

Implementing the complementary basic education programme for the purpose of mainstreaming the out-of-school children in Tanzania

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Abstract. The Complementary Basic Education in Tanzania (COBET) is a programme that aims to provide educational opportunities for out-of-school children, thus facilitating their mainstreaming into the formal education system. This qualitative study, coupled with the phenomenological design, investigated the resources necessary and strategies for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal education in Biharamulo District. The pertinent data were collected through interviews, observations and documentary reviews, which were subjected to thematic analysis. The study involved 34 informants, including the District Adult Education Officer, head teachers, facilitators and learners. The findings indicate a significant lack of teaching and learning materials, particularly non-text resources, as well as insufficient operational funding for COBET centres. Besides, facilitators received no honoraria, and training opportunities were infrequent. The study concludes that inadequate resources conventionally hinder the effective mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal education. It is therefore recommended that there is a prerequisite to enhancing the availability and accessibility of resources so as to ensure the sustainability and success of the COBET programme in Tanzania.

Keywords: complementary basic education, out-of-school children, teaching and learning materials

1. Introduction

Education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right for all citizens regardless of their differences [14, 38]. The right to education was first articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights [39, Article 26] and has been emphasised in various international frameworks, including the 1990 World Conference on Education for All [13, 35], the Millennium Development Goals [41] and the Sustainable Development Goals [40]. In this context, many countries have taken various initiatives to ensure access to basic education for all children, including out-of-school children. The Complementary Basic Education (CBE) programme has been one of those initiatives adopted by many countries as an alternative approach to providing basic education to out-of-school children [29]. Despite the fact that many countries around the world take initiatives to provide education to all school-aged children, a significant number of primary school-age children are still out of school. The global educational monitoring report of 2023 shows that the number of out-of-school children has increased up to 250 million worldwide by 2022 [8]. Nevertheless, sub-Saharan Africa has been noted as a leading region with 98 million primary school-age children who were out of school by 2021 [9]. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the state of resources and the strategies necessary for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education in Tanzania.

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*Educational
Dimension*



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1.1. An overview on the implementation of complementary basic education programme

The CBE programme has emerged as a vital initiative adopted by various countries to provide a second chance for children who have either dropped out of school or never had the opportunity to enrol on primary education [29]. The primary objective of CBE is to re-integrate these children into the formal education system [27]. Various countries, including Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Ghana, Bangladesh and Kenya, have made significant efforts to ensure that out-of-school children gain access to basic education [1, 2]. This underscores the importance of effective strategies and adequate resources in facilitating the mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal educational settings. Consequently, it is crucial to investigate the resources and strategies necessary for the successful integration of these children into formal primary education.

Despite the promise of the CBE programme, challenges persist in the mainstreaming of out-of-school children across various nations. For instance, in countries like Egypt, Pakistan, Ghana, Malawi, and Nigeria, the implementation of CBE is hindered by factors such as inadequate training for facilitators, limited funding, a shortage of instructional materials and ineffective teaching strategies. These obstacles highlight the urgent need for a more robust approach to the implementation of CBE. Thus, a thorough study is imperative for the realisation of the programme's execution and, thereafter, ascertaining the literature gap.

In Tanzania, several scholars have accentuated numerous factors impeding the successful implementation of Complementary Basic Education (COBET), such as the research work by Michael, Ndijuye and Ephrem [19] who indicated that the ratio of books to learners coupled with a general lack of appropriate teaching and learning resources specific to the COBET curriculum are inadequate. Moreover, Mnubi [21] found that, although facilitators were trained to use participatory and child-friendly approaches, they often resorted to traditional lecture methods due to the large number of COBET learners and a severe shortage of facilitators. This situation limits facilitators' ability to engage with students and address their diverse learning needs fully. In the same vein, Michael, Ndijuye and Ephrem [20] identified key demotivating factors for learners to engage fully in the COBET programme, which include the absence of after-work or evening classes and lack of financial support for school-related expenses. These challenges compel the researchers to make a closer examination of the COBET implementation in facilitating the mainstreaming of out-of-school children.

Initiatives are being taken to integrate the out-of-school children into formal education [31] mainly two years of study at COBET centres, culminating in the Standard Four National Examination [24, 34, 37]. However, statistics indicate that, as of 2021, approximately 1.7 million primary school-aged children remained out of school [36]. Furthermore, data from Basic Education Statistics in Tanzania (BEST) reveals an increase in primary school dropouts from 167,834 in 2019 to 193,605 in 2022, exacerbating the population of out-of-school children [32, 33]. A study by Edwin, Amina and Godwin [6] documented that COBET learners were also dropping out, leading to the closure of several COBET centres in Tanzania mainland. Mbilu [17] noted that very few learners transitioned from COBET centres to formal education, with many either repeating the course or quitting before mainstreaming, which implies that there are significant barriers existing that thwart the achievement of COBET's objectives. The increasing number of out-of-school children poses a risk of rising street children and illiteracy in society. Thus, this paper aims to shed light on the implementation of the COBET programme in Tanzania with a focus on mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education. Specifically, the study aims to assess the state of resources essential for this transition and identify effective strategies to enhance

the COBET programme.

1.2. Research questions

1. What is the state of resources necessary for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education?
2. What are the strategies to be taken for improving the COBET programme in mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education?

1.3. Contributions of the study

The findings of the current study are expected to raise awareness among various educational stakeholders in the broader community. In particular, the findings are expected to help policymakers and programme administrators gain insights into the current practices of the programme's centres and the extent to which they facilitate the mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal education.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded by social constructivism, a theory developed by Vygotsky, which posits that learning is fundamentally a social process. According to this theory, language and culture play an essential role in human intellectual development and shape how humans perceive the world. Vygotsky [42] argued that learners construct knowledge through personal experiences and social interactions. Learning occurs when individuals actively engage in social activities, construct meaning within their context, and operate within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where more knowledgeable others provide guidance and support. In the COBET learning context, the teacher serves as the more knowledgeable others, facilitating learning by employing learner-centred and collaborative teaching methods. The teacher helps learners acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes through interactive methodologies, the use of teaching and learning materials available in the environment and effective instructional strategies. This implies that if resources are adequately utilised and learners collaborate with both peers and more knowledgeable others, the mainstreaming process will be effective.

Supporting this framework, Smith, Lovatt and Wise [30] introduced the Accelerated Learning Model (ALM), which aims at expediting the teaching and learning process so as to achieve desired outcomes more efficiently than traditional methods [1]. ALM focuses on fostering deeper learning and enhancing learners' progress [26]. The ALM is relevant to COBET as it provides a way for the COBET centres to fast-track the learning of out-of-school children, ensuring smooth mainstreaming to formal education. By emphasising deeper learning, learner engagement, and efficient instructional strategies, ALM supports COBET in creating an inclusive and stimulating learning environment where learners can acquire essential knowledge and skills at an accelerated pace. This model was designed to assist developing nations in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) goal No. 2 and the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goal No. 4 through a condensed curriculum, learner-centred pedagogy, interactive teaching methods and extended instructional time [18]. The model has principles that shape the way the model works and is applied in learning. However, four out of nine principles by Hoffman et al. [11] were used in this study; namely, we learn best when we are not affected by negative emotions and enjoy the learning process, we access information through all of our senses, we learn best when we are engaged, we learn more if we can connect the information to other things.

The model was valuable for investigating whether the learners learn best in interactive learning environments without being affected by negative emotions. Besides, it was used to find out if facilitators were able to engage learners in the teaching

and learning process. Consequently, the study was able to find out the status of COBET facilitators, the availability and usefulness of teaching and learning materials in COBET centres, and the comfort of the learners in attending the class at the agreed time. It was essential for the study to investigate whether the state of resources in COBET centres enhances learners' motivation and readiness to learn, ultimately enabling them to take the National Standard Four Examination for transition into the formal education system.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

This study employed a qualitative research approach so as to collect rich and in-depth insights with regard to the individual experiences, attitudes, behaviours and multiple meanings from the study informants [4, 25]. The approach was apt for the study since it allows researchers to delve into complex questions, such as the reasons behind certain behaviours and to scrutinise the experiences of the programme providers [10]. Moreover, the study employed a phenomenological design to investigate informants' experiences, thoughts, descriptions, expressions and interactions in their natural settings in relation to the COBET centres. The design helped to reveal the meanings and values attached to the COBET programme. Thus, the design facilitated the gathering of in-depth information regarding the mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal education in Tanzania.

3.2. The study area, sample and sampling techniques

The study took place in Biharamulo district in the Kagera region in the United Republic of Tanzania. The region was selected based on the 2022 BEST data, which show 16,726 pupils' dropouts in the Kagera Region, making it one of the three regions with the highest dropout rates in the country [33]. However, Kagera was among the first five regions in Tanzania in which a pilot study on the COBET programme took place from 1999 to 2002 [37]. Biharamulo district was purposely selected for the reason that it was the leading district with the highest dropout rates in the region, recording a total number of 4,755 primary school pupils' dropouts in 2022 [33]. The assumption was that the effective implementation of the COBET program would be sufficient to facilitate the mainstreaming of out-of-school children into the formal education system. The informants were purposively sampled so as to share their experiences on the implementation of the COBET programme in the study area. The purposive sampling technique was apt in this study as it helped the researcher to obtain informants who were uniquely considered to possess vital information [4, 16]. Thus, the researcher sampled a total number of 34 informants from 3 COBET centres, including 1 District Primary Adult Education Officer (DPAEO), 3 head teachers, 6 COBET facilitators and 24 COBET learners.

3.3. Data collection procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, documentary reviews and observation methods. The tools were initially developed in English and then translated by language experts into Swahili language to mitigate potential language barriers. Semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was employed due to their flexibility since the inclusion of follow-up questions for clarifications is allowed, enabling deeper exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives [4]. The interview sessions took at least 30 to 45 minutes per informant, during which the notebook and audiotape recorders were used to facilitate transcription during data analysis. Documentary review was employed due to its ability to offer permanent data that can be reviewed repeatedly [3]. The DPAE office reviewed the documents, as well as the

head teacher's office and the facilitator's office. Besides, observation was employed for the reason that it is a vital method in social research as it helps to discover complex interactions within natural social contexts [15]. Non-participant observation was carried out using observation checklists, thus allowing the study to get what was taking place in a real situation instead of relying on reported information [43].

3.4. Ethical considerations

This study carefully considered ethical issues. Before the data collection process began, informed consent was obtained from each informant. No informant was coerced into participating in the study; instead, the researchers explained the study's purpose and the nature of each informant's involvement. Besides, informants were assured of the confidentiality of their information and that the data collected would be reported without disclosing their identities. Anonymity was maintained by assigning letters to the informants instead of using their real names.

3.5. Data analysis procedures

The data recorded in the field notebook and audio tape recorder from informants were subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed in this study for the reason that it is a recognised method for data analysis in qualitative research, enhancing the credibility of findings through its openness and flexibility [5]. The data analysis process began with the transcription of the recorded data, followed by the translation from Swahili, the language used during data collection, into English by translation experts. The next step involved reading and re-reading each transcript to interpret the data through a coding process. During this phase, inter-coder reliability was established by having two independent coders coding the same transcripts, thus ensuring consistency and transparency in the coding process along with enhancing the reliability of the codes [22]. Finally, similar codes generated by the two coders were merged to develop themes and categories for reporting.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the study conducted in Biharamulo District, Tanzania. The study had two objectives: to investigate the state of resources necessary for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education and to investigate the strategies to be taken for improving the COBET programme's mainstreaming. Before presenting the findings, the demographic information of the informants is presented below.

4.1. Demographic characteristics of informants

This study involved 34 informants from 3 COBET centres, comprising 1 DPAEO, 3 head teachers, 6 COBET facilitators and 24 COBET learners. The age range of the informants was from 26 to 55 years. For the case of the learners, 9 learners had an age range from 15 to 18 years, whereas 15 learners were below the age of 15 years. All workers who participated in this study had a certificate in education, diploma certificate, or bachelor's degree, except for one facilitator who had an ordinary secondary education certificate. All workers had more than six years of working experience, especially having worked with the COBET centres, with the exception of the District Primary Adult Education Officer, who had a two-year working experience with COBET centres.

4.2. The state of resources necessary for mainstreaming the out-of-school children into formal primary education

This objective sought to investigate the state of resources necessary for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education. In this objective, the state

of teaching and learning materials, financial resources and COBET facilitators were investigated. Figure 1 summarises the results from DPAEO, head teachers and COBET facilitators.

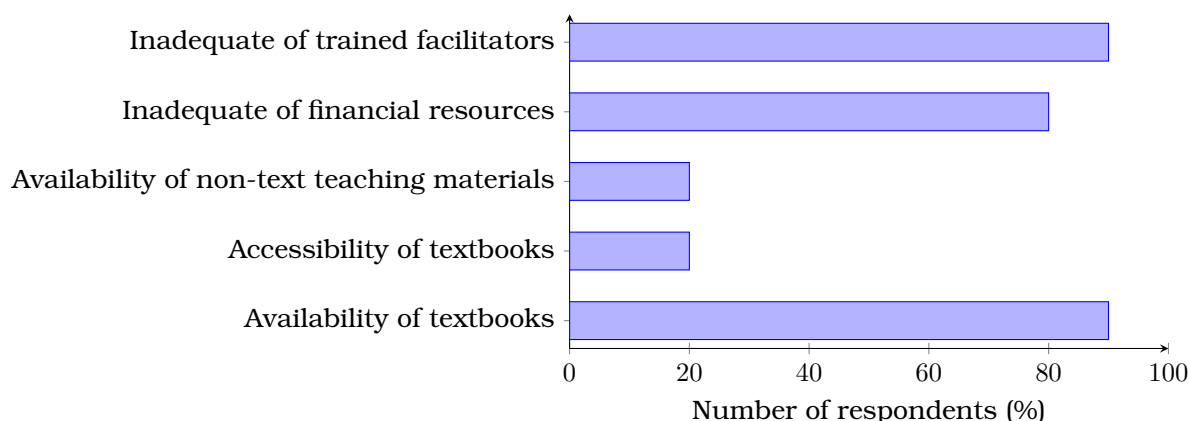


Figure 1: The state of resources necessary for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education (field data, 2024).

Two aspects, text materials and non-text materials, were investigated based on teaching and learning materials. It was found that text materials were sufficient, whereas non-text materials were scarce across the visited centres. The site visit was conducted in all 3 COBET centres which were involved in this study, and the storage conditions of textbooks were documented. It was found that there were sufficient textbooks compared to the number of learners. The learner-textbook ratio was 1:1, and there were sufficient reference textbooks in all the centres involved in the study. Despite the fact that all centres had sufficient textbooks, the facilitators were observed teaching in the classrooms without learners having textbooks. Facilitators had their personal copies, while the learners had none. With regard to reasons for not providing the learners with the textbooks, one facilitator from Centre B asserted that:

It is true that we have sufficient textbooks, but we do not have a library where we can keep them so that the learners can access them. However, we are currently working on a plan for the best way to provide our learners with textbooks. In fact, we are figuring out how our learners can borrow textbooks for their private studies even when they are not in the classroom. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre B, in April, 2024)

Other reasons for not providing the learners with the textbooks include the type of teaching methods employed by facilitators purporting to avoid the damage or loss of the textbooks. In the case of non-text materials, it was found that such materials were scarce in all 3 visited centres. Observations revealed that facilitators in all 3 centres involved in this study were teaching without using any teaching aids. Through the interviews, the findings revealed that there are no adequate non-text materials which are specific for COBET centres (figure 1). Regarding the availability of non-text materials, one of the facilitators from Centre A had the following observation:

We do not receive any teaching and learning materials from this centre but rather rely solely on the primary school, with the exception of textbooks provided by the government. Facilities such as pens, chalks, marker pens, manila sheets, chairs, desks for the learners, classrooms and all other teaching materials and facilities are obtained from this primary school. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre A, in April, 2024)

One of the head teachers from Centre C commented on the following with regard to the availability of teaching and learning materials:

The centres have no teaching and learning materials because they do not have an allocated budget. Consequently, they depend solely on the nearby primary school. However, it would be great if these centres could be self-sufficient, with their own classrooms, facilitators and all the necessary teaching and learning resources. I believe that we would be able to achieve the set goals better if they were fully autonomous and self-reliant. (Interview with head teacher from Centre C, in May, 2024)

In the same line, the DPAEO had the following regarding the state of resources in COBET Centres:

The operations of the COBET centres rely heavily on the primary schools. Normally, they use non-text materials from the primary school, and we advise the facilitators to prepare teaching and learning materials using their local environment. (Interview with DPAEO, in May, 2024)

The quotation above implies that the learners face difficulties in learning due to the inaccessibility of the textbooks. It is clear that there are sufficient textbooks, but they are still not exhaustively utilised by the learners. Besides, the dependence on non-text materials from primary schools indicates that these centres cannot operate or sustain themselves independently, as they are not allocated the capitation grant necessary for their operation.

The financial resource was another aspect investigated. The study findings revealed that no financial resources were provided for COBET centres. Through interviews, the study findings revealed that many COBET centres were closed down because they were not receiving any funds to pay the honoraria of paraprofessional facilitators. Regarding this concern, one of the head teachers from Centre B had the following narration:

During the establishment of the centres, the government allocated honoraria to the facilitators. Thus, the paraprofessional facilitators collaborated with the permanently employed facilitators who were selected to teach in the COBET centres. Later on, the honoraria were stopped, thus leading to a significant number of paraprofessional facilitators to stop teaching in the COBET centres. As a result, quite a good number of centres were closed down. (Interview with head teacher from Centre B, in April, 2024)

The study findings reveal that they do not receive any operational funds. However, they get the support of the working materials from the primary schools where the COBET centres are located. Regarding the availability of the operational funds for COBET centres, one of the facilitators from centre C asserted that:

We do not receive operational funds directly from the government, but we get the amenities such as chalk, pens, paper and manila sheets from this primary school in order to prepare teaching aids. (Interview with facilitator from Centre C, in May, 2024)

With regard to the possibility of receiving any funds from the community or organisations or any other donors for these COBET centres, the study findings reveal that the centres do not receive any funds from any stakeholders. In support of the argument in question, one of the facilitators from Centre A had the following observation:

We do not receive any funds for the centres from any stakeholders or well-wishers except for some parents whose children are COBET learners who pay contributions for their children's porridge. (Interview with facilitator from Centre A, in April, 2024)

The above verbatim quotes suggest that the COBET centres do not receive funds to pay the paraprofessional facilitators or for other operating costs, thus relying solely on primary school capitation grants. The paraprofessional facilitators stopped teaching in COBET classes because they were not paid their honoraria. This situation has exacerbated the closure of many COBET centres, and the remaining centres depend on primary schools for their survival.

Another resource investigated is the state of COBET facilitators in the form of their training. Two concerns about their qualification for teaching the COBET classes were investigated, which were based on the initial training and development training. The findings of the interviews show that only one facilitator was trained, while five facilitators had not received any training on the COBET programme before teaching the COBET learners. The study findings indicate that some facilitators were assigned to teach in the COBET classes despite not having received any training before teaching in those centres. The informants' voices evidenced this during the interview. For instance, one of the facilitators from Centre C asserted the initial training of facilitators:

Before teaching the COBET classes, I had not received any training in respect to teaching COBET learners. However, since I am used to teaching Standard I and II pupils in ordinary primary school, I find it possible to apply the same teaching methods and approaches in teaching the learners in the COBET programme, though some of the COBET learners are older. Subsequently, I have to treat some of them like adults. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre C, in May, 2024)

The findings further indicate that any teacher can be assigned to teach in the COBET classes at times when there are no teachers who have received training on the COBET programme. It was revealed that if a training session has been scheduled, the facilitators without any training will be obliged to attend the training in order to be equipped with a better understanding of the COBET program. Further details regarding the criteria for selecting the COBET facilitators were provided by the head teacher from Centre A as indicated below:

The primary criterion for selecting COBET facilitators is considering whether the particular facilitator has received COBET training. However, it is difficult to maintain the trained teachers because sometimes, a teacher who has received training may be transferred to another school. In that regard, any teacher can be selected to teach the COBET learners regardless of his/her training background. (Interview with the head teacher from Centre A, in April, 2024)

In the case of development training, the aim was to find out if the COBET facilitators had attended any formal development training in the COBET programme, either through short courses, seminars, or workshops, especially prior to teaching the COBET classes. Through the interviews, the facilitators' responses revealed that four out of six facilitators had attended formal development training on the COBET programme. One of the facilitators from Centre B had the following narration regarding the aspect of development training in the COBET programme:

I have attended the COBET programme-related training twice as much. The first training was in 2015, and it was about the new COBET curriculum. The second training was in 2018, during which we were trained on how to restructure the lesson periods following the change of textbooks. We also learned how to create a new timetable in order to cope with such changes. Through such trainings, I have been equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills in handling the COBET. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre B, in April, 2024)

The study findings indicate that COBET facilitators who had never attended any training need effective training, as pointed out by one of the facilitators from Centre C, who was quoted during the interview regarding lack of training in relation to effectiveness in teaching:

Frankly speaking, I have not attended any COBET training, but I took over the responsibility of co-teaching the COBET learners in collaboration with the remaining trained facilitator. This happened when another trained facilitator was transferred to a different school. In fact, I do face some difficulties in teaching them, but I often seek assistance from the trained facilitator. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre C, in May, 2024)

With regard to the transfer of trained facilitators to other schools and leaving the centre with a shortage of trained facilitators, the DPAEO had the following to say:

The transfer of teachers from one working station to another station is the right of teachers when the particular teacher requests to be transferred. In that regard, it is difficult to retain the trained staff at the COBET centres. Perhaps the best solution could be the incorporation of COBET training into the curriculum of the teacher training colleges, something which would help in the preparation of specialised teachers to teach the COBET learners and thus ensure the constant supply of facilitators to COBET centres who are well trained for the effectiveness of the programme. (Interview with the DPAEO, in May, 2024)

With reference to the above verbatim quotes, it implies that the majority of facilitators lack initial training, though they were teaching the COBET classes after being assigned by the school administration. Besides, the transfer of trained facilitators from one primary school to another has been a challenge in retaining teachers who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to teach in the COBET centres. Therefore, the government should incorporate COBET training into the teachers' training colleges curriculum, something which would help in the preparation of specialised teachers to teach COBET learners.

4.3. The strategies for improving COBET mainstreaming of the out-of-school children into formal primary education

Data collected for this objective were analysed to investigate the strategies to be used for improving the COBET programme so as to ensure effective mainstreaming. The analysis of the findings shows that informants cited different strategies for improving the mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal education. Figure 2 summarises the data from DPAEO, head teachers, facilitators and COBET learners on the strategies for improving the COBET programme for effective mainstreaming.

Analysis of the data collected from the interviews shows that the most mentioned strategies were Honoraria for COBET facilitators, receiving operational grants to

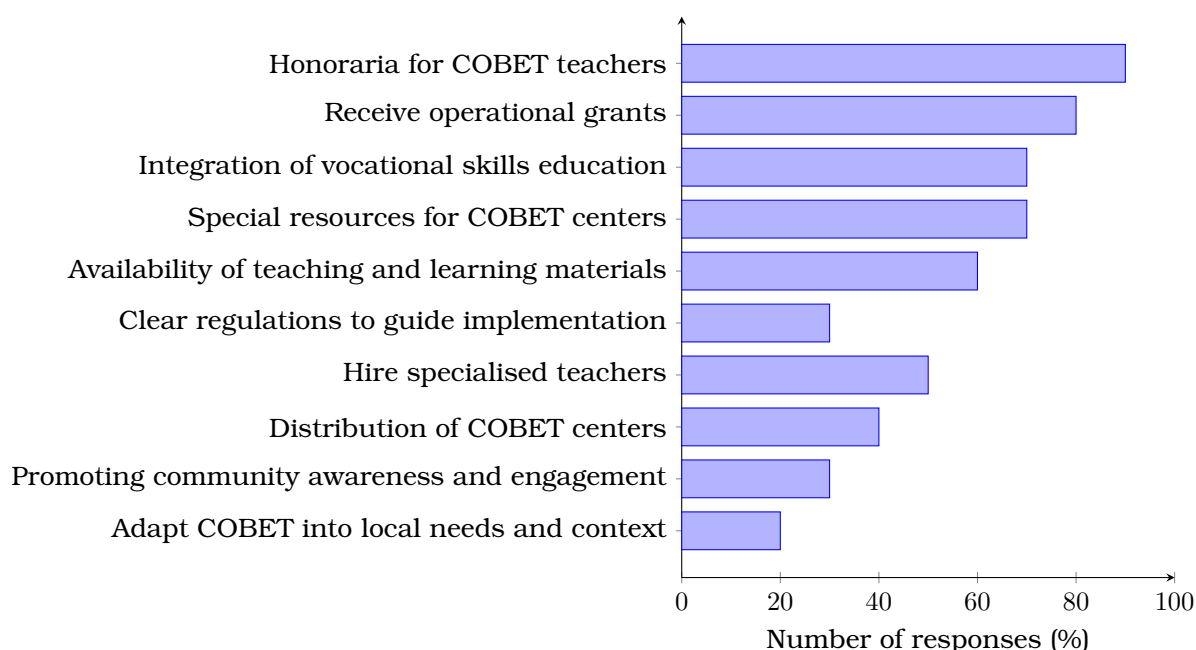


Figure 2: Strategies for improving COBET mainstreaming of the out-of-school children into formal primary education (field data, 2024).

sustain themselves instead of relying on primary schools, integration of vocational skills education, special resources for COBET centres, availability of teaching and learning materials and hiring specialised teachers. The least mentioned strategies were clear regulations to guide the implementation of the programme, distribution of COBET centres, promoting community awareness and engagement and adapting COBET to local needs and context.

The informants pointed out that the strategies mentioned above could significantly improve COBET and ensure effective mainstreaming of out-of-school children. One of the head teachers from Centre C had the following suggestion regarding securing resources:

The government should hire and deploy dedicated teachers specifically to teach COBET learners and ensure that COBET classes are taught by qualified facilitators. The capitation grant should also be provided directly to COBET centres, thus allowing them to be self-sufficient and avoid relying on primary schools, which also face resource constraints oftentimes. (Interview with the head teacher from Centre C, in April, 2024)

The above quote suggests that it would be beneficial to learners if the government would ensure proper training and recruitment of specialised teachers who will teach in COBET centres. Besides, the centres should be provided with operational funds to become self-independent. Moreover, the study findings revealed that there must be equal distribution of the COBET centres, thus ensuring that all out-of-school children across the country have access to the COBET programme and the opportunity to resume their studies. In this context, one of the head teachers from Center B suggested the following plan:

The government should introduce at least one COBET centre in every ward in order to enable out-of-school children to have access to education in their local communities. The allocation of one COBET centre in each ward will reduce the overall costs incurred by the government, thus providing the

COBET learners with a better and more accessible learning environment.
(Interview with the head teacher from Centre B, in April, 2024)

With reference to the above verbatim quote, it implies that, by allocating COBET centres in each ward, the government would be better positioned to provide improved infrastructure for COBET centres compared to the current situation. Besides, all out-of-school children in the country will be likely to benefit from this second chance to resume their studies, unlike the current scenario, where some out-of-school children have access to COBET centres. In contrast, others miss this opportunity because such centres are not available in their communities.

The findings of the current study suggest that COBET facilitators need to receive their honoraria in a timely manner. Besides, the COBET centres should be equipped with up-to-date resources and equipment in order to keep pace with the advancement in science and technology. In this regard, one facilitator from Center A had the following observation:

The facilitators should receive their honoraria timely, just as the government employees receive their monthly salaries. On the other hand, the COBET centres should also be provided with ICT equipment so that the learners can keep up with the rapid changes happening in science and technology in the dynamic world today. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre A, in April, 2024)

The above quotation implies that the provision of ICT equipment to each COBET centre can be a motivating factor, consequently attracting more learners to join the COBET centres. Access to such technological changes would enable the learners to cope with the advancements in science and technology, thereby enhancing their skills and employability. Moreover, the study findings indicate that COBET learners should have their own classrooms and other facilities despite being located within primary school premises. This arrangement would provide the learners with a unique learning environment and schedule different from that of the normal primary school pupils. One learner from Center A had the following argument regarding the learners' classrooms:

The government should build classrooms, teachers' offices and sanitation facilities specifically for us so that we can study comfortably. This will help us to balance the best time to study and the time to work so as to earn income. I believe that, if we have our own classrooms, many children who are out of school will join this centre. (Interview with the learner from Centre A, in April, 2024)

The quotation above implies that COBET learners can have greater flexibility when it comes to managing their time, thus enabling them to engage in income-generating activities. The learners who are also employed in informal jobs would have the opportunity to study after their regular working hours. By providing the COBET learners with special classes and schedules, the programme can better accommodate their diverse needs, thus enhancing their chances of success.

Similarly, with regard to the sustainability of the COBET centres, the DPAEO asserted that:

It would be better if the government made the COBET centres self-sufficient by building their infrastructure, recruiting specialised teachers and allocating their own capitation grants just as it does for primary and secondary

schools so as to increase the efficiency of these centres and help them achieve their intended goals. (Interview with the DPAEO, in May, 2024)

The strategy which was least mentioned for improving COBET so as to ensure effective mainstreaming of out-of-school children is the promotion of public awareness and community engagement. During the interviews, the informants pointed out the need for the government to promote widespread public awareness of the COBET programme's objectives and its significance within the community. Regarding awareness and community engagement, the head teacher from Centre B asserted that:

The government should conscientise the community with regard to the COBET programme's objectives and its implications within the community. This will encourage the participation of the parents to make them build interest in enrolling their children who have not been to school as well as those who dropped out, thus providing them with the opportunity to mainstream into formal education. (Interview with the head teacher from Centre B, in April, 2024)

Another head teacher from Centre A had the following opinion regarding awareness and community engagement through religious leaders:

The government should cooperate with religious leaders in attempting to sensitise the community about the importance of the COBET programme and the likely consequences of denying children the opportunity to receive education. I personally believe that, with such cooperation, the COBET centres will be highly successful in achieving their intended goals. (Interview with the head teacher from Centre A, in April, 2024)

In the same line, one of the learners from centre A had an opinion with regard to the creation of awareness through church leaders:

It would be good if the COBET programme were advocated in churches and parent meetings at schools. Quite a good number of the out-of-school children could join in the COBET centres. When parents hear the priest promoting the COBET programme in the church, they will be inspired and thereafter motivate their out-of-school children to join the centre, as happened to me. (Interview with the learner from Centre A, in April, 2024)

One of the facilitators from Centre B had the following comment regarding creating community awareness through media:

The community should be well informed about the comprehensive goals and objectives of the COBET programme. The media, such as radio, television and social media platforms, should be utilised to educate the public about the COBET programme. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre B, in April, 2024)

The above quotations imply that religious leaders and media can inspire and motivate people in all aspects of life. In that regard, religious leaders can help in promoting the COBET programme and thus inspire the community to participate in promoting the COBET programme. Moreover, the government should use media platforms such as WhatsApp, X, Facebook and Instagram, as well as other social media to enlighten the public about the significance of the COBET programme and its objectives. One facilitator from Centre A had the following comment regarding community engagement through lower-level leaders:

The government leaders at the village and ward levels should be involved in overseeing the COBET programme, and this should be a standing agenda in their regular meetings. The community should also be engaged in the construction of COBET facilities with the support of the government. (Interview with the facilitator from Centre A, in April, 2024)

The statement pointed out by the facilitator above highlights that a lower-level involvement approach will enhance the programme awareness within the community and the challenges that face the COBET centres, thus being part and parcel in facilitating the establishment of the strategies so as to address the likely challenges. Through the interview, the DPAEO emphasised the importance of involving the community leaders in the implementation of the COBET programme, although it was among the least mentioned strategies. During the interview, the DPAEO asserted that:

The community leaders should be involved in creating awareness amongst individuals and the community as a whole since they constitute the key figures in the community. Therefore, it is easy for the community leaders to educate the community about the importance of the COBET programme and thus encourage the community to engage and participate in the implementation of the programme. The laws and guidelines should also be clear, and responsibilities should be well-defined so that everyone can work to achieve the intended goals. (Interview with the DPAEO, in May, 2024)

The above quotation implies that community leaders should be actively involved in the implementation of the COBET programme. In the same vein, clear laws and guidelines need to be enacted, and the specific roles and responsibilities of various leaders and stakeholders should be in place and outlined. This approach will task all parties in the community so as to fulfil their duties and contribute to achieving the goals of the COBET programme. It is also essential to ensure that the religious leaders are well-informed about the COBET programme. By doing so, such leaders will be educating the community on the importance of participating in the programme and encouraging the families to enrol their out-of-school children in the COBET centres. Consequently, this will facilitate the mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal education.

Adapting the COBET programme to local needs and contexts was another least-mentioned strategy proposed for improving the COBET programme. It was suggested that the curriculum should incorporate practical life skills and entrepreneurial training, unlike the current curriculum, which teaches COBET learners only academic subjects similar to those taught to other primary school pupils, despite their status as young adults capable of securing employment. The additional skills will significantly enhance their well-being after completing their studies. In this regard, one of the learners from Center B had the following testimony:

I am grateful for the opportunity to study at the COBET centre. However, I think if our facilitators also equip us with practical life skills like welding, carpentry, cookery and sewing, we can be self-employed after completing our studies. The life skills can not only benefit us but also attract more out-of-school children who currently sell pastries in the streets to enrol in the programme. (Interview with the learner from Centre B, in April, 2024)

The above quotation implies that, though the COBET learners are grateful for the opportunity they have been given to return to school, their pressing need is to be taught the practical skills so as to be equipped with the necessary competencies which

will support them in securing employment or being self-employed in various fields, thereby enabling them to generate income after completing their studies. With regard to the measures to be taken in attempting to improve the current COBET programme, the study findings reveal that it would be beneficial for the programme to provide the training that equips learners with skills to earn income, thus fostering self-reliance after completing their studies. One of the facilitators from Centre A had the following comment:

The COBET curriculum should be designed in such a way that the education being provided to learners should become beneficial to them. Apart from being taught arithmetic, reading, civics, and morals, they have to be taught practical life skills such as cookery, welding, carpentry, and so forth. This would enable them to become self-reliant individuals after completing their studies in the COBET centres. In that regard, more out-of-school children would also be motivated and thus be enrolled in the programme as it will empower them with knowledge and abilities that they can apply in their future endeavours. (Interview with facilitators from Centre A, in April, 2024)

When the DPAEO was asked about the reform of the current COBET programme, he asserted that:

The government should create an environment that is likely to attract out-of-school children to enrol in the COBET centres. For example, in addition to the academic curriculum, the COBET centres should provide practical life skills and entrepreneurial training, which will enable the learners to engage in income-generating activities after completing their primary education. (Interview with DPAEO, in May, 2024)

Based on the quotation, the study findings reveal that the COBET programme can effectively equip the learners with the knowledge and skills necessary for preparing the out-of-school children to be self-reliant when the vocational skills and entrepreneurial training alongside the core academic subjects are incorporated into the programme. This approach can facilitate the successful transition from theoretical foundation to the workforce, thus enabling learners to embark on self-employment after completing their studies.

5. Discussion

5.1. The state of resources necessary for mainstreaming the out-of-school children into formal primary education

This study revealed that the state of resources in COBET centres necessary for mainstreaming out-of-school children into formal primary education was insufficient. The study findings revealed that non-text materials are scarce across the three visited centres, and there is poor utilisation of the available materials. According to Michael, Ndijuye and Ephrem [19], when the materials are well-aligned with the learners' own contextual experiences, they allow them to connect the lesson content to their real-world situations easily. This was also noted by Hoffman et al. [11] that learners learn more if they can connect information that they learn to other things. Learning is improved when proper textbooks are used in the teaching and learning process. Thus, the learners' initiative to read the material helps them to understand better and remember the content, compared to the learning environment in which the learners only listen to the teacher lecturing [19]. This trend is contrary to the findings of this study, in which the facilitators rely solely on their copies of the textbooks to

teach while the learners are not supplied with textbooks but rather kept in the school storerooms.

Moreover, based on the study findings, it was revealed that the COBET centres rely on non-text materials from the primary schools where the COBET centre is located. This was contrary to the study by Michael, Ndijuye and Ephrem [19], who asserted that using the teaching and learning materials during the teaching and learning process enhances the learners' interest to learn in the view of the fact that they can associate the lesson with their own contextual experience. Moreover, it is important to use the teaching and learning materials as they significantly provide the learner with the opportunity to use more than one cognitive pathway. For that reason, learners must learn through seeing, touching, smelling, hearing or tasting. This argument is in line with the study by Hoffman et al. [11], who pointed out that learners access information by using all senses. Therefore, the facilitators must provide their learners with multiple opportunities to learn and demonstrate their understanding of it.

Besides, the study findings revealed inadequate financial resources within COBET centres. This reduced the efficiency in the implementation of the COBET programme. It revealed the effects of supporting the paraprofessional facilitators on honoraria and other operating costs of the centres. These findings correspond with the study by Mbilu [17] in Korogwe, Tanga, Tanzania, which revealed that the facilitators did not receive their honoraria for a long time, thus being discouraged from continuing working in the programmes' centres. This situation keeps demotivating the facilitators from teaching in the COBET centre, given the fact that they are also required to teach in primary schools and perform other duties as part of their regular work. This affects facilitators' commitment to the implementation of the COBET programme.

Moreover, the study revealed that only one facilitator was trained while five facilitators had not received initial training, thus lacking the necessary knowledge and skills on how to teach COBET learners. The situation implies that the majority of COBET facilitators rely on their primary school teaching experience, which is why it has been a challenge for some facilitators to manage teaching and handling COBET learners. The study findings are in line with the study by Mbilu [17], who argued that, even though the COBET facilitators meet the minimum academic qualifications required by the government for teaching the COBET learners since they had never received any pre-service training, they seemed lacking the necessary pedagogical skills to implement the programme in a way that could have the most significant positive impact on learners. However, this diverges from Vygotsky [42], who argues that teachers should be more knowledgeable to help the learner cross the zone of proximal development. The initial training is very important due to the fact that, to some extent, COBET learners are young adults with multiple responsibilities; thus, they have to be regarded as adults and not being taught as children.

The study findings also depict that four facilitators out of six who were involved in this study had attended teachers' continued professional development programme with regard to the COBET programme. Two out of six teachers had never received any training with regard to the COBET programme. However, they were teaching the learners in the COBET centres since their head teachers had assigned them such teaching responsibilities. This often happens when some COBET-trained facilitators are transferred from one school to another, which necessitates non-trained facilitators to teach the COBET learners. In fact, it is a challenge to retain teachers who have received continuous professional development programmes to teach COBET learners. Such findings are consistent with the findings by Mbilu [17], who asserted that teachers used to teach in COBET classes using the same techniques and skills which are used to teach in regular primary schools. Thus, it is important to accommodate a good number of teachers who are equipped with COBET teaching skills to support the

implementation of the programme. Besides, it would have been better to incorporate COBET trainings into the curriculum of the teacher training colleges, something which would help in the preparation of a good number of specialised teachers to teach COBET learners.

5.2. The strategies to be taken for improving COBET mainstreaming of the out-of-school children into formal primary education

The study findings revealed the best strategies for improving COBET mainstreaming of out-of-school children into formal primary education. The findings of this study revealed significant disparities in the distribution of the COBET centres across the wards. Some wards do not have even a single COBET centre, while others have multiple centres. The best strategy revealed was to ensure equal distribution of COBET centres across the wards. According to Odame and Ameyaw [23], in order to minimise the distances that learners have to travel, more conveniently located meeting centres need to be provided. This motivates the COBET learners to participate effectively in learning. Moreover, the government must ensure the availability of the paraprofessional's honoraria, similar to the payments for other government-employed teachers. This finding aligns with the study by Sakir, Kalli and Ebireri [28], who argued that, in order to ensure effective provision of COBET, there should be necessary funding to the programme. The funding of COBET will ensure that teachers are paid their honoraria on time, thus improving their participation in work. Similarly, community involvement in building infrastructure specifically for COBET centres is crucial. This is supported by Hussein [12], who reported that community engagement in the programme's implementation is vital for achieving intended goals. Involving the community members will foster a better understanding of the COBET programme and encourage them to consider themselves as stakeholders in these centres. This sense of ownership will motivate the families to send their out-of-school children to study and benefit from the programme. By taking these steps, quite a good number of out-of-school children will gain the opportunity to mainstream into formal education, thereby facilitating the achievement of the COBET programme.

Furthermore, media such as radio, television, and social platforms should be used to sensitise and educate the community on the goals and objectives of the COBET programme. Along the same line, famous people in the community, as well as religious leaders, should be involved in raising awareness of COBET.

Moreover, the local government authorities should be insisted on with regard to the COBET programme and be assigned clear responsibilities for managing and monitoring such centres. The COBET agenda should be a standing item in their regular meetings so as to ensure awareness amongst community members on the objectives, implementation and challenges facing the COBET centres. This argument complies with the 2014 Education and Training Policy revised in 2023 on the importance of education to all people, including those who miss the opportunity to join formal education. Thus, the school administrators and committees are required to oversee and monitor the operations of the COBET centres. Similarly, based on the study findings, it is further suggested that the government should engage the community in constructing the COBET infrastructure, such as the classrooms and facilitators' offices and facilitating the operation independently. The approach will conscientise the community on the significance of participating in the programme and thus inspire the families to enrol their out-of-school children. Subsequently, this will enable the achievement of mainstreaming the out-of-school children into formal education in the country as a whole.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study suggest that the curriculum must incorporate, in addition to other strategies for improving the COBET programme,

practical life skills and entrepreneurial training. The proposed curriculum improvement will enable the learners to secure employment or engage in self-employment upon completion of their studies. Many COBET learners come from challenging backgrounds, and some of them are compelled to participate in income-generating activities in attempting to meet their own and families' needs. The findings are in consonant with the finding by Mnubi [21], who argued that some COBET learners serve as breadwinners, earning income to sustain themselves and their families. In the same vein, the incorporation of practical life skills in the curriculum may attract a significant number of out-of-school children to join COBET centres and, thus, ultimately help in reducing the prevalence of illiteracy and street children in the community. As noted by Emmanuel [7], street children constitute one of the target groups intended for enrollment in the COBET program.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The study findings with regard to the state of teaching and learning materials in COBET centres, coupled with the strategies for improving COBET mainstreaming of the out-of-school children to formal education, have revealed a number of insights. First, the teaching and learning materials, particularly non-text materials, were scarce across all three centres involved in the current study. On the other hand, despite the availability of the text materials in the COBET centres, they were not effectively utilised since the facilitators mainly employ lecture methods in the teaching and learning process. In addition, the teaching and learning resources, including the textbooks, remained unused despite being available in the storerooms. Moreover, the COBET centres lack dedicated operational funds and rely solely on capitation grants intended for primary schools where the centres are located. Thus, the proposed strategies for improving COBET incorporate building the necessary infrastructure for the COBET centres, allocation of the capitation grant specifically for COBET centres, recruitment of the teachers specifically for the COBET centres, incorporation of the vocational and entrepreneurial training into the curriculum, utilisation of the media platforms in attempting to educate the public about the COBET programme and its significance in the community and making the COBET programme a standing agenda item in regular community meetings.

Based on the conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made: the policymakers should integrate COBET training into the teacher college curriculum, and the community and other education stakeholders should collaborate with the government to build COBET infrastructure. Furthermore, it is recommended that the same study should be conducted in other districts in order to provide a broader understanding of the programme's implementation across the United Republic of Tanzania.

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