

Perceptions of Teachers Towards Inclusive Education: The Case of Early Childhood Centres in Sissala East District

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Abstract: The study investigated teacher perception towards inclusive education in Early Childhood Centres in Sissala East District in Upper West Region, Ghana. The study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. A sample of 150 teachers in the Early Childhood Education centres were selected using census and homogeneous sampling techniques. Questionnaires and interviews were used for data collection. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data while qualitative data were analysed in themes. The study found that: most early childhood teachers in the Sissala East District had a positive perception of inclusive education. It was also evident that most early childhood teachers in the Sissala East District believe that factors such as lack of teacher training; insufficient resources; limited administrative support; teachers' attitudes; large class sizes and poor building infrastructure influence their perception of inclusive education. The study concluded that teachers in early childhood centres within the Sissala East District have a positive view of inclusive education. However, variables such as a lack of teacher training, insufficient resources, limited administrative support, teachers' attitudes, large class numbers, and inadequate building infrastructure impact their perspective of inclusive education. Based on the key findings, the study recommended that teachers in early childhood centres in Sissala East District should be motivated by early childhood coordinators and headteachers to have positive perceptions of inclusive education. Again, the ministry of education should offer enough and consistent teacher support services, such as teaching assistants, and continuous professional development programmes to improve the efficacy of inclusion and minimise teacher stress.

Keywords: teachers' perceptions, inclusive education, early childhood education, children with disabilities

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, there has been a decisive move towards inclusive practice in education and an acceptable agreement on the key principles which was encompassed in the Salamanca Statement. Since 1994, the principles agreed on in Salamanca have been reinforced by many conventions (UNESCO, 1994). The declarations and recommendations in Europe which covers the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) had made it an explicit reference to the importance of ensuring inclusive systems of education.

In the light of the global development since Ghana was a participant at the Salamanca and Dakar Conferences, the Ministry of Education pursued those rights hence the Ghana Education Service in its Education Strategic Plan of 2003–2015 adapted Inclusive Education.

It was obvious that the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has gone beyond the narrow idea of inclusion as a means of understanding and overcoming a deficit in the issue of inclusive education. It is now widely accepted that concerns on the issues of gender, ethnicity, class, social conditions, health and human rights encompassed universal involvement, access, participation and achievement (Ouane, 2015). The UNESCO International Conference in Geneva in 2008 raised the importance of inclusive education as a means of addressing increasing inequality, spatial segmentation and cultural fragmentation. Garcia-Huidobro (2015) has also pointed out that equity must be at the centre of general policy decisions and not limited to peripheral policies oriented to correct the effects of general policies that are not in tune with the logic of justice or prevention. Education for all and removing barriers to participation and learning are essential links which made the reform of the education system and other policies such as poverty alleviation, improved maternal and child health, promote gender equality and ensure environmental sustainability and global partnership.

Inclusive education can, therefore, be understood as the presence (access to education and school attendance), participation (quality of the learning experience from the learners' perspective) and achievement (learning processes and outcomes across the curriculum) of all learners. UNESCO's (2008) definition of inclusive education states that "an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the learners and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination" (p. 3).

The ideology of inclusive education, as outlined above, is implemented in different ways across different contexts and varies with national policies and priorities which are in turn influenced by a whole range of social, cultural,

historical and political issues. Definitions and understandings of what is meant by inclusion and inclusive education vary greatly within countries (Watkins & D'Alessio, 2014) and there is no agreed interpretation of terms such as handicap, special need or disability. Such differences are linked to administrative, financial and procedural regulations rather than reflecting variations in the incidence and the types of special educational needs in countries (Meijer, 2013). When considering policy and practice for inclusive education across countries, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that policymakers and practitioners are not always talking about the same thing (Watkins & D'Alessio, 2014). There appear to be several reasons for this: firstly, the education systems (policies and practice) in countries have evolved, within very specific contexts and are, therefore, highly individual (Meijer, 2013).

Despite this, there are similarities in approaches and aims for inclusive education within all countries, as well as between countries (Ainscow & Booth, 2015). Secondly, systems for inclusive education are embedded in both the general and special education frameworks of provision that exist in individual countries (Watkins, 2014). There is a need to examine issues impacting inclusive education within both general education legislation and policy to fully understand teaching and learning in inclusive settings. UNESCO's (2005) monitoring report on quality in education highlighted the need to respect "indigenous" views of quality. Mitchell (2015) states: Since there is no one model of inclusive education that suits every country's circumstance, caution must be exercised in exporting and importing a particular model. While countries can learn from others' experiences, it is important that they give due consideration to their own social-economic political-cultural-historical singularities' (p. 19).

Despite these varying contexts, fundamental principles can be agreed upon to overcome barriers which may arise from, professionals' perception, class, sexist or racial prejudice, or from cultural misunderstandings' (Rambla, Ferrer, Tarabini & Verger, 2016). Operti et al. (2009) have suggested that Skidmore's (2004) examples of discourses around deviance as compared to inclusive education can be helpful in identifying and overcoming barriers to learning. According to Schumm and Vaughn (2015), the most effective teaching strategies used in preparing teachers for inclusive education are embedded in the inclusive teacher preparation model. To them, this preparation model is in two major dimensions. One deals with the outcomes of the model and the other focuses on the specific programme components (Schumm & Vaughn, 2015).

The most prevalent education conceptualisations are those that define inclusion based on certain key features and characteristics such as age-appropriate placement and learners being able to attend their local school. Berlach and Chambers (2011) provided a philosophical framework for inclusive education along with school-based and classroom-based examples. Their philosophical underpinnings included:

availability of opportunity; acceptance of disability and or disadvantage; superior ability and diversity; and an absence of bias, prejudice, and inequality. Hall, Campher, Smit, Oswald and Engelbrecht (2016) and Florian (2015) noted that inclusion means "full membership of an age-appropriate class in your local school doing the same lessons as other pupils and it matters if you are not there. Plus, you have friends who spend time with you outside of school" (p. 31).

Concerning inclusive practice, learner achievement can be compromised unless teacher training programmes embrace a new wave of pedagogical practices that value all learners (Carrington, Deppeler & Moss, 2010). Learning to teach in an inclusive setting is a highly complex and dynamic activity, and has much to do with context that uses a whole-school approach. A whole-school approach to inclusive education involves using multiple strategies that have a unifying purpose and reflect a common set of values.

It requires that policymakers, teacher educators, teachers, parents, learners, and the community work together to create an educational environment that promotes equal opportunity for learning and well-being on social and emotional levels (Avramidis, 2015; Ekins & Grimes, 2016; Fullan, 2014; Peterson, 2014). While we cannot claim a definitive form of inclusive pedagogy, an attempt can be made to stir up a rich and diverse knowledge base that informs the preparation of teachers for inclusive education. Professional development is important in the creation of successful inclusive environments. Many teachers are apprehensive about teaching special education learners because they feel that they lacked the training necessary to meet learner needs and that they had not learned appropriate skills in their career or at professional development workshops (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2016; Desimone & Parmar, 2016b). Teachers are the single most important components in the process of making an education system more inclusive. They have sometimes the overwhelming task of translating frameworks, policies and directives into practice while safeguarding the best interests of the child (Hargreaves, 2014). The initial and continuous training and support of teachers are key strategies for the realization of an inclusive and right-based education system. Teachers are both duty bearers and rights holders within the framework for the right to education, and their empowerment to be able to assist the process of promotion and protection of the right to quality education for all is therefore very important. Arbeiter and Hartley (2002) stated that inclusive education requires that teachers use a child-centred approach, that they are aware of the individual learning needs of their learners and that they adapt the delivery of the curriculum accordingly

Ocloo and Subbey (2008) reported that most Ghanaian headteachers oppose the admission of kids with disabilities to their schools since such individuals will degrade the school's academic standards. Similarly, most teachers refuse to include disabled learners in their classrooms because they believe it will be unsatisfying and stressful. Those with

severe impairments are more likely to be rejected than children with mild disabilities. Mainstream educators are disempowered to serve learners with special educational needs in their classrooms due to a lack of particular knowledge and training on inclusive approaches (Emam & Mohamed, 2011; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014)

Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) content that teachers' perceptions in inclusive educational settings are not developing favourably. Studies have found that even experienced educators tend to be less positive about inclusion (De Boer et al., 2010; Moburg and Savolainen, 2003; Muwana and Ostrosky, 2014). In any event, if inclusive education is to be valued and implemented as an educational modality, teachers' perceptions of it must be given attention. Nketsia and Salovita (2013) mentioned that teachers who go through inclusive education course during service training have a considerable level of understanding and positive view of inclusive education. However, Hunter-Johnson, Newton and Cambridge (2014) in their study "teachers' perceptions of inclusive education its implication for adult education in the Bahamas" identified lack of teacher training; insufficient resources; limited administrative support; teachers' attitudes; large class sizes and poor building infrastructure as the most prominent among teachers' responses in regards to the factors which influenced their perceptions towards the implementation of inclusive education. Although studies have shown that teachers' perceptions about inclusion vary according to a wider range of what is regarded as a disability (Ocloo & Subbey, 2008; Deku and Vanderpuye, 2017; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Wood, Evans, & Spandagou, 2014). It appears there has not been any study conducted in the Sissala East District. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the perceptions of teachers towards inclusive education in early childhood centres within the Sissala East District.

1.1 Research Objectives

The study sought to find out about:

1. Teachers' views on inclusive education in the Sissala East District.
2. Possible factors influence teachers' perception of inclusive education in the Sissala East District.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions

1. What are teachers' views on inclusive education in the Sissala East District?
2. What possible factors influence teachers' perception of inclusive education in the Sissala East District?

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The study adopted the sequential exploratory mixed-method design. This approach is a two-phase mixed method with the

overall purpose of using qualitative data to explain or build upon initial quantitative results (Creswell, 2018). This approach was used because there was a need for the qualitative data to further explain significant and insignificant findings obtained in the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2018). Moreover, multiple sources or methods of data gathering increased the credibility and dependability of the data since the strengths of one source compensate for the potential weaknesses of the other (Watson & Welch-Ross, 2000).

2.2 Population

The population for the study was 204 participants. It was made up of 54 headteachers and 150 kindergarten teachers. However, the accessible population was 150 kindergarten teachers in Sissala East District.

2.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

The study selected all the 150 teachers as the sample through census. Census technique is where a researcher selects all the members of the population as the sample (Borg & Gall, 2007) The reason was that this number was manageable in size. Also, 10 teachers were selected from the 150 teachers using homogeneous sampling technique.

2.4 Instruments for Data Collection

The study employed a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide as data collection instruments for this study. A structured questionnaire was used because of the following reasons: it offered actionable data; easy for comparability; generalisation of findings can be made; anonymity of respondents was assured; large scale was covered within a short time; there was less pressure on participants in responding to statements (Zohrabi 2013). The semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection because it allowed the researcher to enter another teachers viewpoint, to better understand their perspectives on the topic under investigation (Patton, 2002). Similarly, it allowed a wide range of participants' understanding to be explored and also revealed important aspects of the phenomena under study. Furthermore, the interview guide (semi-structured) helped the interviewer to focus on the research objectives, yet open up new avenues for further questions (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen 2010).

2.5 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

2.5.1 Validity of the questionnaire

Validity of the questionnaire was established using face and content validity procedures. Face validity of the questionnaire was checked by giving the prepared instrument to the researchers' colleague Tutors at the College of Education. Again, before deploying the instrument for data collection, the researchers submitted the question to some professors with an understanding of inclusive education to examine if the content assessed what it intended to measure. Comments from the colleague tutors and the professors on the questionnaire were used to effect the necessary corrections before the

questionnaires were administered to participants in the main study.

2.5.2 Reliability of the Questionnaire

Reliability of the instrument was checked by using the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was selected because it is a much more reliable way of checking the internal consistency of the instrument (Creswell, 2013). 50 teachers at the Early Childhood Centres in Lambussie-Karni District were selected for pre-testing. These teachers were selected because they have similar characteristics and are compared to those in the study area. After the pre-testing of the questionnaire, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient value was calculated and a value of 0.892 was obtained. This was an indication that the questionnaire was reliable. This is because according to (Creswell, 2013), if a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient value of 0.7 is obtained, then, the instrument is reliable.

2.6 Trustworthiness of the Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The researchers interacted with the subjects over two weeks to develop an acquaintance with them. This was done through casual visits to the teachers in their schools. This enabled the researcher to develop a cordial relationship with teachers. In this way, the researcher was able to build trust between himself and the teachers. This trust contributed positively to participants opening up for discussions of all relevant issues that were covered in the study.

Also, to address the dependability issue for the study, the processes within the study are reported in detail, thereby enabling future researchers to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results. Again, for confirmability's sake, the researchers took steps to help ensure as far as possible that the findings of the study were the result of the experiences and ideas of participants rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher. To this end, beliefs underpinning decisions made and methods adopted were acknowledged within the research report.

2.7 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data (questionnaires). The items on the questionnaire were coded and fed into the Statistical Product for Service Solution (SPSS) version 21 and analysed using descriptive statistics. The interview data recorded were transcribed, coded, and built into relationships. Themes were then developed from the relationships for discussion.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Research Question One: What are teachers' views on inclusive education in the Sissala East District?

This question aimed at examining the perceptions of teachers towards inclusive education. Simple frequency counts, percentages, means and standard deviations were used to analyse the quantitative data while interviews were analysed in themes. Quantitative results are shown in Table 1 followed by the interview results.

Table 1: Views of teachers on inclusive education

Views of teachers on inclusive education	SD	D	A	SA	M	SD
I feel that inclusion won't work in any class that has too many learners	12(8%)	36(24%)	45(30%)	57(38%)	1.5	.43
I feel that inclusion will increase my workload	30(20%)	46(30%)	29(19%)	45(31%)	1.2	.41
I feel that learners who require specialised academic support are less capable intellectually than their mainstream peer	15(10%)	27(18%)	51(34%)	57(38%)	1.5	.43
I feel that learners who require specialised academic support should remain in schools	37(24%)	33(22%)	29(26%)	51(34%)	1.3	.42
I feel that inclusion provides an opportunity for learners to learn to appreciate the diversity that is similar to the outside world	0(0%)	15(10%)	57(38%)	78(52%)	1.8	.46
If I changed to another school I would look for a school not practicing inclusion	15(10%)	29(19%)	45(30%)	61(41%)	1.6	.43
I feel inclusion can work in all schools	30(20%)	30(20%)	42(28%)	48(32%)	1.1	.43
I can teach a few learners who require specialised academic support	21(14%)	30(20%)	42(28%)	57(38%)	1.5	.43
Learners who require specialised academic support are more difficult to discipline	24(16%)	21(14%)	51(34%)	54(36%)	1.4	.42

Source: Field data, (2022) (Total number of teachers=150)

Key: SD=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; A=Agree and SA=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Results from Table 1 indicate that most (78, representing 52%) of the teachers strongly agreed that inclusion provides an opportunity for learners to learn to appreciate the diversity that is similar to the outside world (M=1.8, SD=.46). The results also show that 57 (representing 38%) of them strongly

agreed that inclusion won't work in any class that has too many learners in a class (M=1.5, SD=.43). Likewise, 57 (representing 38%) of the teachers strongly agreed that learners who require specialised academic support are less capable intellectually than their mainstream peers (M=1.5,

SD=.43). Similarly, 57 (representing 38%) of them strongly agreed that they teach a few learners who require specialised academic support (M=1.5, SD=.43).

Again, the results indicate that 54 (representing 36%) of the teachers strongly agreed that learners who require specialised academic support are more difficult to discipline (M=1.4, SD=.42). Also, 51 (representing 36%) teachers strongly agreed that they feel that learners who require specialised academic support should remain in schools (M=1.3, SD=.42). Likewise, 51 (representing 36%) teachers strongly agreed that if they change to another school, they would look for a school not practicing inclusion (M=1.3, SD=.42). More so, 48 (representing 32%) of them strongly agreed that they feel inclusion can work in all schools (M=1.1, SD=.43). Additionally, 45 (representing 31%) of the teachers strongly agreed that they feel that inclusion will increase their workload (M=1.2, SD=.41).

It can be deduced from these results that teachers believe that the presents of inclusive education are of much significance to learners with disabilities. The results can further infer that aside from the benefits learners with disabilities can derive from inclusive education, it loses its significance if the class size is large. It can be inferred from the quantitative results that teachers in KG centres have a fair idea about what inclusive education is and were willing to embrace it.

Themes, direct quotes and explanations were used to analyse the qualitative data. For example, the theme of we welcome children with disabilities assists them and gives them special attention emerged as indicated by the analysis. This could be seen from the analysis of themes and subthemes.

For instance, one kindergarten teacher said:

When parents are bringing their children with disabilities to the school, immediately we see them, we quickly meet them and receive the child from them. We don't allow them to bring them to the classroom [KGT: 2].

Another respondent said:

I embrace children with disabilities. This is because they are people who need our attention most [KGT: 5].

One respondent also said:

There are some children when you ask them questions, they will not talk or mind you. The head is always down. Another one will not sit at one place. So, I sometimes move such children to sit in front of the class [KGT: 4].

These comments suggest that kindergarten teachers receive children with disabilities with warmth and this makes them happy.

Another teacher shared her views by saying:

During break time, I call children with disabilities and teach them lessons I taught their colleagues without disabilities [KGT: 6].

Similarly, one teacher said:

Some of these children need attention. And it seems they don't get it from their parents. For that reason, when they come to school, we the teachers give them attention and that makes them happy [KGT: 1].

One teacher said:

I become friendly to children with disabilities. For example, I smile, show them love and also bring them closer to me [KGT: 7].

These comments suggest that children with disabilities need attention which sometimes they are unable to get it from their parents. Fortunately, kindergarten teachers give children with disabilities attention whenever they come to school. It could be realised from the quantitative and qualitative data that kindergarten teachers welcome children with disabilities into their classes. Based on these results it was concluded that teachers in Early Childhood Centres in Sissala East District have a positive perception of inclusive education.

3.2 Research Question Two: What possible factors influence teachers' perception of inclusive education in the Sissala East District?

Table 2: Possible factors that influence teachers' perception of inclusive education

Factors that influence teachers' perception of inclusive education	SD	D	A	SA	M	SD
Knowledge on inclusive education influence how I perceive inclusive education	2(2%)	10(6.7%)	65(43.3%)	72(48%)	3.4	.70
Sufficiency of resources influence how I perceive inclusive education	5(3.3%)	24(16%)	72(48%)	49(32.7%)	3.1	.78
Administrative support influence how I perceive inclusive education	6(4%)	29(19.3%)	60(40%)	55(36.7%)	3.1	.85
Other teachers' attitudes influence how I perceive inclusive education	20(13.3%)	18(12%)	62(41.3%)	50(33.3%)	3.0	.99
Large class sizes influence how I perceive inclusive education	19(12.7%)	13(8.7%)	57(38%)	61(40.7%)	3.1	.89

Source: Field data, (2022) (Total number of teachers=150)

Key: SD=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; A=Agree and SA=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Table 2 presents response ratings to various statements on possible factors that influence teachers' perception of inclusive education using a Likert scale which ranges from 1 as strongly disagree (SD) to 4 as strongly agree (SA). The study reveals that 72 of the teachers representing 48% and 65 of the respondents representing 43.3% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed respectively to the statement "Knowledge on inclusive education influences how I perceive inclusive education.". Contrary, 10 of the respondents representing 6.7% disagreed to the statement while 2 of the respondents representing 2% of the total population disagreed. The statement recorded a mean value of 3.4 (Std=0.70). In addition, the data obtained showed that 49 of the respondents representing 32.7% and 72 respondents representing 48% either strongly agreed or agreed respectively that "Sufficiency of resources influence how I perceive inclusive education". However, 24 of the respondents representing 16% disagreed with the statement while 5 of the respondents representing 3.3% of the total population disagreed. The statement recorded a mean value of 3.1 (Std=0.78).

Similarly, the analysis revealed that 55 of the respondents representing 36.7% strongly agreed that "Administrative support influence how they perceive inclusive education" while 60 of the respondents representing 40% agreed with this statement. Even so, 29 of them representing 19.3% and 6 of them representing 4% disagreed respectively to the statement. The statement recorded a mean value of 3.1 (Std=0.85). The teachers further confirmed that the other teachers' attitudes influence how I perceive inclusive education (Mean=3.0 Std=0.99). They also confirmed that large class sizes influence how they perceive inclusive education (Mean=3.1, Std=0.89).

It can be deduced from these results that teachers believe that factors such as lack of teacher training; insufficient resources; limited administrative support; teachers' attitudes; large class sizes and poor building infrastructure influence their perception of inclusive education.

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings confirm that of other studies. For example, various studies showed the importance of this fact, as more experienced instructors are predisposed to be less positive about inclusiveness relative to newly qualified staff, and younger people are more open to change (Moburg & Savolainen, 2013; de Boer et al., 2010; Muwana & Ostrosky, 2014). Although training does improve the behaviour of teachers toward special learners, some argue that the current content of courses fails to provide relevant practical skills (Emam & Mohamed, 2011; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014).

Also, the study lends support to the research by Nketsia and Salovita (2013) who found teachers have a general understanding and positive view of inclusive education. Muwana and Ostrosky (2014) study revealed that although teachers largely supported the principle of inclusive

education, the vast majority stated that children with disabilities should be assisted by specialists, as the overall teaching experience requires substantial changes to mainstream practices.

More so, the study aligns well with Arbeiter and Hartley (2012) who highlighted a series of strategies taken by teachers to create an inclusive classroom environment such as giving individual attention, grouping, bringing children with hearing deficiencies to the front, and sign language, commonly noted in practice. The study also confirms the study of Singal (2015) that teachers adopt some strategies to assist learners with disabilities. The general belief was that teachers are not vitally important in promoting the inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream educational experience, but rather this was the responsibility of specialised staff or family. Although special learners were included in regular classes, the attention that was given to them was minimal compared to their non-disabled peers. Global shreds of evidence suggest that good practice in inclusive education should consider an array of factors. For instance, in Australia key strategies are focused on in-class assistance.

The respondents admitted that there are possible factors that influence their perception of inclusive education. This builds on research findings in the literature (Hunter-Johnson, Newton and Cambridge, 2014). according to literature and research findings, the knowledge teachers have on inclusive education, the sufficiency of resources, administrative support, large class sizes and other teachers' attitude is the most prominent among teachers' responses in regards to the factors which influenced their perceptions towards the implementation of inclusive education.

4.1 Key Findings

From objective one, results gave evidence that generally, most early childhood teachers in the Sissala East District had a positive perception of inclusive education. Assessing objective two, it was evident that most early childhood teachers in the Sissala East District believe that factors such as lack of teacher training; insufficient resources; limited administrative support; teachers' attitudes; large class sizes and poor building infrastructure influence their perception of inclusive education.

4.2 Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that teachers in early childhood centres within the Sissala East District have a positive view of inclusive education. However, variables such as a lack of teacher training, insufficient resources, limited administrative support, teachers' attitudes, big class numbers, and inadequate building infrastructure impact their perspective of inclusive education.

4.3 Recommendations

1. Teachers in the Early Childhood Centres in Sissala East District should be motivated by Early Childhood

coordinators and headteachers to have positive perceptions of inclusive education.

2. The Ministry of Education should offer enough and consistent teacher support services, such as teaching assistants, and continuous professional development programmes to improve the efficacy of inclusion and minimise teacher stress.

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