
Comprehensive Inclusive Education for Children who are Severely Disabled or the at-Risk Groups, Reality or Myth. What is the Position of Developing Countries?

John Charema (PhD)*, & Thomas Musankuleni Kaputa (PhD)**

**Director, Mophato Education Centre Francistown, Botswana*

***Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Zimbabwe Open University*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore and analyse the practical inclusion of children with severe disabilities or the at-risk groups. These are referred to as students with diverse needs (those with extreme physical disabilities; profound hearing loss; highly challenging behavioural problems; bed ridden cases; mentally challenged, nonverbal cases and extremely gifted, to mention but a few) in an inclusive set-up considering their diverse needs and different interpretations of inclusion. The benefits and challenges of inclusion for the at-risk group in both developed and developing countries are examined and suggestions of possible practical approaches are explored in terms of settings, curriculum, resources, diverse needs, adaptations, personnel, accommodations and meaningful participation.

KEY WORDS: *Inclusion, inclusive education, at-risk groups, diverse needs.*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a notion born in the evolution of society's changing views towards people with disabilities. The moral value and concept of inclusive education, a philosophy of student placement and quality program delivery that has tended to dominate discussions in recent years, is a deliberate attempt to restore human dignity and opportunities for equal access. As educational systems world over, adopted the Education For All (EFA) an initiative by UNESCO to accept and accommodate students with disabilities, options of best placement concepts were debated and discussed but what is still in question is the quality of the service and its success rate. The literature on inclusion is as conflicting as public opinion and as diverse as the practices in different set ups, the nature and severity of disabilities and how they impact on the learners. This diversity is well established with society and parents raising demands that can be difficult to meet. Interestingly, in both developed and developing countries, these phases mirror society's evolution of equal treatment for everybody including people with disabilities. Society became increasingly concerned with human rights, human dignity, support, equal opportunities, access and accommodations. This paper explores and analyses the practical inclusion of the at-risk groups referred to as students with diverse needs which includes those living with extreme physical disabilities; profound hearing loss; highly challenging behavioural problems; bed ridden; intellectually challenged; nonverbal cases and extremely gifted, to mention but a few. It further examines the benefits and challenges of inclusion for the at-risk group in both developed and developing countries drawing lessons for the latter. It ends up by suggesting ways of making inclusive education a reality in developing countries as a way forward.

INTERPRETATION OF INCLUSION

Different authors from all walks of life throughout the world have different definitions and interpretations of “Inclusive Education” influenced by certain aspects of practices carried out within different countries and regions in both developed and developing countries. While the concept of inclusive education is not in dispute, there are still a number of contradictions and disagreements on the implementation of the same. An active international debate has gained currency in terms of the impact inclusion has on implementation with regards to: settings, curriculum, the nature and severity of disability and their impact together with the availability of resources both human and material. Inclusive education is taken to be more about challenging exclusion policies and practices and is the favoured approach to meeting the needs of all learners in mainstream educational settings (UNESCO, 2001). While this is quite an embracing definition or interpretation, it still misses the aspect of quality, participation and beneficial education. Again, a similar interpretation of the concept (UNESCO, 2003), points out that inclusive education is an approach that seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. As stated out in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (Dakar World Education Forum, 2000), the implication is that schools are encouraged to accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, socio and economic background or other conditions either hereditary or man-made. Inclusive education can be interpreted as the philosophy and practice for educating students with disabilities in general education settings (Ajuwon, 2008; Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008; Slee & Allen, 2001). UNESCO (2005) identifies and uses four key concepts to interpret inclusive education; it is taken as a process, which requires identification and removal of barriers to learning, targeting all students to participate and achieve quality results, particularly learners most at risk. According to Villa & Thousand (2005), inclusive education is about embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each student in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong, assuming that living and learning together benefits everyone irrespective of their condition. Such a definition or an interpretation assumes conditions in some developed countries where there appears to be true democracy and adequate resources to cater for the diverse needs of children to be included and to train all the relevant necessary personnel.

Many more definitions and interpretations of inclusive education point in the same direction (Acedo, Ferrer & Pamies, 2009; Boyle, Topping & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Chimonyo, Mamvura, Kaputa, Hlatywayo, Munemo, Nyatsanza and Mutandwa, 2016; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Khan, 2007; Nyanga and Nyanga, 2013; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel and Malinei, 2012; World Education Forum, 2015). Typically, they all have one thing in common, that all children should be educated in the general mainstream irrespective of their differences, eliminating all forms of discrimination in the learning environment, and this is a positive development in the right direction. However, what is missing are the practical details of the nature of the inclusion, due to the severity of some children’s disabilities and their impact, the settings and accommodations for particular individuals with specific disabilities and the extent of curriculum modifications (Chimonyo et al, 2016). Are we considering wholesale inclusion for equity without taking into consideration quality, participation and the practical realization of inclusion? Do we have adequate qualified personnel diversified enough to cope

with the demands and challenges of the variety of disabilities and other related conditions involved? Indeed, these are some of the challenges to deal with.

INCLUSIVE SETTINGS

Inclusive settings should be suitable and conducive for all learners in the mainstream education system. The classrooms and the surrounding environment must be user friendly with easy access for all children including those with diverse disability needs. School buildings must have fittings that are tailor made to accommodate mobility gadgets and a variety of other equipment to cater for students with diverse needs. Class teachers and support personnel in charge of the classrooms must have adequate knowledge to operate and assist students to be functional in order for them (students) to learn with ease. Philosophically it is easy for the literature to spell out the requirements of an inclusive setting, however, when it comes to practice one realizes the challenges involved. A number of authorities (Boyle, et al, 2013; Khan, 2007; Savolainen, et al, 2012; UNESCO, 2009) are skeptical about having inclusive education for everyone; citing lack of preparedness of teachers, lack of qualified special education teachers, lack of resources particularly in some developing countries. Where they experience poor governance and operate on shoestring budgets, experience corrupt practices and have poor infrastructure. A study in Western Australia that evaluated the progress of inclusive education (Tuettemann, Or, Slee and Punch, 2000) indicates a continuing resilience of traditional forms of special education and their anxiety to move towards full inclusion for everyone. Villa & Thousand (2005) point out that the growing diversity of the student population in schools is a topic of great debate and concern in that the differences among students vary and may include but are not limited to language, culture, gender, religion, sexual preference, geographic setting, socio-economic status, background, nature and severity of disability and varied disabilities and abilities. There is a central problem of theorizing on inclusive education leading to contradictions and struggle seven on policy-making without a very clear path to follow due to implementation challenges. The good news is that in the US and other developed countries quite a number of schools seem to have made a lot of progress on full implementation (everybody) of inclusion (Ferguson, 2008; Florian & Linklater, 2009; UNESCO, 2003; 2009; Villa & Thousand, 2005). However, it must be noted that most if not all such countries are well developed, with good economic bases that are generally well managed, with advanced technology, adequate resources, well trained personnel and well cultivated positive attitudes and therefore experience different and limited challenges. As such including all students within their full range of diversity in the mainstream continue to increase, advance and gain momentum in most developed countries. Yet it is a very different story when it comes to developing countries that are battling with a host of problems (poverty, civil wars, lack of resources, lack of qualified personnel, poor technology, high rate of illiteracy, hunger and disease (Handley, Higgins & Sharma, 2009)). With such challenges, it appears impracticable to have full inclusion in every school in the rural and urban areas. In developed countries, the differences in children could be celebrated as a variety of wealth to share and learn from, as long as the inclusion is meaningful, participatory and beneficial. Yet in developing countries, as pointed out, it would be a mammoth task considering all the differences and their demands to include and cater for every child in a participatory and beneficial manner.

It is important that countries with whatever resources they have engage in practical ways to make inclusive education successful with all children participating and benefitting. There is no debate on the fact that all stakeholders (parents, educators, the community at large and all children not only those with disabilities) benefit in an inclusive set up if all the most important requirements are met. However, a case in point is an example of some of the developing countries, which cannot even feed their populations, without basic facilities like electricity and running water, with soaring unemployment of over 90% (Charema, 2016). The question is, is it possible to have a meaningful, participatory and beneficial inclusive education for the at-risk group? If not, what can be done in order to have successful inclusion for this particular group? It is imperative to emphasize that the question of segregation can no longer be entertained. As vividly put across by Villa & Thousand (2005), that segregationist thinking assumes that the right to belong is an earned rather than an unconditional human right which, has no place in this day and age. Since segregation is a no-go area which is an agreed notion, and wholesale inclusion does not seem to benefit the targeted group (in developing countries) due to the aforementioned constraints, then some form of useful practical inclusion (for example partial) should be put in place.

CURRICULUM AND PRACTICE

While there appear to be clear policies regarding inclusive education, like those mentioned by Mariga, McConkey and Myezwa (2014), there continues to be international debate and contradictions on comprehensive implementation of inclusive education within different countries. A study carried out by Savolainen et al, (2012), comparing 319 South African teachers and 822 Finish teachers both primary and secondary found out that sentiments towards disabilities were positive in both countries however, teachers had many concerns about the consequences of including children with disabilities in their classrooms. This may serve as a clear indication that there is still hesitation, uncertainty and lack of confidence among teachers. First and foremost, there is need to carry out a feasibility study of the whole school in order to raise awareness, assess and rehabilitate the environment and the buildings. The assessment should include checking the environment and surroundings for easy movement to access the classrooms, the acoustics in the rooms for students who use hearing aids, and favourable conditions for the use of other assistive devices as required by different children to cater for their diversity. The curriculum must suit every student either by modifying or by adapting it without necessarily watering down the value of the material taught. There must be harmony between the curriculum and the industrial sector to ensure relevant education that can be used in the industry to benefit the country.

Parents, educators and the community at large must be involved to ensure ownership, acceptance and change of attitudes (Chimonyo et al, 2011; 2014; 2016). A strong relationship is likely to be formed when everybody involved is working towards one goal, that of creating a positive inclusive learning environment. In general, most studies (Boyle et al, 2013; Florian & Linklater, 2009; Savolainen et al, 2012; UNESCO, 2009) indicate a positive attitude towards inclusion from educators and other related personnel. However, on finding out more, teachers who had taught students in an inclusive class indicated significant negative change in attitude towards comprehensive inclusion (Boyle, et al, 2013). A sign that indicates the need for thorough preparation in schools on teachers, parents, students and the community at large and to put in place appropriate facilities for meaningful and beneficial inclusion. While

comprehensive inclusion has gained momentum in developed countries, from policy to practice, developing countries particularly in sub-Saharan Africa continue to lag behind in educational developments and in the implementation of inclusion. The emphasis is on changes in the curriculum that allow teachers to teach according to the needs of the students and how the students learn, interact, and relate to one another both those with and without disabilities. Learning institutions have to consider restructuring their policies, curricula, cultures and practices to cater for the diverse needs of all learners.

As pointed out by UNESCO (2009), inclusive education practices should reflect the changing culture of contemporary schools with emphasis on active learning, authentic assessment practices, applied curriculum, multi-level instructional approaches, and increased attention to individualized student needs. Including the formerly excluded, particularly the at-risk group in the mainstream setting does not necessarily constitute inclusion unless there is meaningful learning and participation. Apart from the challenges posed by the diverse needs of different students, learning institutions must change their teaching strategies to become more caring, nurturing and supportive communities where the needs of all students are beneficially met. It is commonly known that comprehensive inclusion has many challenges particularly for developing countries. Such challenges call for identifying all barriers around and within schools that hinder learning and participation and make sure, they are minimized or removed completely to facilitate meaningful learning.

MEETING THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

Inclusion is a process that takes time and therefore seeks to address the diverse needs of learners through changes in teaching methods, strengthening and encouraging the participation of all students and the community in the life and work of a school. The objective of the school is to change services or delivery methods, to suit the customer who happens to be the student in the school without necessarily looking at how “special” that child may be. To begin with, this can be achieved by carrying out a thorough assessment of students establishing their pre-requisites for effective learning (Chimonyo et al, 2016). With such needs in place, students are likely to respond to the demands of an inclusive set up accessing the curriculum and teaching materials for progressive learning. The use of mixed grouping of pupils with a smaller ratio of those with and without diverse needs within a class can be considered to strengthen relationships and encourage bonding for better participation (Kaputa, Munemo, Hlatywayo and Mupandasekwa, 2014). Teachers can encourage learning relationships between all students to allow full interaction.

According to Mariga et al (2014), the use of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) can be employed to achieve proper curricular adaptations to accommodate all students for effective implementation. Both specially trained and mainstream teachers without special education training can work together sharing ideas on approaches, structures, strategies and teaching techniques for the betterment of all students. One idea is to have these professional teachers prepare students with diverse needs for a topic to come before they encounter it that may pose challenges when taught to the whole class. This is likely to boost the confidence of this group of at-risk students. Teachers with the help of other involved professionals can rewrite or audiotape some materials for particular students to access learning easily.

It is paramount that educators dispel any form of stigma before it is established for example the way other students may view the use of special or different gadgets used by students with diverse needs. Inclusive education does not focus on a student as “special” but on how to transform the education system to cater for diverse learners. Villa & Thousand (2005) posit that inclusion is a belief system, once adopted by a school an inclusive vision drives all decisions and actions by those who subscribe to it. Differences in students often viewed as a problem can be embraced as an opportunity for learning and valuing rich and varied dynamics and experiences brought by individuals of diverse nature.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

A true inclusive education setting values diversity and the unique contributions each student brings to the school and classroom in particular. In a comprehensive setting, every child feels safe, loved and has a sense of belonging. Students, educators, parents and the community participate in setting learning goals and take part in decisions that affect them. Inclusive settings can fulfill parents’ visions and dreams of wanting their children with disabilities, to be accepted by their peers, have friends and lead “regular” lives, a reality. In the mainstream classes is a reflection of the similarities and differences of people in the real world, and children learn to appreciate diversity in a life-like manner. There is an assumption that respect and understanding grow when children of differing abilities and cultures play and learn together. Inclusive settings allow children to socialize and learn from each other and in the process develop friendships and social skills. It is important that educators and related personnel ensure that all children benefit through the creation of a conducive learning atmosphere that helps all children learn at their own pace, using their own style within a positive nurturing environment. Typically, it must be pointed out that while there are challenges of diversity, fully comprehensive inclusive schools that are rare and few, no longer distinguish between “general education” and “special education” programs and are enjoying the benefits that come with the wealth of diversity (UNESCO, 2008). With all teachers working together, most or all students can benefit from the additional resources and supportive techniques used in an inclusion classroom.

Inclusion is one of the greatest challenges facing educational systems throughout the world today, and it is quite evident that the field of inclusive education is not without uncertainties, disputes and contradictions (UNESCO, 2009). It is also clear that exclusion exists in all countries, in different varying forms at different degrees due to a variety of reasons some of which are natural others man-made but all caused by the demands of diverse needs (UNESCO, 2008). Additional challenges that appear to come with diversity is the concern of best interests of individual children and the growing demand for more diverse services that require financial resources. Inclusive programs do not only demand financial resources but also reflect more on the planning process for these children and also make sure that the process allows true participation, resulting in beneficial education. Perhaps, what is needed is the application of what has already been learned from research, that inclusion should be carried out in different forms to allow full benefits for the at-risk group (Anastasiou, Kauffman & Nnovo, 2015). One area that may well provide direction with this process is planning for students with profound disability demanding needs. The literature on inclusion reflects the belief, as recommended, that placement requires a careful planning of the needs of the child as well as the other children and the ability of the regular classroom to manage the process (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Interestingly, a panel of authors (Kauffman, 1994;

Kauffman, 1999; Zigmond and Baker, 1995) spoke about the growing challenge of inclusion for students with severe learning disabilities and or disorders (the at-risk group) and recommended "alternate education programs in appropriate settings" to meet their needs. The results of their (the authors) analysis and examination is a wealth of information that can provide direction to special education leaders, especially as they maneuver through the remnants of reform and the often-controversial issue of inclusion (Kauffman, 1999).

SUGGESTED IDEAS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

In order to make inclusive education a reality especially in developing countries, we need to:

- Ensure that educators and other assisting personnel receive thorough training that allows for flexibility and there should be adequate resources to teach and cater for students with diverse needs and learning styles. Early intervention centers and schools should be well resourced with adequate sustainable financial support to ensure that services and learning activities are fully inclusive.
- Motivate and empower parents to canvas for inclusive education so that their children will be educated in an inclusive setting within their community.
- Bring all stakeholders on board thus all mainstream and special educators, parents, students and the entire community to work together and participate in the design, delivery, and monitoring of the program to ensure success, thereby reframing inclusive education as a shared responsibility.
- Lobby through the governments for education departments to take responsibility for implementing anti-discrimination legislation and enforcing legal mandates for inclusion, and policies to remove barriers that hinder inclusion.
- Support governments and system services to carry out empirical research and engage in pilot models of successful inclusive education provision. That could be monitored and assessed from time to time making the necessary changes for successful inclusion and could be replicated in different parts of the relevant countries.
- Encourage education departments to support governments and system services to pilot models of successful inclusive education provision that could be scaled up and replicated.
- Make awareness campaigns and engage civil society and other actors to form networking service groups for schools and NGOs such as teacher associations and parent groups.

CONCLUSION

Inclusion benefits everybody involved that is students, parents, educators and the community at large. Throughout the review of literature on different inclusive practices, it would appear as though communities and schools that embrace the true meaning of inclusion tend to be more positive towards an inclusive service delivery system. Such communities further dispel the fear of including students with diverse needs into embracing and celebrating natural diversity as a rich learning opportunity. It must be emphasized that implementing comprehensive inclusive education is not a cost-cutting measure. Therefore, both developed and developing countries must be prepared to invest substantial resources to facilitate system

reforms such as pre and post service teacher and staff training; improving and restructuring infrastructure, providing suitable varied learning materials, and equipment; revising and adapting curricula to cater for students' diverse needs. However, most developing countries and some developed countries seem not to be ready for meaningful, quality and beneficial comprehensive inclusion.

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