

Exploring the Preparedness of Teachers to Implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-Schools of Gaborone, Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the preparedness of teachers to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-schools of Gaborone. A qualitative research approach was adopted. The interpretivist paradigm was used. The population of study consisted of pre-schools of Gaborone. These were situated in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Purposive sampling was used to select pre-schools that had learners who were deemed to have special needs while being taught in the same classrooms as those without learning difficulties. The same sampling technique was applied to select six schools, that is, two from each of the three settings. The reason for choosing schools in different areas was to find out if teaching in such areas had any impact in the preparedness of teachers to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education. In relation to this, the study sample was made up of twelve participants, six of these were heads of chosen pre-schools while the other six were senior teachers of the same. Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect data from both heads of pre-schools and chosen teachers. Gathered data were analysed thematically. Based on the results of this study it was gathered that most teachers who taught in pre-schools did not have adequate knowledge to offer inclusive early childhood education therefore there were not fully prepared to do so. This exposed a need for the government and other related stakeholders to implement viable training programmes for the affected learners.

Key terms: Inclusion, Inclusive early childhood education, preparedness, pre-schools, teacher

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is generally seen as a branch of education which deals with the teaching of all young children, both formally and informally, up until the age of eight years (Cooper, 2016). In the past two decades, Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) which is viewed in other countries as Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) has changed the perceptions of people in all societies and the world at large. IECE prepares teachers to teach young Children with Special Needs (CWSN) from the age of 3 years to 6 years in pre-school settings. The program supports national and state standards that promote the development of young CWSN in inclusive pre-school settings.

CWSN have the right to be a part of mainstream education from an early childhood and it is the responsibility of the regular schools and Early Childhood Educators (ECEs)/ the teachers to provide this education to all young learners despite their unique differences. An early childhood specialist or special education teacher should work on healthy development of infants, toddlers and empower educators to improve the policies, programs, practices and systems that affect the lives of CWSN with other children in pre-school settings (Adedoyin and Okere, 2016). The inclusion of CWSN in ECE settings should focus on

the transformation of school cultures and pedagogy to increase access to all children, enhance the acceptance of all learners, maximize children's participation in various activities and increase the achievement of and development of all children (Bose, Chadha & Chhabra, 2018).

Bose, Chadha and Chhabra (2018) in their research paper stated that in Botswana, the inclusion CWSN in ECE gained momentum in response to the following international developments that advocated for the inclusion of CWSN in educational settings ; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations [UN], 1989), Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons With Disabilities (UN, 1993), Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994), Dakar Framework on Education for All (UNESCO, 2000) and Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). At the national level in Botswana, a number of education policy documents promote education of CWSN in regular education settings, including Revised National Educational Policy (Republic of Botswana, 1994), Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (Republic of Botswana, 2001) and Inclusive Education Policy (Republic of Botswana, 2011). The ECCE policy (Republic of Botswana, 2001), through the Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP) 2015-2020 (Republic of Botswana, 2015a) and the National Development Plan (NDP) 11 (Republic of Botswana, 2016) further accentuated the inclusion of children with special needs into the ECE settings.

Recently, many countries worldwide, including Botswana, have adopted the Incheon Declaration on Education 2030, which sets out a global education roadmap for the next 15 years. This declaration has an overarching goal to ensure inclusive, equitable equality and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (Bose, Chadha and Chhabra, 2018). It also encourages "access of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all children and provision of at least one year of free and compulsory quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) so that they are ready for primary education" (UNESCO, 2015).

In Botswana, research on the inclusion of CWSN in ECE pre-schools is scarce. Bose, Chadha and Chhabra (2016) explain that previous research in Botswana indicates that educators do not have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of CWSN in ECE pre-schools and are concerned about inadequate equipment, large class size, inadequate training and lack of resources in the implementation of successful inclusion in schools. They further pointed out that educators play a very important role in the inclusion of CWSN, however, most of these research focused on primary and secondary teacher's perceptions and did not include the views of ECEDs on the inclusion of young CWSN in ECE schools (Rodriguwez, Arnaiz-Sanchez & De Perdomo, 2020; Mangope, Kuyini, and Major, 2012; Mukhopadhyay, 2013). Regardless of this, educators are expected to review their pedagogical approaches and classroom practices to see if they are responsive to the needs of learners who have Special Educational Needs (SENs) in ECE settings.

Inclusive early childhood development (ECD) classes represent a critical phase of development where exceptional strategies in teaching and caring are required for holistic development, especially for vulnerable learners. Diversity is widespread in ECD institutions, because children come from different backgrounds; on the basis of meeting other children with different statures, and being at different academic readiness levels and so forth. According to Bose, Chadha and Chhabra (2018), the inclusion of CWSN in ECE settings focuses on the transformation of school cultures and pedagogy to increase access to all children, enhance the acceptance of all students, maximize children's participation in various activities and increase the achievement and development of all children.

The teachers' competencies for inclusive education pedagogy are important determinants of what happens within a classroom filled with diverse learners. The array of diverse learners in ECD classes, calls for teachers with specialized knowledge, competencies and skills to handle children's uniqueness. Competencies are skills and knowledge that enable a teacher to be successful. Kin. Raza and Seidman (2019) found that teachers that were rated higher in the domains of instruction, student assessment, classroom management, and personal qualities, were most effective in terms of student outcomes. In

general, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge positively affects student outcomes (Kunter et al., 2013).

Kunter et al. (2013) reflect that teacher competence include skills and knowledge, but also beliefs related to learning, motivation and self-regulation. Bandura (1986) also concurs that competence denote knowledge and skills, but also the ability to use these successfully in different situations.

Several authors have argued that teacher training should entail not only courses to extend their skills, knowledge and understanding, but also transform their attitudes for inclusion. Martinez, (2022) reported significant positive changes in child care providers' perceived competence and attitudes toward inclusion after a comprehensive training program. Extensive courses combining formal instruction with practical experience have effectively resulted in pre-service teachers acquiring specific competence, more positive attitudes toward inclusive practice and people with special needs (Kin, Raza & Seidman, 2018). Additionally, research shows that while course content and improving 21st-century teaching skills: The key to effective 21st century learning and assignments, also enhance their understanding of different types of SEN and increase their willingness to accommodate such students in their classrooms (Martinez, 2022).

Continuous professional development (CPD) programmes have to be designed to support teachers lacking the right mentality, teaching content and strategies needed to accommodate learning differences (Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller, 2014). CPD programmes provide opportunities for practicing teachers to enhance their practices (Rodriguez, Arnaiz-Sanchez & De Perdomo, 2020; Berlach & Chambers, 2011). Such programmes, are meant to help teachers to respond to the philosophy of diversity so that they can benefit from the organized empowering opportunities. These programmes include education workshops or seminars, observation visits to other schools, networking opportunities for teachers, conferences, mentoring opportunities and peer observations. ECD teachers need to understand the complexities of teaching diverse learners as proclaimed in the Salamanca Statement of Declaration (1994), which directs government to retrain teachers that lack understanding of children with special education needs in inclusive settings (Hunt, 2011). However, a myriad of challenges face inclusive education providers, among others, being providing them with skills, knowledge and understanding, ensure the development of positive attitudes toward students with SEN and their inclusion in regular classrooms (Forlin, 2010). Therefore this study intends to explore the preparedness of ECD teachers to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-schools of Gaborone.

Statement of the Problem

In Botswana, the Ministry of Education's Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE, 1994) provides a framework for implementing inclusive education in Botswana. However, teachers still find it a challenge to teach learners with special educational needs in inclusive pre-school settings. Despite the policy on inclusive education, it has been discovered that Botswana teachers do not possess adequate skills and attitude for including learners with special education needs (Mukhopadhyay, 2012). Apart from this, Mukhopadhyay (2014) claims that there is very limited research done in Botswana, the small amount of published literature that exists mainly focuses mainly on the opinions of primary and secondary educators on inclusive education. In relation to this, Chhabra, Srivastava, and Srivastava (2010) also state that educators in Botswana do not have favorable attitudes and are more concerned about inadequate equipment, non-availability of paraprofessionals and lack of knowledge and training for the inclusion of CWSN in primary and secondary schools and this leaves out those in pre-schools. Teacher training programmes, on the other hand also seem to be failing to address the situation of inclusion of CWSN in pre-school classrooms. The nagging problem at hand therefore, was whether or not teachers in pre-schools understood the role played by inclusive education in teaching CWSN to prepare them for formal school readiness. This study was therefore, timely as it sought to explore the preparedness of teachers to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-schools of Gaborone, Botswana.

Research Questions

1. What competencies are possessed by ECD teachers to ensure successful implementation of Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-schools of Gaborone?
2. How effective are the support systems availed to teachers to enhance their preparedness to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-schools of Gaborone?
3. What are the training needs of ECD teachers in order to ensure their preparedness to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Gaborone Pre-schools?
4. Establish challenges faced by early childhood education teachers in implementing inclusive early childhood education.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory. This theory was used for its ability to stress the importance of teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes in handling diverse learners including those with special needs. In view of this, Gardner (1993) defines intelligence as "the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural settings. Traditionally, in the fields of education, and the cognitive science, "intelligence has been regarded as a uniform cognitive capacity that people are born with" (Gardner, 1983, p.7). However, in this theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner (1993) challenged traditional beliefs by acknowledging that people have different cognitive strengths as well as different cognitive styles. Gardner (1993) stated that each individual possesses 'nine' intelligences; logical mathematical intelligence (the capacity to analyze problems logically and scientifically); linguistic intelligence (sensitivity to the spoken and written word and the ability to master language); visual spatial intelligence (forming mental models of a spatial world, creating mental imagery, re-creating visual experiences and producing graphical likeness of spatial information); musical intelligence (skill in the performance, composition and appreciation of music); bodily kinesthetic intelligence (working skillfully with objects, controlling fine and gross motor movements, using the body in highly differentiated and skilled ways for expressive and goal-directed purposes); personal intelligence (the capacity for understanding oneself and a talent for understanding and relating to other people); naturalistic intelligence (sensing patterns in and making connections to elements of nature, such as species or the environment); and existential intelligence (the proclivity to pose and ponder questions about life, death, and ultimate realities).

The application of this theory in this study is that ECEC teachers have a responsibility of first acknowledging that the learners that there are assigned to teach in their profession or classes are different and therefore, they should identify their needs, strengths, capacities, interests and preferences then use these to design individualized educational plans that will help in their subsequent delivery of concepts. Furthermore, the teacher must ensure that the students' giftedness, talent and creativeness are fully nurtured. In other words, the activities considered in individualized educational plans must be aligned to these. Additionally, for any service to be effectively substantiated, parental involvement and effective participation must be encouraged. This might help to ensure continuity of learning and relevant service provision to learners who have special needs.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative research approach. Gray (2014) posits that qualitative research is appropriate when the information about an investigated phenomenon is limited, and when the study attempts to explore and describe experiences by identifying themes. Gray (2014) also maintains that qualitative research is appropriate in research for the development of theories that are grounded in the informants' perceptions of events (Gray, 2014). In relation to this, interpretivism was used based on the philosophy that there is no one reality, but that reality is multi-dimensional and ever changing (Merriam, 1998:202) and that

its interpretation is often different depending on individuals and their connection with the issues at hand. Furthermore, an exploratory case study design. The basic aim was to explore the preparedness of teachers to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Pre-schools of Gaborone, what teachers did in their classrooms and their understanding of what they were doing with regard to the implementation of inclusive education.

The population of study consisted of pre – schools of Gaborone, Botswana. These were situated in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Purposive sampling was used to select pre – schools that had learners who were deemed to have special needs while being taught in the same classrooms as those without learning difficulties. The same sampling technique was applied to select six schools, that is, two from each of the three settings. The reason for choosing schools in different areas was to find out if teaching in such areas had any impact in the preparedness of teachers to implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education. Participants in chosen schools were those that played crucial roles and they included heads of pre-schools and senior teachers in the preschools. In relation to this, the study sample was made up of twelve participants, six of these were heads of chosen pre – schools while the other six were senior teachers of the same. Semi – structured interview guides were used to collect data from both heads of pre – schools and chosen teachers. The open-ended questions helped the researcher to gain deeper insights on the phenomenon of study as she could ask for further elaborations where responses seemed unclear. In line with this, Gray (2014) highlights that in – depth interviews enable the researcher to explore and examine non-verbal cues and how the respondents feel about the topic under discussion.

Gathered data was analysed was thematically. The process begun with transcribing and organising data. In relation to conducted interviews, audio recordings were carefully listened to, and verbatim transcriptions were made. To organize data, researchers identified key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. Relevant quotes and excerpts were extracted and grouped under each theme. The researchers maintained a systematic approach to organize all gathered data, creating folders or files for each participant and data source, making it easier to cross-reference and manage the information. By organizing the data in this manner, the researcher was able to analyze and draw meaningful insights from the rich information provided by the participants. In interpreting the gathered data, the researcher tried to explain the themes and patterns in relation to the research questions, existing literature, as well as the study's theoretical framework. This process involved making sense of the data, identifying the implications and significance of the findings and subsequently drawing conclusions. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants' responses, heads of schools were coded from Head 1 to Head 6 and teachers were codes from Teacher 1 to Teacher 6, respectively.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Competencies Possessed by ECD Teachers to Implement IECE in Pre-Schools

The study discovered that most teachers and heads of could successfully identify some students with special needs in the ECD category. In this regard, there were most efficient in identifying those with visible disabilities like physical impairments, some intellectual challenges, language and speech problems and those with clear visual impairment. Nonetheless, they took time to realise those with various learning disabilities, hearing impairment and psycho – social problems. In this regard, one participant said '*.....I can easily pick learners who are blind because they cannot see anything, bump into objects when walking and cannot see what is being done in class*' (**TEACHER 4**). With a different opinion, one head of a school said, '*....we usually take a long time to recognise and assist learners with learning disabilities, hearing problems and social issues because their special needs take time to be noted*' (**HEAD 2**). In view of this, Kin, et al. (2018) state that extensive courses combining formal instruction with practical experience have effectively resulted in pre-service teachers acquiring specific competences, more positive attitudes towards inclusive

practice and people with special needs.

Despite this, it was discovered that most teachers communicated with all learners using language that was inclusive. For instance, they did not call their learners with learning disabilities with names that were negative hence stigmatizing. In view of this, one head elaborated saying, *'...from my observation, most teachers in our pre-school have positive attitudes towards learners with special needs, they never call them with negative names related to their conditions and this enhances their acceptance'* (HEAD 1). In this regard, Bose, et al. (2018) states that the inclusion of learners with special needs in ECE settings should focus on the transformation of school cultures and pedagogy to increase access to all children, enhance the acceptance of all learners, maximize children's participation in various activities, increase the achievement of and development of all children. Furthermore, the study realised with concern that only a few teachers managed to adapt their teaching methods to effectively cater for the needs of learners with special needs. In relation to this, one participant lamented and said: *'.....our preschool teachers basically have minimal knowledge of adapting their knowledge of adapting their methods to suit those with learning challenges but they try..'* (HEAD 6). To improve the teachers' knowledge of inclusive education, Berlach and Chambers (2011) maintain that, teachers should be equipped with skills of adjusting the curriculum and their teaching methods so that there are able to address the needs of learners concerned.

The Effectiveness of Support Systems Availed to Implement IECE in Pre-Schools

The study revealed that there were several support systems that were available to assist ECEC teachers to meet the needs of learners with special needs in pre – schools. One of these was parental involvement. Most heads of schools always encouraged parents of learners with special needs to work with teachers towards assisting affected individuals. In relation to this, parents helped learners to practice skills that there were taught in schools. In this regard, one participant said: *'...some parents of learners with special needs are effectively involved in the learning and development of their children with special needs because they desire that there are provided early intervention'* (TEACHER 6). In addition, it emerged that most schools provided teaching and learning resources to pre-school classes and this made delivery of learning content much easier to teachers. In this regard, one participant said, *'.....in my preschool we are provided with adequate teaching and learning resources and these help us in meeting the needs of learners with special needs'*(TEACHER 3). Furthermore, the study discovered that the teacher – learner ratio in schools was manageable and this reduced the teachers' burden of managing diverse learners. This initiative also helped some teachers to easily identify learners with special needs and where they could, assist them. One of the heads of preschools said *'..... I support my teachers by ensuring that they always teach manageable classes and this removes the burden of dealing with several diverse learners'*.

The Training Needs of Teachers to Implement Inclusive Early Childhood Education

The study discovered that most preschool teachers needed to be trained to effectively conduct early identification of learners with special needs as this has a capacity to prevent the worsening of a disability or condition. In relation to this, it unveiled that apart from being trained to identify learners with special needs they needed to be trained to categorize learners according to their conditions. In view of this two participants said:

'.....as teachers we need to be trained to identify learners with different special needs in the Early Childhood Development category as this will help us to design and implement relevant teaching instruction' (TEACHER 3)

'.....teachers as well as school heads need to be deliberately taught how to categorize learners according to their special needs so that there are given intervention services that have a capacity to address their needs'(HEAD 4)

Additionally, the study confirmed that pre –school teachers needed to be trained on how to adapt and use different teaching methods to meet or address the needs of affected learners. In this view, Rodriguwz et al. (2020), affirm that continuous professional development programmes provide opportunities for practicing teachers to enhance their practices. Also the study discovered that teachers needed to be trained on issues that were related to making referrals for further and more comprehensive assessments. Above all, both heads and teachers strongly emphasised that training programmes on teaching learners with special needs needed to be intensified and continual in the ECEC category so that teachers may keep abreast of new dimensions in the education of such learners.

Challenges Faced by ECE Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Early Childhood Education

One of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing effective inclusive early childhood education was that some heads of preschools were so negative about disability issues to the extent that they did not enroll learners with more visible disabilities. In response to this, a significant number of participants felt there was a need to enforce practical laws that can precipitate changes in school practice to eliminate intentional exclusion. In this regard, **TEACHER 1** maintained that: *'some heads are responsible for separating or neglecting learners with disabilities in early childhood settings and schools unless this changes with good laws and policies that work'*. In relation to this, Adedoyin and Okere (2016) maintain that there is a need to improve policies, programs, practices and systems that affect the lives of children with special needs in pre-school settings. Furthermore, it was noted that in some situations, it was collaborative effort of heads of preschools and some teachers that enforced the exclusion of learners with disabilities from schools unilaterally or clandestinely.

Also, the study posited that some teachers could not effectively implement inclusive education because of lack of adequate teaching and learning resources in their pre – schools. In situations where the availability of resources was not an issue, teachers felt the teaching resources had content or subject matter that was significantly above the capabilities of some learners with special needs. What seemed to worsen this situation was that teachers had no capacity to adjust this material to the level of affected learners. In this view, one participant said, *'.....I am not able to adapt teaching content so that it is able to address the needs of these learners'* (**TEACHER 2**). Additionally, some teachers stipulated that they did not possess requisite skills to fully include learners with special needs in the teaching and learning processes. This meant that even if they could be provided with adapted curriculum and enough material resources the chances were high that due to their subdued competencies they would not meet the desires goals. In view of this, one school head said, *'.....most our pre- school teachers have never been adequately trained to teach children with disabilities and this poses a big challenge to them'* (**HEAD 5**).

DISCUSSION

The study discovered that most heads of preschools and teachers had the capacity to successfully identify some students with special needs in the ECD category. This was so especially with those who had visible disabilities. Furthermore, it also unveiled that even if most teachers had limited knowledge on disability issues their attitudes were that of tolerance and acceptance (Martinez, 2022). Despite this, the study realised with concern that even if these teachers possessed positive attitudes about affected learners, few of them managed to adapt their teaching methods to effectively cater for the needs of learners with special needs.

In regard to support systems for ECEC teachers, it was realised that parental involvement in the education of affected learners was viewed as one of the most support mechanisms available. This initiative was effectively advocated for by heads of schools. In addition, it emerged that most schools provided teaching and learning resources to pre-school classes and this made delivery of learning content much easier for teachers. Furthermore, school heads supported the teachers' ability to provide effective inclusion by

ensuring that the teacher – learner ratio in schools was manageable. This initiative also helped some teachers to easily identify and address specific needs of learners with special needs.

The study also discovered that for most teachers to be fully prepared to provide effective inclusive education to pre – scholars with special needs, they needed to be trained to effectively conduct early identification and referral. This was viewed as having a capacity to prevent worsening or progression of a disability or condition. In relation to this, it unveiled that apart from being trained to identify learners with special needs they needed to be trained to categorize learners according to their conditions (Rodriguwz et al., 2020). Additionally, the study confirmed that pre –school teachers needed to also receive training on adapting and using different teaching methods to meet or address the needs of affected learners. Above all, the study substantiated that both heads of pre – schools and teachers could improve their readiness to provide inclusive early childhood education by engaging in continuous professional training programmes on teaching learners with special needs in the ECEC category so that they are kept up to date on new developments in regard to the teaching of affected learners.

Despite this, the study gathered that there were several challenges that affected the readiness of teachers to implement inclusive early childhood education. One of these was that some heads of preschools had negative attitudes about disability in general and this affected their keenness to enroll learners with disabilities. Furthermore, some teachers' readiness to implement effective inclusive education was affected by shortage of teaching and learning resources in their pre – schools. In situations where the availability of resources was not an issue, teachers felt the teaching resources had content or subject matter that was not commensurate to the needs of some learners with special needs. It is also strongly prudent to highlight that, the preparedness of a significant number of teachers was lack of requisite knowledge, skills and competencies to effectively teach and include learners with special needs in the teaching and learning processes.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that Pre – school teachers are not adequately trained to provide effective inclusive education to learners with special needs. Therefore there is a need for responsible authorities to facilitate the initial training and continuous professional development of teachers so that there are able to identify learners with special needs, adapt their curriculum and implement intervention strategies for their effective inclusion. Furthermore, the study recognised that if effective inclusive education is to be implemented at pre – school level there is a need for meaningful collaboration between parents and Pre – school teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends

1. The government of Botswana and related stakeholders should ensure that Pre –school teachers receive continuous professional development training in inclusive education so that there are equipped with knowledge and skills to identify and offer early intervention to learners with special needs.
2. Management personnel of Pre – schools should ensure that they modify the physical as well as the learning environment to ensure that it is conducive for implementation of inclusive education.
3. Management personnel of Pre-schools should facilitate the availability of teaching and learning resources that match the capabilities of learners with special needs.
4. Heads of Pre –schools should intensify parental involvement in the education of learners with special needs so that it will be easier for teachers to collaborate with parents in effective inclusion of learners

with special needs.

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