

Teacher Trainees' Level of Preparedness for Inclusive Education in Botswana Schools: Need for Change

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which the University of Botswana special education teacher-training programme. Inclusive education has gained significant currency nationally and internationally. Inclusive education demands that the teacher should be able to meet the needs of students with disabilities in a regular/ordinary classroom. The success of inclusive education rests on quality teacher preparation gearing towards inclusive education. How teachers are prepared is intrinsically linked to the quality of education provided in the schools. Qualitative research method was used to explore how teachers are prepared for inclusive education in Botswana. Eighteen final year special education student teachers were involved in two focus group discussions. Findings of this study revealed that special education student-teachers were not prepared to meet the learning needs of diverse categories of learners with disabilities in inclusive settings. Based on the findings of this study, a teacher preparation model is proposed for successful implementation of inclusive basic education in Botswana.

Keywords: Teacher Preparation, Inclusive Education, Qualitative Research, Vygotskian Framework, Learners with Disabilities

INTRODUCTION

Educating students with and without disabilities in the general classroom is becoming the current practice which is commonly known as inclusive education. Inclusive education is perceived to be one of the ways to increase educational access to large number of students with disabilities. This means more children with disabilities will be placed in the regular classroom than before. In order to provide effective inclusive education for all students, teachers need to develop a different set of skills and knowledge than traditionally required by the profession. At the same time the roles

of the special education teachers are changing from solely being a teacher to being a case manager.

Schumm and Vaughn (1995) and Baker and Zigmond (1995) observed that increasing numbers of children with special needs are being served in regular classrooms which is dramatically changing the way special education services are being provided in schools. They stressed that this development must be addressed in pre-service teacher education programs so that the next generation of educators will be better prepared to work more efficiently and effectively. Therefore, the importance of changing the traditional ways of teaching in regular classrooms cannot be

overemphasized. Given the complex nature of classrooms and the increasing demands on teachers, who often have little or no specialized training in working with exceptional students, structures should be set up to provide the necessary help and guidance for teachers to make changes in their instruction (Magg & Katsiyannis, 2000).

With the increasing diversity among children in today's classrooms, teacher preparation programs are increasingly called on to train teachers who are able to respond competently to the challenges of inclusive classrooms (Munby, Lock, Hutchinson, Whitehead, & Martin, 1999). A major part of responding to the diversity found inside the classroom is through effective and efficient teacher preparation. Regular and special education teachers often feel that they are inadequately prepared to address the needs of learners with various categories of exceptionalities. The current teacher-training model should focus on affording trainee teachers ample opportunities to practice as much as possible throughout the program (Jenkins, Pateman & Black, 2002). This calls for a change in the national teacher preparation program for teachers (both regular and special education teachers). Teachers need to be flexible and willing to adapt classroom instruction to meet the learning needs of students both with and without disabilities (Hamill, Jantzen, & Bargerhuff, 1999). At the same time, special education teachers need to collaborate with the critical stakeholders to ensure that learning takes place. Therefore, special education teachers must have skills in communication, collaboration, and cooperative learning strategies and they should have confidence to use those skills (Fisher, Deshler & Schumaker, 1999; Hamill, Jantzen, & Bargerjuff, 1999; Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley, 2000).

Preparing quality teachers for inclusive education is a challenging task in both developed and less developed countries. The situation in Botswana is not different from other countries. The policy of equal educational opportunities for all citizens prompted the Government of Botswana to commission a consultancy to review special education provision in 1992 with the intention of respecting the philosophy of equal educational opportunities for all. The consultancy report expressed that there was acute shortage of specialist teachers and a lack of adequate teacher training facilities within the country. In 1994, the government gave special education focus, as evidenced by its prominence in the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education. The policy recommends that "All teachers should have some elements of special education in their pre-service training. Those who have not received such training during their pre-service

training should receive it during their in-service training" (p.42). The policy also recommends the establishment of Intervention Teams in all schools so that the regular teachers and the special educators can collaborate to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and those at risk of school-failure.

The Government of Botswana recognizes the importance of providing equal opportunities for all learners in the current Revised National Policy on Education of 1994. Equal educational opportunities may be achieved only if government ensures that all students, irrespective of their differences receive quality education (Republic of Botswana, 1993, 1994). Such is possible if the government trains teachers to be responsive to the diversity that they find inside classrooms. By so doing, Botswana would be implementing inclusive education. Additionally, Botswana as signatory to the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO), is bound to achieve Education For All (EFA) goals targeted for 2015, which emphasizes inclusive education and non-discriminatory education practices (UNESCO, 2009).

Historical roots of special education program: University of Botswana

The Ministry of Education realizing the need and urgency for special educators formally in November 1994, requested the University of Botswana to help with the development of human resources to enable it to implement the recommendations of the Revised National Policy on Education. In response to such a request, the Diploma and the Bachelor of Education in Special Education started in 1995 and 1999 respectively.

The University of Botswana started with three programs in Special Education:

- a. A 2-year in-service diploma program in special education for teachers,
- b. A 4-year pre-service degree program in special education for undergraduates, and
- c. A 3-year in-service program in special education for holders of a Diploma or its equivalent from the University of Botswana or one of the colleges of education in Botswana.

The current program is a double major, which means that students take special education along with a general education teaching subject. The University of Botswana offers specializations in four areas: mental retardation, learning disabilities, visual impairments, and hearing impairments. During the training, students

take foundational classes in the areas of identification, diagnosis, remediation, and the preparation of individualized educational programs. The first batch of undergraduate degree students graduated in October 2003. The Diploma in-service program has since been phased out in 2007. The current program was inclined towards preparing specialized teachers with limited emphasis on inclusive classrooms.

At the center of teacher development programs for inclusion is the demand for teachers who can address the needs of diverse learners. Hargreaves (1994) succinctly argues that, it is 'what teachers think, what teachers believe and what teachers do' (p.117) eventually determine the kind of learning that young people receive. In order to realize the aspired change, special education teacher trainees should be equipped with skills, knowledge and competencies which promote successful inclusion of students with disabilities. According to McLeskey and Waldron (2002) high quality teacher development programs "...are an integral part of current efforts to transform schools into inclusive school communities." (p.144). Furthermore, Haug (2003), highlighted that effective special education teacher development programme should have a curriculum that produces knowledgeable, reflective, empathetic, responsive teacher individuals and should place much emphasis on the new social-contextual paradigm underpinning inclusive education movement.

The purpose of this study was three-fold. First it explored the influence of teacher preparation programs on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, and perceived preparedness as well as self-efficacy in inclusive settings. Secondly, it sought to gain an understanding into the university teacher preparation programs and the characteristics of teacher trainees having undergone such training and how such programs can better prepare future teachers for inclusive education. Finally, it identified barriers that may interfere with teacher preparedness for inclusive education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen for this investigation. This approach was specifically chosen to enable the exploration of student teachers experiences of going through the special education program. Experience is a phenomenon of interest for qualitative researchers, especially the phenomenologists. Qualitative approaches are designed to obtain maximum information from the participants in their natural settings (Special Education laboratory). As

Gubrium and Holstein (1997) observe as naturalists; the 'social contours of participants experiences with samples of real conversation' (p.31) subsequently possibilities of gathering rich data are enhanced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Qualitative research designs are also identified as appropriate for data analysis in new areas of research (Patton, 1990). This kind of research gives an avenue to student teachers to express their feelings and opinions about special education; such kinds of opportunities have been limited for special educators in Botswana.

Focus group discussion

In depth focus group discussions were employed to collect information from the teacher trainees in order gain better understanding of their perspectives on inclusive education. The key objective was to elicit from each group of participants a comprehensive range of views, perceptions and reflections about their experiences of inclusive education. Focus groups are planned sessions where individual discuss ideas and perceptions focused around a topic of interest (Krueger, 1993). Focus group methodology was selected as a means to identify structures, processes, and activities which promote and support the inclusive education of students with disabilities. The focus group discussion process allowed the participants of this study to share their perceptions, listen and respond to the views of other members of the group during discussions led by a facilitator (Krueger, 1993). Krueger notes that "the focus group helps people hear themselves and receive feedback from their peers" (Krueger, 1994, p. 239). A number of researchers recommended focus group discussions method while collecting data in the area of disability research (Lewis 1992). For this reason, the researchers used this method and were able to gather 'rich and thick' data about the level of teacher trainees' preparedness and identify the factors that influence the practice of inclusive education. Through focus group discussions, the participants were able to share their lived experiences of the regular classrooms and schools which could not have been captured through the conventional one-on one interview. In addition, focus group discussions provided a platform for participants to express their views about inclusive education; such kinds of opportunities have been limited in Botswana. Focus group discussions enabled the researchers to gain greater insights into why certain opinions were held by teachers and learners with and without disabilities. Data which emanated from the discussions allowed the researchers to understand the strategies that have to be put in place when planning, designing,

implementing and evaluating an inclusive education programme in Botswana schools.

Participants

Eighteen fourth year Special Education student teachers of University of Botswana who have had experience in teaching students with disabilities in regular schools during their teaching practice were selected purposively for this research. Two focus groups discussions were organized. Group 1 consisted of in-service teachers and groups 2 were pre-service student teachers.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview method was employed (Kvale, 1996). An interview guide, consisting of 10 open-ended questions with probes was used to gather information from each focus group. The interview guide was developed through a review of the literature relating to teacher preparation for inclusive education. One of the researchers (Teaching Assistant) interviewed the student teachers to gain insights on student teachers' level of preparedness for inclusive education.

Procedure

The student teachers were requested to participate in the study and they consented and participated. The semi-structured interview method was employed and each group was interviewed face to face by one of the investigators (Masters Student who is trained in focus group technique). Interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted at the UB Special Education Laboratory. The investigator informed the participants of the purpose the research and reminded the teachers that they (investigators) were interested in finding out anything and everything with respect to their experiences relating to their level of preparedness for inclusive education. The investigator made sure that the participants were comfortable and free from any distraction (Kruger, 1998). One of the investigators facilitated the interview process, and tape recorded the information with participants' consent. The facilitator began the interview using the interview guide and made sure that every participant responded to the same question, and also encouraged discussion among participants. The investigator remained as neutral as possible and sought clarification whenever it was deemed. The investigator made sure that everyone participated and did not steer the discussion in his direction.

Data Analysis

The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim into written text by the principal investigator. Analysis procedures then followed a step by step constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to develop themes. In Step 1, an outline of paraphrased items was generated based on each interview text. This transformed the raw data into manageable thought units for analysis. In Step 2 each transcript was examined separately and whenever a new theme emerged, it was highlighted. The identified themes within the transcript were then compared across transcripts in Step 3. Overall themes were then developed in Step 4. This procedure was followed for each transcript analyzed. A summary of all transcripts was compiled in which sub-themes were compared to come up with overall themes that were later used to report the finding of this study.

Conformability

After preliminary findings, a 'member check' exercise was carried out by allowing the participants to go through transcribed transcripts and preliminary themes. In addition to this they were also asked to add any additional information or qualifications to their summaries. All participants agreed with the summaries and confirmed that the information reflected accurately presented their contributions to this investigation. The final coding themes were; knowledge, skills, attitudes and barriers.

RESULTS

The findings are presented as they relate to the themes which seemed to emerge from the two focus group discussions, namely; knowledge, skills, attitudes and barriers.

Knowledge

The participants of this study appeared to be concerned about the limited knowledge on various aspects of meeting the learning needs of various categories of students with disabilities. Since the University of Botswana offers special education as a double major degree and focus on single disability area specialization, the participants' concerns were specifically directed towards students' academic and emotional behaviors and basic functioning skills such as communication. One of the participants raised a critical argument about Sign Language and Braille

skills. Majority of the participants were of the opinion that all the special education teachers should have knowledge in Sign Language and Braille. They also emphasized the importance of identification and diagnosis of students with disabilities. They opined that a large number of students are not identified in the schools as the teachers do not have the knowledge on identification.

One of the participants stated that; *we need to collaborate with other teachers, parents Ministry of Education officials.* On a similar issue another participant said:

When we are in the schools, the teachers that we should know everything about special education. Rona (We) are only not prepared to offer help because we did not cover other areas. For example I specialize in learning disabilities not hearing or visual impairment, during teaching practice one of the senior teachers guidance revealed to me that she does not know anything about guidance it is important that we should have counseling skills.

The reason for of learning difficulties could be caused by other problems such as emotional disturbances, peer pressure, bereavement at home which needs to be tackled. Students with disabilities also face similar problems and no one may be ready to help.

Skills

Participants of the study indicated that they lack skills required for inclusive classroom setting. One of the participants of the study revealed that:

During teaching practice teachers had high expectation from us and it's like you are to be a master of all. I had a student with hearing impairment in my class and I did not know how to handle a student with hearing impairment

On a similar issue one of the participants during the focus group discussion said: *We are not able to help. If we were to be given basic skills like American Sign Language, Braille, it would save the situation.*

Describing the issue of skills one of the participants indicated that:

Tota gone (The truth is), we are "half baked" not yet ready to function in an inclusive education set up. I majored in Learning Disabilities (LD) I do not have in-depth

knowledge about other areas. Why do we have to go through a double major combination? I think it would be good if we were to take majors from special education. We do not learn other disabilities such as communication disorders whereas there are a lot of students with communication problems. We do not have adequate support service facilities such as speech therapy in Botswana. If we learn more about this area we would be able to function well in inclusive setting.

These sentiments were further affirmed by another participant who said;

In my teaching practice I have seen students with autism but you don't teach us about how to manage students with autism. In the community as a special education specialist I expected to know about these disorders but I was not able to help. I would like to be taught how to identify students with disabilities and even counseling skills so that I could counsel students with disabilities.

Attitude

Favorable attitude towards learners with disabilities plays an important role in the implementation of inclusive education. Unfortunately, many student teachers failed to demonstrate favorable attitude and complained about the deficit of the students. One of the participants said,

These kids are difficult to manage; I need to work extra to manage those kids. I need to be parenting them, some of them cannot learn. Their parents dumped them in the school. Other teachers in the field during teaching practice would expect me to help all the learners with disabilities. They expect one to be a master of all.

Reflecting on their experiences of attitudes the majority of the participants in the two groups reported that Special Education is not well recognized in Botswana.

One of the participants during the discussion said,

We do not get scarce skills. Kana (In actual fact) even our friends here at UB look down on Special Education course. They think in special education everything is simplified.

Narrating her story with frustration one of the participants of the study said,

I went to a certain department here in UB; one of the lecturers said to me that lona le ya go ruta digole kana (Oh! So you are going to teach disabled people), who cannot do anything; I pity you.

Barriers

Asked about the availability of resource materials in the special education laboratory one of the participants stated:

Other departments such as Science have many latest types of equipment whereas in our program we learn about this equipment, software theoretically. When will we learn to use materials for students with disabilities and software that we always hear about in classes? For the last four years I have been seeing the same computers and none of them have any specialized software.

Sharing the same sentiments one of the participants of the study said:

It was only yesterday one of the lecturers demonstrated on how to use this equipment. I suppose this program should be more practical than theoretical. We have been hearing that Special Education is all about services, but with this current program I am not confident, that after graduating I will be able to serve learners with diverse needs.

Reflecting on the issue of practical skills one of the participants stated that:

The duration of teaching practice (TP) is very short; we do not have time to practice skills such as Sign Language, various instructional designs, and development of materials. I wish the teaching practice could be more like internship where we could be placed for the whole semester and get the opportunity to practice what I have learned in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

Globally, teacher preparation programs are under fire for their perceived inability to prepare quality teachers (Rosenberg & Smdelar, 2005). There is a positive correlation between quality teacher and student achievement (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Research on special education teacher preparation in Botswana is limited, and if it exists, it is not informed by a theoretical framework. Therefore, it is mostly

designed by experts who had vested interest and believed more on the 'medical-deficit' model that promote segregated education or it was position papers. Echoing the sentiments of Benjamin (2002) who observes that policies and pedagogies need to be anti-oppressive schooling available for all students, "...which engage with the politics of identity and differences in creative and challenging ways..." (p.49).

Findings from comparative research documenting the characteristics of effective teacher education programs (Brownell, Ross, Colm, & McCallum, 2005) and the findings of the current research resulted in the proposal of a teacher preparation model. In this model, we have been influenced by the Vygotskian framework of reference that teaches us that children learn language through social interactions embedded in social engagements and ongoing discourses (Manning & Payne, 1993). The role of the adult is to provide opportunities for social interactions and a platform for ongoing discourses. Inclusive education offers a wider platform for students with disabilities to interact and gather new knowledge resulting from social engagements to modify the schema. These kinds of opportunities are lacking in segregated environments.

Nguyen (2006) argues that preparing special educators for the 21st Century classroom should rely on a teacher preparation model emphasizing critical and reflective practices as important learning and teaching tools. Nguyen further highlighted that the teaching should further focus beyond the face-to-face classrooms and use social constructivist approach which would allow prospective special education teachers to reflect on personal thinking, collaborate

.... while examining views from colleagues, to connecting individual experiences with professional works, learning new content at own pace, to having a sense of ownership, and to empowering own learning through a community-based learning environment (p.2622).

Incidentally, the University of Botswana placed emphasis to enhance professional experience for teacher training programme. This study demonstrates that there was the current special education programme did not emphasise student-teachers experience on the inclusive education component. Therefore, a new teacher preparation programme is proposed.

Proposed Model for Special Education Teacher Preparation and Future Implications

The proposed programme would focus mostly on the candidates who have Diploma in Education from the Colleges of Education who are aspiring to be special educators. This programme will be 3^{1/2} years duration. The first year of their study, candidates would focus on special education and educational foundation courses. The specialization would start at second year when students would be allowed to take-up two areas of specialization. This would give the graduates a wide scope for practice and meet the demands of inclusive education. It is not enough to create only a special educator but it is equally important to develop support service provisions in Botswana to address the acute shortage of skilled personnel required to work with individuals with special educational needs. Botswana does not have tertiary education institutions or programmes for preparing support services personnel such as the different therapists including occupational, speech, physio, sign language interpreter, braillest, low vision therapist, vocational rehabilitation technicians, etc. The recommendation based on this study is to have the existing pre-service special education program divert to producing human resource in these areas. Future research plans should focus on replicating the same study with a wider population including those teachers in the field and others from other training institutions. In addition, if we are to bring about school reform and create a model that is aligned towards inclusive education, then these institutions must work hand in hand with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development and admit those individuals who are interested in working with learners with diverse learning needs.

CONCLUSION

Finally, more research is needed on teacher preparation in developing countries. To date, little information is available on effective teacher education model for inclusive classrooms. The teacher education, particularly inclusive education is extremely complex where beginning teachers play many different roles and need to serve students with diverse needs. Consequently, it is also to develop a professional knowledge to address the diverse educational needs of various learners in general education classrooms.

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