Research into levels of understanding about inclusive education in Otjozondjupa Region, Namibia

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# Background

Namibia was already embracing inclusive education in 1999, when the country's Blue Print of the Constitution was created, guaranteeing free education in line with the Millennium Development Goals. Before this, the National Policy on Disability (1997) had given all children equal opportunities and equal access to education, regardless of impairments. In 2005, The Office of the Prime Minister under which the Disability Advisory Unit lies, wrote extensively about including inclusive education in the Strategic Plan for the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) 2005-2010,

"Planning for a Learning Nation". Sadly, ETSIP's 155-page document makes no mention of inclusive education. The ETSIP1 document accepts that there are inequalities and that the quality of education is highly jeopardized by poor standards, school management systems and access. But it fails to recognize the educational needs of children with disabilities. Namibia's strong pillars of commitment to education for all have weakened over time, as my arguments will reveal later in this paper.

# Survey context

Given the above background, I set out to find out about principals' and teachers' understanding of inclusive education. I also wanted to find out how learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were coping in the schools. Learners with learning difficulties are hereby defined as those children who find school work difficult even though their intelligence is normal and have no sensory or physical problems. Children with disabilities are those who have physical, sensory or mental impairments and to a certain extent find school work difficult as a result of their impairments. Other key questions looked at: the training needs of teachers; parents' involvement in school; provision of professional support; and the major problems teachers encounter in their classrooms. The survey targeted 12 schools, 12 school principals, 24 teachers (2 from each school) and 27 learners. Four schools were urban, 2 were semi-urban and 8 were village schools. The distances from one urban school to the next ranged from 1km to 6km, whereas distances from one village school to the next ranged between 45km and100km. Distances of schools from the Regional Office ranged from 70km to 250km, except for 2 urban schools.

The sampling of schools was purposive2 for the simple reason that the results would provide an emergence of views into how best inclusive education and mainstreaming of disabilities could be done. Some schools were selected on pre-existing relations of trust with the researcher, so as to avoid negative speculations about why the school was targeted. Other schools with no pre-existing relations of trust were meant to neutralize possible bias during analysis.

# Findings

Analysis was three pronged. Questions were targeted at: learners identified with learning difficulties or disabilities; teachers; and principals. Similar questions were asked to the three groups for the purpose of triangulation3 of the survey. I discuss below some of the major responses from these three groups and provide my views about my observations.

## (a) Learners

Learners generally liked their schools because at school they played with friends or received good teaching. One learner from a refugee school said:

"The school is my future. When I grow up I will not be a street kid, I want to be a teacher".

Another from a village school said:

"We learn good and bad things here. Some learners are respecting us and others are abusing us".

When asked whether they needed to move to another school, some learners responded:

"I want to get away from here to avoid teasing because I stammer"
"I would like to do vocational training which is not taught in our school"
"There is no life in a village school like dancing, having many friends and walking around in town"
"I would like to get away from my mother who abuses me because I have a disability".

Learning difficulties were observed to be linked to: visual impairments; poor understanding of the curriculum; problems with reading, writing and mathematics; limited access to rooms (especially for those using wheelchairs); memory problems; and language barriers. Children were asked about these challenges and how they coped:

* children with visual difficulties (11.1%) said they hold the book closer or apply eye drops when available. One learner commented that even after explaining his needs to the teacher, nothing had been done
* concerning curriculum issues, 14.8% of the learners said they either had no idea what to do, did nothing or tried to get help from others. Those with mathematics difficulties (3.7%) just 'switched off'. The majority (37%) who had reading and writing problems sought help from friends and teachers, or siblings at home
* 11.1% were being teased due to their disabilities and hated school
* 7.4% experienced language difficulties in schools where English rather than mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction.

In terms of support requested by the learners, many expressed the need for teachers to come to their rescue; to be closer to them, provide reading games, assist with getting eye glasses, and introduce vocational skills, etc. One learner put it very simply:

"I just need someone to encourage me".

It seems clear from the children's responses that schools need to put systems in place that will respond fully to the barriers identified. Ainscow4 (1991, 1994) discusses the need for a reconceptualization of the special education needs task. He further asserts that difficulties experienced by pupils come as a result of the way schools are organized and the forms of teaching that are provided. Skirtic, (1991), quoted in Ainscow (1994), names this phenomenon as 'students with special needs becoming artefacts of the traditional curriculum'. Once this happens, it is likely that these learners will drop out of school. What needs to be done at this level is to listen to their needs and formulate ways of meeting those needs. Learners have a right to be heard; their views should be sought and considered5 .

## (b) Teachers

Teachers' understanding of inclusive education seemed impressive:

* 45.8% indicated that inclusive education means having all learners in one class irrespective of their capabilities
* 12.5% did not have an idea of what inclusive education means
* 8.3% did not respond to this question
* 37.5% gave varied answers around willingness to help learners in the classroom and need for training.

In relation to special education training:

* 58.3% of the teachers interviewed had received some exposure to special education at their training colleges
* 41.6% had received no exposure.

Prior to this piece of research, inclusive education pamphlets had been sent to all schools in the region. Teachers were therefore asked about these materials:

* only 29.1% acknowledged having seen the pamphlets
* 58.3% had never seen them.

This indicates that either teachers have very little interest in inclusive education, or that school principals did not distribute the pamphlets for discussion among the teachers.

Teachers displayed very little understanding of the social model of disabilities. It seems many still believe that disabilities are medical concerns and should be handled by doctors. Nevertheless, 83.3% of the teachers had knowledge about children with disabilities in their classrooms whereas 16.6% said they had no idea.

In relation to how children with learning difficulties or disabilities should be taught:

* 41.6% felt that learners should be taught together but that provision should be made in terms of facilities, teaching aids and teacher training
* 37.5% of teachers thought such children should be in a special class
* 12.5% indicated that, due to the complexity of disabilities, such children should be in special schools, though if the disability is not severe the child could be mainstreamed
* 8.3% said that any child with a disability should be in a special school.

It seems that many teachers do have a positive view of inclusive education but lack the necessary training:

* 79.1% of the interviewees indicated that they would need training in inclusive education
* 70.8% said they needed training in general special education
* 62.5% chose training in learning difficulties
* the remaining teachers said they needed training in individual disciplines such as visual, hearing, physical and intellectual impairments.

Information given about school-parent relationships revealed a need for parents to get more involved in their children's learning. Teachers' suggestions for strengthening this area included:

* more systematic parents' days
* establishment of parent-teacher forums on a monthly basis \* encouraging parents to take part in school development.

The clear message is that school development should be done more through strengthening school and parent relationships.

Teachers cited the following main problems that they encounter when teaching:

* explaining concepts in the curriculum
* handling learners with behavioural problems
* inadequate learning materials
* chronic absenteeism by learners
* disrespectful and lazy learners
* memory problems among learners
* language barriers

These factors play a part in the observed poor classroom performance and low reading levels of many learners. Central to this finding is the fact that teachers expect support from the Regional Office or National Institute for Educational Development (NIED). If support is lacking, teachers experience frustration and reach high levels of 'burn-out'.

My observation regarding language barriers is that Namibia has turned a blind eye to the heterogeneity of the society. There is no one school where you will just find exclusively one ethnic group; schools contain a mixture of ethnic groups. If the lower primary grade teacher therefore uses the mother tongue of the majority in the classroom, children from other ethnic groups are disadvantaged. In addition, it is not uncommon to find teachers in the lower primary who have no basic understanding of the local languages.

## (c) Responses from school principals

The principals interviewed had been leaders in their schools for 4 months, 6 months, 13 months, 2 years, 4 years, 5 years, 10 years and 11 years. Two principals were absent from their schools. These were not interviewed. In their place their respective Heads of Departments were interviewed.

Their understanding of inclusive education varied, including:

* involving all learners in the mainstream
* teaching learners with specific challenges in a different setting, e.g. special school
* removal of all barriers and impediments to learning
* making learning accessible to all
* rendering individualized assistance to learners with special needs in the mainstream class.

This variety of interpretation of inclusive education could be a barrier, unless everyone continually strives to debate and find common understandings.

Some of the principals' opinions on how inclusive education could be strengthened seemed to contradict their understanding. For instance, some suggested establishing special classes in every school and establishing a regional special school. Others, however, suggested intensive in-service teacher training; sensitisation programmes on national radio; and special programmes for learners who cannot cope with the curriculum.

Principals were asked how parents responded when told about their children's learning difficulties. Some parents responded well but did not know what to do. Others thought it was an insult to them and an attempt to discriminate against their child. Some parents loaded it all on the teachers and indicated that learning matters are the school's responsibility, not the parents'.

From such responses, it can be seen that some schools remain isolated from parents. This is a definite barrier because it leads to parents not wanting to take up their roles responsibly. It is essential, therefore, to draw up programmes that knit the schools and parents together. As suggested by teachers, formation of parent-school links is paramount to the success of any school development agenda.

School principals mentioned barriers their teachers face in the classroom, including:

* language problems
* lack of facilities
* lack of support
* lack of training
* overcrowded classes
* time factor due to the requirements to complete the school curriculum
* absence of parental support.

Through the interviews with principals, learning difficulties emerged as most common disability teachers encounter, followed by intellectual, visual, hearing and physical impairments and stammering, in that order. This corresponds well with the information given by teachers and learners. There does not appear to have been much done to ameliorate such difficulties. Encouraging innovation among teachers, school principals, education officers and parents could bring about the required positive changes. In particular, we could build on the teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education to help learners with difficulties. Teachers with possible negative attitudes about mainstreaming such learners could be sensitized to respond to the various learning needs of children.

# Conclusion

This study sought to highlight current levels of understanding about inclusive education, learners' coping mechanisms and the relationship of schools with parents. The paper is not complete because areas such as culture, social structures in urban and rural schools were not addressed. What is clear is that: teachers' cry for training must be heeded; school management systems must be addressed; and school support from the Regional Office and NIED will be paramount to the success of inclusive education. Schools in Namibia function on a given policy.

School management systems hinge upon the fact that there is no policy on inclusive education and therefore schools are not being held responsible for children's learning difficulties. Even if an inclusive education policy is drafted, its success can only be realized if there is a consistent teacher training programme in place, teacher commitment, and parental involvement. Such a programme could target teachers in pre-service training and those already in the service. Pre-service training will ensure the development of teacher capacity, while in-service training will help to reduce pupil drop-out rates, improve motivation on the part of the teachers, and boost the morale of the learners.

# References

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UNESCO Convention on the Rights of Children Article

1 2 1ETSIP doc page 19 - Challenges

2 Robson C. (1997) Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientist and Practitioner-Researchers Blackwell UK. 141

3 Robson C. (1997) Real World Research pg. 290. Triangulation, in surveying, is a method of finding out where something is by getting a "fix" on it from two or more places.

4 Ainscow M. (1994) Special Needs in the Classroom; A Teacher Education Guide. London Jessica Kingsley UNESCO

5 Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children

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