

A Conversation about Inclusive Education: Revelations from Namibian Primary School Teachers

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Abstract—Inclusive education stems from a philosophy and vision, which argues that all children should learn together at school. It is not only about treating all pupils in the same way. It is also about allowing all children to attend school without any restrictions. Ten primary school teachers in a circuit in Namibia volunteered to participate in face-to-face interviews about inclusive education. The teachers responded to three questions about their (i) understanding of inclusive education; (ii) whether inclusive education was implemented in primary schools; and (iii) whether they were able to work with learners with special needs. Findings indicated that teachers understood what inclusive education entailed; felt that inclusive education was not implemented in their primary schools, and they were unable to work with learners with special needs in their classrooms. Further, the teachers identified training and resources as important components of inclusive education. It is recommended that education authorities should perhaps verify the findings reported here as well as ensure that the concerns raised by the teachers are addressed.

Keywords—Classrooms and schools, inclusive education, resources, training.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the early 1990s, the Education for All (EFA) initiative started a global movement that sought to provide quality education to all children including youths and adults [1]. The initiative was the precursor of what would in later years be known as inclusive education. In its simplest definition, inclusive education is about allowing all children to attend school without any restrictions. It is argued in fact that the “single commonality across definitions of inclusion is that children with and without disabilities are placed in the same setting, which is most often a classroom” [2]. In this regard, inclusive education is premised on “a human rights agenda that demands access to, and equity in, education” [3]. In fact, the discourse around inclusive education is identified as moving from why it is important, to how it can be successfully implemented [4]. This author has identified seven pillars that are critical in promoting inclusion. These are:

- (i) Developing of positive attitude;
- (ii) Supportive policy and leadership;
- (iii) School and classroom processes grounded in research-based practice;

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- (iv) Flexible curriculum and methodology;
- (v) Community involvement;
- (vi) Meaningful reflection; and
- (vii) Adequate training and resources.

An important aspect of inclusive education is that schools should accommodate all children. The accommodation should be regardless of whether they are disabled, gifted, street children, children from remote populations, or children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities [5]. Inclusive education has an optimistic, but also realistic philosophical background, suggesting that every learner if they are provided with appropriate support should thrive [6]. Also important, is the fact that it is not only about treating all pupils in the same way. It is also about taking into account of the learners’ varied needs in order to fulfill their interests, motivations, and capacities. So, inclusion significantly depends on the availability and quality of educational support that the school is able to offer.

Policies have been put in place to promote inclusive education in Namibia. According to the constitution of the Republic of Namibia, education is the inalienable right of every child. The constitution protects all people in Namibia against any form of discrimination [7]. In 2008, the Republic of Namibia Ministry of Education developed a policy on inclusive education (sector policy on inclusive education) which was approved for implementation in 2013. In essence, the policy stressed that in Namibia, learners with special needs have the right to receive quality education like any other school-age going child. Although Namibia has developed policies to support the implementation of inclusive education, there is no monitoring system to establish whether this is happening or not. Further, it is reported that there is a paucity of knowledge about what the teachers’ concerns are about inclusive education in low- and middle-income countries [8]. It was on this basis that a conversation about inclusive education was carried out with primary school teachers. The aim here was to give a voice to teachers of young learners with special needs.

II. METHOD

Following permissions from the department of education and school principals, teachers were approached for possible participation. The teachers were assured that they would not be identified in anyway. It was stressed that all information provided would only be for research purposes. So, they understood that while the researchers would report the findings to the authorities, they would however, not be identifiable. From a population of 40 primary school teachers

in a circuit in Namibia, 10 volunteered to participate in the conversation. To collect data, teachers were initially requested to provide biographical data such as their gender, age and experience. Following this, the teachers participated in face-to-face interviews. Specifically, the teachers responded to three questions whose aim was to establish their views about inclusive education. The questions were: (i) What do you understand by inclusive education? (ii) Is inclusive education implemented in primary schools? and (iii) Are you able to work with learners with special needs in your class?

III. FINDINGS

The sample comprised of 10 teachers, six of whom were women. Their ages ranged between 26 years and 57 years ($M = 38.5$; $SD = 9.2$). A majority (80%) indicated that they possessed either a teaching certificate or diploma as a highest academic qualification. In terms of teaching experience, this ranged between five years and 25 years ($M = 14.8$; $SD = 5.9$). Table I shows the biographical data of the participants.

TABLE I
 BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF THE SAMPLE (N = 10)

| Category | N | % |
|---|---|----|
| Gender | | |
| Women | 6 | 60 |
| Men | 4 | 40 |
| Age | | |
| 20 – 29 | 1 | 10 |
| 30 – 39 | 5 | 50 |
| 40 + | 4 | 40 |
| Highest academic qualification | | |
| Certificate | 5 | 50 |
| Diploma (e.g. Diploma in primary education) | 3 | 30 |
| Degree or higher (e.g. Honours) | 2 | 20 |
| Teaching experience | | |
| 0 – 9 | 2 | 20 |
| 10 + | 8 | 80 |

To the first question: **What do you understand by inclusive education?** Teachers seemed to know what inclusive education was. For instance, Taleinge (female teacher) [the names of the teachers are pseudonyms] indicated: "... to cater to all the learners from different background in formal education, so now we can talk about learners who have intellectual disabilities; for example, we can talk about learners who have physical disabilities, we can include in learners who have the hearing impairment or visual impairment..." On the other hand, Nangula (female teacher) pointed out: "... inclusive education referred to the inclusion of learners in the same class regardless of their abilities ..." also, Matti (male teacher) said: "... as long as they are within the same class with different capabilities ... as long as they are in the same class with others which are not having a problem like others or like them ..."

Others described inclusive education from a policy perspective. For example, Timo (male teacher) indicated that: "... inclusive education is an educational policy or process that requires teachers to accommodate all learners in their

classroom sector..." in a similar vein, Eino (male teacher) indicated that inclusive education was "... an education system whereby learners are all included in the system regardless their background, their abilities and so on ..."

In the second question participants were asked: **in your view, is inclusive education implemented in primary schools?** Virtually all the participants indicated that inclusive education was not implemented. From the participants' responses it became apparent that lack of training affected the implementation. In this regard, Matti averred: "... teachers are not trained to teach learners with special needs ..." He further said, "... also no resources and infrastructure are available ..." In the same vein, Naayole (female teacher) pointed out, "... the government did not train all the teachers to cater for those learners ..." This was also corroborated by Nangula who asserted: "... not all teachers are trained to teach learners with special needs ..." Nangula further argued: "... another big challenge is about resources ... only few schools in Namibia have resources to cater for learners with special needs ..."

Also identified as a problem, was the design of school buildings. The participants felt that the schools were not built in a way that catered for learners with special needs. For instance, Taleinge said, "... our schools are not built friendly to those learners who have the impairments and different capabilities ..." She added, "... some schools do not have wide enough corridors whereby the learners with a wheelchair will move ... or they have stairs which makes it difficult for a wheelchair bound or blind person to climb ..." Furthermore, she argued: "... some school toilets are far ... 200 m away from the class and there is no corridor which is going along to the toilet ..." This is an issue also raised by Matti, who pointed out, "... the building or structure of our school is not friendly to the learner ... even the school environment is not conducive to those learners ..." About this matter, Popyeni (female teacher) said: "... resources are not clear ... starting with the physical building itself, the class itself ... because in our normal school we have this handicapped learner on a wheelchair ... he can only enter with assistance ..."

In the third question participants were asked: **Are you able to work with learners with special needs in your class?** Regarding this, Naayole pointed out: "... yes I can be able to deal with them..." She was asked why she said "... I can be able to..." to which she replied: "... I can be able to if I can be given the things I need..." Asked what those were? She indicated: "... If I could be trained to work with the children ... if I could be given materials like books and teaching aids for the children..." Similarly, Nangula said: "... yes, yes but I do not expect them to give 100% of what I am teaching them..." Asked why she did not expect them "... to give 100%..." she said: "... they don't have books to assist them and I do not have the time to always focus on the slow ones ..." In a similar manner, Ndapanda (female teacher) indicated: "... Yes, because I don't want them to feel bad I have to try to work with them ..." asked why she thought the learners would feel bad, she said: "... because I want them to feel they are part of what I am doing all the time ..."

A different answer was from Mweneni (female teacher)

who pointed out: "... It's difficult to work with a learner who has a special need because it will take time ... You can use a long time to assist that learner..." asked why, she intimated: "... I try my best to work with everybody ... the problem is when I take longer addressing something with a learner with disabilities my time is taken up and other children start losing concentration ... they start making noise or disturbing others ..."

IV. DISCUSSION

The primary school teachers interviewed in this study revealed that they understood what inclusive education entailed. Further, they indicated that they felt inclusive education was not implemented in their primary schools. This was also corroborated by their admission that they effectively, were unable to work with learners with special needs in their classrooms. An important contribution from the teachers was the fact that they identified training and adequate resources as a priority. Training teachers is critical because they can only create learning environments that fully embrace learners with special needs, when they know how to. Also, proper training would assist teachers to value every learner for who they are, strive to meet each learner's needs, and thereby create a sense of belonging in the classroom [9].

From a pre-service perspective on the other hand, Namibia needs to ensure that the modern teacher is equipped with the necessary skills that will enable them to deal with learners in an inclusive classroom. This is a task that teacher education colleges and universities will have to address. Such training is critical because the task of "initial teacher education is to prepare people to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children" [10].

For authorities especially, this is important because it is reported that newly qualified teachers "particularly at the primary level, do not seem overwhelmed with new educational practices and do work toward inclusion voluntarily" [11].

Regarding the ability to work with learners with special needs, effectively the teachers indicated that they could not. The teachers revealed that they felt inadequate because compounding the lack of training, was the non-availability of books and teaching aids. With respect to resources, schools play a significant role in the learning and teaching context. This is because a school consists of macro features (like buildings), which influence how classroom supports are provided, which in turn influence how individualized supports are provided [12]. The teachers revealed that the design and outlook of their schools were not meant to cater for learners with special needs. For instance, they mentioned the lack of appropriate facilities meant to address problems experienced by learners on wheelchairs. What is apparent here, is the fact that necessary changes in schools need to realistically take place, otherwise inclusive education will remain approved in policy but never implemented. This suggests that for Namibia to see the implementation of inclusive education, the Ministry of Education should also dedicate resources meant to adapt and change the outlook of schools to accommodate and be

friendly to learners with special needs.

The findings reported here suggest that despite noble intentions, the policy prescripts are not necessarily taking root at implementation level. In fact, it is argued that "becoming more inclusive is a matter of thinking and talking, reviewing and refining practice, and making attempts to develop a more inclusive culture [13]. These findings are therefore important for Namibian education authorities for two reasons. Firstly, they offer an opportunity for the authorities to verify them, and secondly, to look at finding solutions in collaboration with teachers. Finding solutions in conjunction with teachers because they generally know what takes place in their environments. About this issue, it has been argued that a lack of cooperation between politicians on the one hand, and teachers on the other, result in a marked discrepancy, with respect to the ideological and practical commitment to inclusive education in schools [14], [15]. The solutions should therefore include the training and resources that were identified by the teachers in this study. When training and the provision of resources is accomplished, the hope is that inclusive education will thrive as envisaged in the Namibian constitution.

In terms of implications, the findings are good for the Ministry of Education in Namibia because this suggest that proper planning and budgeting could be undertaken in order to address the problems identified in this study. What is clear is that Namibia is committed to inclusive education. What is required then is that the appropriate tools that would assist in achieving this are used. Perhaps the starting point would be to focus on teacher training and the resources.

V. LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted among 10 volunteering participants representing a quarter of the circuit population. It therefore was not intended to be a comprehensive investigation of the teachers' views, but to provide a basis of how teachers saw inclusive education. In effect, the study was not meant to be generalized to the entire Namibian context but to alert authorities to how some teachers viewed and experienced inclusive education in their classrooms and schools. Perhaps circuit authorities of education should have been given an opportunity too to provide their perspective of the state of inclusive schools in the area they were in charge of.

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