclusion of individuals with autism (Draheim *et al.*, 2020).

A total of 20 (55.6%) of learners highlighted the need for social clubs and groups, emphasizing the importance of structured socialization opportunities. Research by Matson and Goldin (2013) has demonstrated that social isolation is a major concern for individuals with autism, particularly in adulthood. By fostering inclusive social groups, vocational rehabilitation centres can help learners develop friendships, practice communication skills, and build support networks that extend beyond training programs.

Another 20 (55.6%) of learners emphasized the importance of mentorship programs. Mentorship has been shown to be a highly effective strategy in helping individuals with autism navigate employment and social challenges (Griffiths *et al.*, 2016). Vocational rehabilitation centres that implement structured mentorship initiatives where learners are paired with professionals, peer mentors, or experienced individuals can significantly enhance confidence, motivation, and workplace adaptability.

Lastly, 19 (52.8%) of learners identified sensory-friendly environments as a critical requirement. Sensory sensitivities are a common challenge for individuals with autism, affecting their ability to function in traditional workplaces (Robertson & Baron-Cohen,

2017). Research by Ashburner *et al.* (2013) suggests that simple environmental modifications, such as reducing noise levels, providing structured workspaces, and offering sensory breaks, can significantly improve the comfort and productivity of individuals with autism.

From the interview schedule, one of the trainers noted that;

“A specialized curriculum would allow us to address the unique needs of each learner with ASD. Every individual on the autism spectrum is different, with their own strengths, challenges, and learning styles. For instance, some learners may require extra support with social skills, while others may need help with sensory integration or anxiety management.” (TR001)

Another trainer noted that;

“In my opinion, a specialized curriculum should prioritize life skills that are essential for independent living and employment. Many learners with ASD struggle with everyday tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and personal care, which can be significant barriers to transition. Additionally, a focus on life skills would enable us to address the often-overlooked areas of mental health and well-being, which are critical for learners with ASD as they navigate the challenges of transition.” (TR002)

6. Conclusion

A myriad of challenges affect the vocational training of learners with Autism in Nairobi County, Kenya. It was evident that parental engagement is crucial in reinforcing vocational skills and social adaptation. However, many parents lack adequate knowledge and resources to effectively support their children. Additionally, societal stigma and limited community awareness about autism hinder smooth integration. Some of the challenges faced by vocational rehabilitation centres in preparing learners with autism for societal integration included inadequate funding, a lack of trained personnel, limited job placement opportunities, and insufficient autism-friendly infrastructure. The absence of structured transition programs and workplace accommodations further compounds the difficulties faced by learners.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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