Overcoming Resource Barriers: the challenge of implementing inclusive education in rural areas

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I have chosen to focus on **resource** barriers because they are the most widely used excuses for not promoting inclusive practice, even in the most apparently well-resourced educational settings. My teaching colleagues in the UK claim that they would be capable of so much more, 'if only there were more resources'. A lack of resources is perceived as a barrier to inclusion across cultural, geographical and economic boundaries. It is therefore important to understand what we mean by resources and begin to tackle the problem. Resources can be divided into:

* human resources;
* material resources (money!);
* access to information and knowledge.

I would argue, however, that the attitudinal barrier to inclusion is so great that the level of resourcing is irrelevant. It is people's attitude to those resources and they way they utilise them, that is crucial to the promotion of inclusive education.

"Inclusive education is concerned with removing all barriers to learning, and with the participation of all learners vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation. It is a strategic approach designed to facilitate learning success for all children. It addresses the common goals of decreasing and overcoming all exclusion from the human right to education, at least at the elementary level, and enhancing access, participation and learning success in quality basic education for all."

This is the way that UNESCO's Section for Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 2000) has recently defined inclusive education. There are, of course, many different types of barriers. Environmental barriers, such as the fragile economics and undemocratic politics of a country, mountainous terrain, and poor infrastructure are context-specific and extremely difficult to overcome. The resource barriers that I have mentioned above, however, which relate to people, money and information, can be more easily overcome.

In preparation for an EENET symposium at the recent ISEC congress (EENET, 2000), we conducted our own brainstorm about the barriers to inclusive education for all children. We listed all the excuses we'd heard in countries all over the world.

**We can't do inclusive education because:**

* Attitudes are negative - or "until attitudes change…";
* Disabled children aren't ready (eg not toilet trained);
* Our people aren't literate;
* We've got other priorities;
* Our system's too rigid;
* Buildings are not accessible;
* No trained personnel;
* No transport - distances are too great;
* No money;
* No equipment or materials;
* No policy or legislation.

These barriers or excuses could be true of both urban and rural settings. One of the great strengths of 'in tact' rural communities, however, is the relative stability of their population. Hazel Jones (personal communication, 2000) reports that in the rural areas of Vietnam, approximately 80% of the population has been born in the villages, whereas in the urban setting it tends to be the reverse with only 20% of inhabitants having been born in the towns. This rural stability, with its strong traditional and cultural practices, can provide a very positive setting within which to promote inclusive education.

Distance, and apparent isolation, from the centre, or from the nearest town, are two of the main barriers commonly identified in rural areas. This is also one of the reasons why it is often very difficult to recruit well-qualified teachers for posts in remote areas in all countries. Teacher education and ongoing support and training are therefore crucial for any changes introduced in education, if the rural areas are to be fully included in those changes.

It is vital that those working in rural areas find their own solutions to the problems they face and so become as self-sufficient as possible. In every barrier lies a potential solution. Barriers and solutions can be seen as the 'flip sides of the same coin'. And it is largely a question of attitude whether people decide to focus on what they are able to do, rather than on what they do not have. The greater the barrier, the more creative and imaginative the solution tends to be.

# India

I would like to share two contrasting images from a recent visit to India. I was helping to facilitate a week-long seminar on inclusive education in Agra and half-way through the week we decided that we needed to remind ourselves about the reality of schools in the South. First we visited an urban school, then we travelled only a few kilometres out of town to a village school. On each visit we noted the school's potential to provide a more inclusive education.

The overrall impression we gained from the urban school was that it conformed to the traditional idea of what a school should be. It was orderly and neat. The children had chairs to sit on and desks to work at. They wore uniforms and shoes. The classrooms were relatively spacious and the classes were not too large. We listened to some of the children read and asked them a few questions about what they were writing, but they struggled to answer the questions, even in Hindi. We asked about disabled children and were told that there weren't any.

At the village school we were greeted by members of the community, including children, who were happy to enter into discussion with us. There was clearly lots of potential for community involvement in the school. There was only one class and it was very large with mixed ages. There were no books, pencils, desks or chairs. Although there was only one classroom, there was plenty of space outside where teaching and learning could take place. Inside the school we noticed several children who were disabled. We entered into dialogue with the children and sang a Filipino song together.

We were accompanied on the visits by an Indian professor of education who had attended a village school himself. He was able to point out to us the enormous potential strengths of the village school, despite the initial impression of overwhelming poverty, overcrowding and lack of material resources. The professor told us that he had spent most of his primary school years teaching the younger children. By the end of the visit we were convinced that there was greater potential for change in the rural school than in the more formal and better resourced urban school.

# Effective schools

"An effective school is an inclusive school"

In the UK the term inclusion has come to mean effective schooling. It no longer refers only to the needs of children with impairments. This quote is from a document from the government's school inspectorate. Although we don't want to encourage the uncritical exporting of ideas from the UK to countries of the South, it is important to be aware of the current trends in countries of the North, as in the past they have been followed in the South. Hopefully there will be a more genuine sharing of experience and lessons learnt in the future since the Northern countries have a great deal to learn from the South about overcoming resource barriers, as their resources become more and more over-stretched. I have selected a few of the lessons learnt from experience in the UK and from UNESCO's, based mainly on Mel Ainscow's work.

* **Teachers and pupils are the greatest resources available for promoting inclusive practice**

This is true of all contexts, but is perhaps more obviously the case in impoverished rural areas in Africa and Asia, where school buildings are poor, teaching materials scarce and teachers have little training.

* **Build on existing practice**

Lessons learnt from the UNESCO Special Needs in the Classroom project indicate that finding ways of making better use of local knowledge and building on existing practice is where all development must start (Ainscow, 1998).

* **Teachers invariably know more than they use**

Teachers therefore need to be helped to learn from their own experience and from that of their colleagues, by becoming reflective practitioners (Ainscow, 1991) and by building upon what they know, and what they understand about what works and what doesn't work. In this way teachers can begin to take more responsibility for their own professional development.

* **Schools as problem-solving organizations**

"Schools should be places where teachers and pupils are engaged in activities that help them to become more successful at understanding and dealing with the problems they meet." (Ainscow, 1991)

Essentially the more problems that teachers meet, the more successful they are likely to become at solving problems, or overcoming barriers. Problems can therefore be seen as opportunities for collaborative learning. In the context of collaborative problem-solving, including children who have impairments, or who have been identified as having 'special needs', can therefore be seen as an opportunity for the whole school to learn and develop, and so become more effective.

* **Examine the practice of ordinary teachers**

We need to look at the practice of what we sometimes call 'ordinary teachers', as this is more likely to be the appropriate starting point for understanding how classrooms can be made more inclusive.

# 1. Participatory learning: Zambia

Paul Mumba is a so-called ordinary village school teacher. In his opinion, inclusion is about genuine relationships. He is a class teacher who has reflected a great deal on his own practice and who has dared to experiment. He only became involved with children with learning disabilities through the creation of a unit for these children.

The first barrier to inclusion which he identified was the traditional attitudes to disability which led to the exclusion of disabled children from their local school. However, the non-disabled children were also not attending school regularly because of the practice of rote learning.

Paul was concerned that the children were living in a democratic country, but that they had no direct experience of democracy. (Mumba, 1996). The traditional African way of life ensures that children are not encouraged to express opinions and discourages them from challenging the authority of their elders. But he overturned tradition and introduced democratic practices in his classroom. His colleagues were alarmed by his ideas. They feared this would lead to indiscipline throughout the school. Nevertheless he persisted. He began to involve the children in lesson planning and was amazed at how imaginative their ideas were and how committed they were to learning. He had no idea that they had so much to say and was a little overwhelmed at first. However as his teaching became more learner-centred, he found that his role as a teacher changed. He no longer had to stand in front of the class for hours talking. Instead he became a facilitator of the children's learning.

When the children were told that education was one of the basic human rights, their attendance improved. They wanted to claim their right. Attendance also improved because the children were more interested in their lessons. At the end of each term they evaluated the term's learning and provided feedback on how it could have been improved. In this way they were able to adapt the curriculum to make it more relevant to life in that community. One of the activities the children enjoyed most was conducting surveys in the local community to identify those children who were not in school and to establish the reasons for their exclusion. They identified 30 children with learning disabilities and they convinced their parents that they should attend school.

When the beautifully-furnished unit was built, (with windows, unlike the rest of the school!), a teacher was appointed from outside the community who was specially qualified to teach children with learning disabilities. However his training had only prepared him to teach five children. The barrier here was clearly an inappropriate and unsustainable western model which had been imposed on the community without any consultation, therefore showing no respect for local knowledge or practices.

There followed a difficult period when the teachers struggled to reconcile this new development in their school. Twenty five of the thirty newly identified children narrowly missed being excluded once more because the 'special' teacher could only accommodate 5 children in his luxury building. The 'special' teacher became known among the children as the 'Teacher of the Fools'. The children were still seen as different and separate from the rest of the school and they often begged not to be sent back to the unit after a period of integration.

A similar situation is described in a report entitled: From exclusion to Inclusion: a case of children with mental retardation in Kokebe Tsebah Primary School in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Bogale & Haile, 1999). This is an urban primary school with a unit. The study reveals that once the children have experienced full inclusion, they refuse to return to partial integration and withdrawal in the unit (Bogale & Haile , 1999)

Gradually Paul and his colleagues experimented with ways in which he could include the disabled children in his class all the time. They introduced 'twinning' between some of the most able children in his class and those in the unit. They found that by including the disabled children in his class all the time, the overall performance of all the pupils improved. His test results were far better than those of the other classes and the other teachers started to pay attention. He was even visited by university researchers from the capital, Lusaka, from UK and from the USA. He is now linked in to a network of 17 schools and the teachers meet regularly to share ideas. The 'special' unit is now used as a meeting place and resource room.

I have tried to simplify and summarise the barriers faced in Mpika and the ways in which those barriers have been overcome.

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| **Barriers** | **Solutions** |
| Children are passive learners; | Children become active learners; |
| Children are unaware of their rights; | Children claim their right to education; |
| School attendance is poor; | Children's participation leads to improved attendance; |
| Traditional attitudes prevent disabled children from attending school; | Children challenge these attitudes by convincing the parents to send their children to school; |
| Traditional practices prevent children from expressing their opinions; | Children are introduced to democratic practices in the classroom and become very vocal; |
| Curriculum is not relevant to local needs. | Children help to transform the curriculum to suit local needs. |

The significance of this story, I believe, is the way in which human rights, democracy, social justice and inclusive education were seen as inextricably linked. Small group work, active learning, peer-tutoring and the adaptation of the curriculum to local needs are methods which have been used successfully in many inclusive education programmes.

## 2. School-based support: Botswana

The Ministry of Education in Botswana has set up School Intervention Teams (SITs) within schools in order to help school teachers to respond to the learning needs of individual children (Kisanji, 1999). SITs are a school-based resource service whose membership consists of the head teacher, senior teachers, a social worker and the child's parents. These teams were set up to prevent the unnecessary referral of children with relatively mild learning difficulties to the Central Resource Centre (CRC) for special education.

This has helped the schools in Botswana become more self-sufficient and more skilful in managing children who are experiencing difficulties in learning and those with mild impairments. Since it has been estimated that 80% of disabled children have mild or moderate impairments (Jones & Stubbs, 1999), it is essential that all teachers in all schools feel confident about meeting the needs of these children, especially those in rural areas.

There are several advantages to the SITs system:

* It is school-based;
* There is a quick response to the learning, and other needs, of all children;
* Teachers can evaluate their teaching and experiment with different strategies with the support of the team;
* The short and long-term training needs of teachers can be assessed;
* Useful data can be obtained by the Division of Special Education which will help inform the development of a policy on inclusive schooling.

# 3. An inclusive community school: Mali

Douentza is nine hours drive from the capital, Bamako. It is the poorest district of Mali and 90% of the population live below the established poverty line. The combined effects of encroaching desert and decreased rainfall increase vulnerability to famine and drought. 87% of 7 year olds have serious work responsibilities which occupy an average of 6 hours per day. Girls work the longest hours.

In Douentza only 8% of children attend school compared to the national average of 44%. There are only 17 schools in 255 villages. The government spends 24% of its sparse budget on education, but does not have the resources to provide education for all children. There are also many drawbacks to existing state provision. School hours are inflexible, teachers are over-stretched and under-supported, teaching is by rote and in French, and the drop-out rate is very high.

Yet Mali has a rich history and culture. It has produced Islamic scholars, world-renowned musicians, and is home to historic cities such as Timbuktu. Mali is the leading cotton producer in sub-Saharan Africa and is proud of its democratic regime. Its many ethnic groups live together in relative harmony.

In January 1997 Save the Children-UK set up a consultation process with the government, donors, NGOs and village communities with the aim of making schooling more accessible to children (Stubbs, 2000). Access to schooling is part of a wider set of activities intended to strengthen the resilience of village children to the pressures of poverty. This case study shows that inclusive education can be supported in one of the 'poorest' areas of the world and that huge environmental, climatic, economic and material challenges can be overcome.

* **Inadequate state provision**

Generally, educational provision by the state is inadequate and inappropriate. This meant that the development of a community alternative was the only option in the short-term. The consultation process with the community initiated by Save the Children revealed that 70% of children and adults would prefer a different future to that of their parents. They saw access to a school education as the only way of escaping a lifetime of rural poverty. However it was agreed that schooling and work should be linked. Schooling should respond to village conditions and children should be able to go to school twice a day, so that they can still fulfil domestic responsibilities.

* **Lack of policy**

Furthermore, access to education by disabled children is not prioritised by the government, NGOs or communities within Mali. There is no policy or legislation which would support inclusive education. In the negotiations with the community, the inclusion of disabled children was made mandatory from the start.

* **Mobility & communication issues**

The barriers which exclude disabled children from schools are by no means unique to disabled children - however there are issues which are specific to the inclusion of disabled children, such as mobility and communication issues, and these have to be addressed if inclusion is to be successful. Action on Disability and Development (ADD), an international NGO which specialises in supporting disabled people's organisations provided the necessary specialist support.

* **Gender discrimination**

The education of girl children is also not seen as a priority within Mali culture. A decision was made to ensure that 50% of school places went to girls. A female member of the management committee was given the specific responsibility for the recruitment of girls and disabled children. Local theatre and musician groups were used to raise awareness and change attitudes in the local community about girls and education.

* **Teachers' lack of local knowledge**

It was agreed that the knowledge and experience of local villagers was more relevant to village children than that of urban-educated professional teachers, so local villagers were selected and then trained as teachers by professionals.

# 4. Parents as partners: Lesotho

When the national policy on integrated education was formulated in 1987 the situation of disabled children in Lesotho was bleak (Miles, 1989). Only a handful of children were accessing any kind of services - considerably less than in the other English-speaking countries of southern Africa, and there was a desperate lack of expertise in the area of special or inclusive education. Money, materials and information and knowledge were in short supply, but there was a policy and a very strong disabled people's movement.

A great deal of networking, lobbying and awareness raising went on prior to the establishment of the integrated education programme. Save the Children-UK's role was to intentionally build relationships between all the potential key players in the lives of disabled children - disabled people's organisations, ministry officials from education, health and social welfare, local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Queen of Lesotho. This was a process of challenging, and breaking down, attitudinal barriers, and promoting a positive attitude to existing resources. There were few institutional barriers to be overcome, since the only formal segregated provision for disabled children was a very small school for deaf children.

The appointment of a Save the Children adviser in 1991 to work alongside the Head of Special Education in the Ministry of Education was crucial. The adviser, a Zimbabwean, had many years of experience in providing community based services to children with learning difficulties.

One of the adviser's main priorities was to encourage partnership between parents and professionals. She arranged for the Norwegian Association for Persons with Develomental Disabilities (NFU) to make a preliminary visit to the newly-established parents' group. Building a relationship with the parents proved to be a very wise investment. The Lesotho Society of Mentally Handicapped Persons (LSMHP) was founded in 1992. In the same year, the Ministry of Education began its pilot project on inclusive education in ten schools, one school in each of the ten districts. The parents decided not to wait for the results of the pilot, but to take action themselves to promote the development of more inclusive practices by informing teachers in their areas about the programme.

In an in-depth study of the Ministry of education's inclusive education programme, Stubbs (1995) identifies the strengths of one of the remote rural pilot schools as follows: good individual follow-up of individual children; promotion of parental involvement; promotion of parents' independence; coping with large class sizes and few resources; and acting on their own initiative. The teachers are used to overcoming very severe obstacles and dealing with daily hardships, precisely because they live in a poor, remote area.

"this programme...benefits all children...My job satisfaction has improved; I enjoy teaching more even though I work longer hours. The programme has equipped us with different techniques for our so-called normal pupils" (class teacher).

A group of key parents, known as 'resource parents', have been trained to pass on their knowledge and skills to the other branch members of the organisation. They have twelve branches in six of Lesotho's ten districts. They organise meetings in their communities for chiefs, health workers, parents and school children to raise awareness of the needs of disabled children.

The parents were also trained to communicate more effectively with teachers and other professionals. They are now confident that their experience of being parents of disabled children is extremely valuable. They did not receive special training to be the parents of disabled children, and they don't think that teachers would benefit from special training. They prefer a problem-based approach to training and together with ministry staff they are able to advise teachers in the school setting. None of the teachers has 'special' expertise in a particular impairment or an increased salary. All the teachers are responsible for ensuring that disabled children are included. The teachers in the pilot schools, together with the parents, are a major resource for promoting inclusion throughout Lesotho.

One of the teachers told me: "This programme will never collapse. Even if you take the funding away, we will continue to include disabled children. We have repented! We no longer discriminate against disabled children. Now we know how to teach disabled children, we are better teachers."

**Summary of lessons learnt**

* **Whole-school approach**
It is particularly important in rural areas for schools to become self-sufficient in responding to children with impairments.
* **Specialist support**
If specialist support exists, it should not be based in individual schools, but rather at district or national level.
* **Access to information**
Teachers need access to easy-to-read information about how to implement inclusive education and about international documentation on the issue.
* **Teacher training**
Problem-based on-the-job training is more effective than pre-service training.
* **Community involvement**
CBR workers, chiefs, parents and children themselves can make a contribution to inclusive education and help to promote inclusion in society.

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