

Assessment of Learners with Special Needs for Inclusive Education in Botswana: Issues and Challenges for schools

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Abstract

This study examines the role and functions of the Botswana Assessment Centre in diagnosing the learning needs of primary school students. It also examines the issues and challenges faced by learners with special needs who are not assessed for placement and/or instructional modification in regular primary schools. This study endeavours to articulate the issues around this lack of assessment and its implications for the learners and teachers of such learners. Forty-nine teachers from primary schools in Gaborone and surroundings responded to a thirteen-item questionnaire. Data from this questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics, *t*-tests and ANOVA. The results show that the Botswana Assessment Centre (Central Resource Centre (CRC) is unable to assess all students who require assessment and that there is a long wait time for assessments. The results also revealed that although the majority of schools had School Intervention Teams (SIT) who were responsible for referring students to assessment, the role of teams was unclear in some schools. This study recommends that government address the critical shortage of staff facing the Centre and pay more attention to the composition and functioning of the SITs. Finally, the Ministry of Education should explore other ways of ensuring that assessment for placement and modification of instruction can be efficiently and effectively carried out across Botswana.

Keywords: Assessment, learners, special needs, inclusion, education, Botswana

INTRODUCTION

The importance of including learners with special needs in regular classrooms has been emphasized recently by researchers (e.g., Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Mukhopadhyay, 2009). It is increasingly evident, especially over the past ten years, that inclusive education brings social, academic, and even financial benefits for school systems and children (Malgorzata, 2007; Mdikana & Ntshangase, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000, 2004). The inclusion movement believes that children with special needs should learn in the regular school classroom alongside their peers (Mastropieri & Scruggs 2000, 2004). In other words, each child belongs to the regular classroom and there is no justification for excluding certain children from this environment. At the same time, while access to equal education is necessary for every learner regardless of ability, some children do not fully benefit from teaching because of undiagnosed special needs. It is therefore vital that learners are assessed early on or upon entry into primary school to ensure that schools are able to provide them with the necessary services to support their in-classroom learning.

In this study, assessment is defined as the process of collecting data, analyzing and evaluating information about a student's achievement or student characteristics in order to make educational decisions about that individual student (Junita de Swart, 2008). These decisions concern whether students meet the criteria for special education services, selecting the most appropriate program and placement for students, setting instructional goals, choosing instructional methods and materials, and monitoring student progress and the effectiveness of the program (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2001).

Countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Greece, and South Africa have clearly stipulated assessment procedures. From our experience as educators in Botswana, children here are generally admitted into standard one without any form of assessment to ascertain if they have any special needs. This has led to a number of children with special needs entering the education system unassessed and without classroom and learning provisions for them. This study investigates the issues and challenges faced by these learners who have not been assessed and find themselves in regular education classrooms.

Objectives

This study aims to examine how the sole Botswana Assessment Centre (Central Resource Centre (CRC) meets the needs of students who require assessment, as well as teachers' knowledge of assessment – that is how schools/teachers perceive assessment of learners with special needs and the challenges teachers face in teaching learners with special needs who have not been assessed. This study also aims to explore the challenges faced by learners with special needs who have not been assessed and the availability of services for unassessed learners with special needs. The data gathered in this study in turn provides a basis for making recommendations on the best assessment procedures educators can use to level the 'battle field' for learners with special needs.

In other words, the purpose of the study is to unveil the problems encountered in the processes of assessment in Botswana and to suggest ways in which such problems can be prevented or reduced. In particular, the study intends to address problems in Botswana schools whereby examinations are modified only for those who have been assessed and identified as having a special need. This practice excludes and denies access to such examinations by students who have special needs, but have not been diagnosed and identified as such by the educational psychologists.

Research Questions

To give focus and direction to this study, four research questions were raised:

1. How well do both the assessment of students with special needs and in-class educational participation meet the needs of students in Botswana?
2. How well do assessment and inclusive practices in schools meet the needs of students?
3. What challenges do teachers face in teaching learners with special needs who have not been assessed?
4. What are the differences between assessment processes and inclusive practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

It seems fair to suggest that there is little evidenced-based material on the topic of assessment practices and inclusive settings in Botswana, and yet both play an important role in educational processes. Regardless of the intent, the ultimate

goal of educational assessment is to provide an appropriate program and/or treatment plan for the student. According to Goodwin (1997), assessment and inclusion are naturally connected, and that equity in schooling relies on both. Since the government of Botswana advocates for the practices of an inclusive educational system, they must recognize that assessment is critical to the achievement of such inclusion.

It is increasingly acknowledged both internationally and in Botswana, that assessment has a direct influence on teaching and learning, and that this power can be harnessed and directed towards positive outcomes. With the introduction of the Revised National Policy on Education RNPE (1994), Botswana has been presented with an opportunity to transform its assessment procedures in line with current educational policies that seek to modernize education.

It is important that pupils with special needs derive maximum benefit from assessment to ensure maximum participation in school, and eventually society. In the situation of Botswana, some researchers (for example Okumbe & Malatsi, 2005) have observed that most students with special needs are progressing through school without proper assessment. Students who miss out on assessment are unable to access specific educational programs including modified classroom instruction, curriculum, tests and examinations. Learners with special needs can access these benefits only if they have been diagnostically assessed. Given the limited number of students who are assessed many students with special needs in Botswana struggle to succeed with specialized programs in schools (Okumbe & Malatsi, 2005).

Given the apparent increase in the number of learners with special needs, primary school teachers are now more likely to encounter a child with disabilities in their classroom. The assessment of learners with special needs presents these teachers with opportunities to provide better classroom support and yet teachers face a huge challenge in getting such assessment information for a substantial number of their students. Currently, the one main assessment centre (Central Resource Centre (CRC)) and a newly established minor centre are responsible for (and have referred) all assessments in the country. The capacity of the single main centre to ensure national coverage is limited or strained and thus a significant number of students with special needs may not have been assessed.

Botswana also lacks clear policy guidelines on the assessment of learners with special needs. This contrasts with the situations in most developed countries, where laws and guidelines around assessment articulate what should happen for students at different stages of schooling. In Greece, for example, the 'Education of Individuals with Special Educational Needs' (SEN) law (Law 2817/2000) provides that the identification of students with special educational needs be realized during the first year of primary school. This law also specifies the use of a special screen-test system at the start of every school year by the local Diagnostic Assessment and Support Centres (DASC) for the entire Greek student population. It is hoped that these measures will lead to an integrated Individualized Educational Programme (IEP) for every student identified as having special needs. Once their IEP has been developed, students with special needs are placed in the regular school setting, which is considered by DASC specialists as most appropriate for the education of all students.

In Botswana, it is not clear who should be assessed and when the assessment should take place. In most cases, assessment happens by accident or does not happen at all. Despite the fact that the RNPE (1994) positions assessment as one of the cornerstones of the successful inclusion of students with special needs into regular classrooms, a significant number of students with special needs are attending schools but are not being formally assessed. As a result, such students are denied the right to benefit from the available accommodations including specialized teaching and modified examinations. These students then tend to struggle with traditional curriculum and examinations. Often, this in turn leads to such students dropping out of school due to frustration, failure and lack of clear career paths (Dart, 2007)

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Forty-nine regular primary school teachers from ten government primary schools participated in this study. These teachers were randomly selected from the ten randomly selected schools in Gaborone and surrounding areas, which are all in close proximity to the special education central resource centre.

There were 6 males (12%) and 42 females (88%). All respondents had professional teacher qualifications. The majority of them had a teacher's diploma (57%, n=28), while 11 (22%) had bachelor qualification and 16 (85) had a Primary Teachers' Certificate qualification. One teacher held a BGSE/IGSE and one held a Master's Degree. The majority of the teachers (n=28, 57%) had been teaching for more than 15 years, while 43% had less than 15 years of teaching experience. Based on the number of years that most have been teaching (15 or more) it seems likely that the primary school teachers surveyed will have experience helping learners with special needs in their classrooms. All

participating teachers had experience teaching in inclusive settings. The majority (71%, n= 35) had more than 5 years in such settings. The remainder (29%, n=14) had 0-5 years teaching experience in such settings. This is a positive sign. Research has shown that teachers with special education awareness tend to have positive attitudes towards and are willing to assist learners with disabilities (Dart, 2006; Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Johnstone & Chapman, 2011; Mukhopadhyay, 2009).

Only seven teachers had no students with recognized special needs in their classrooms at the time of the research. The remaining 42 had between one and five. This is a great sign for concern as it implies that a substantial number of students with special needs are present in regular classrooms and have not been identified and assessed and therefore they may not be receiving the appropriate interventions to assist them to perform to their maximum potential.

Three staff at the assessment centre also participated in the study. A set of questionnaire comprising of close and open-ended questions was also used to collect information from these participants. The questions mainly centered on the assessment procedures and how the officers were coping with a scarcity of resources relative to the demand for service.

Instruments

Two questionnaires (one for staff of the assessment centre and one for teachers) comprised of close and open-ended questions were used to collect information from participants. The questionnaire for teachers focused on how well the sole assessment centre (Central Resource Centre (CRC) met the needs of all students needing assessment, teachers knowledge of assessment, and how they perceived assessment of learners with special needs. There were also questions about the challenges teachers face in teaching learners with special needs who have not been assessed, the availability of services for un-assessed learners with special needs, and the challenges faced by such learners.

Data Analysis

Data from this study was analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse participants' responses to the questionnaire items. ANOVA and t-tests were used to explore the differences between schools' assessment processes and inclusive practices and to determine whether any of the background variables of teachers were contributing to differences in scores in regards to knowledge of assessment and teaching strategies.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Assessment of students with special needs and educational participation in Botswana

Responses from officers of the central resource centre (CRC) revealed that the CRC assesses about 120 students a year. The CRC staff does not proactively seek out and identify children who may need to be assessed. Rather, schools and other child and family services must refer children to the centre for assessment. Another major activity of the CRC is raising community awareness of its services. To fulfill this role the CRC organizes workshops in different localities to sensitize teachers to the importance of special needs identification and assessment.

In responding to whether or not the centre is meeting the needs of all children who might require assessment, it became apparent that the CRC is very aware that the need exceeds the services they are able to provide. The centre's limited reach can, in many ways, be attributed to schools not adequately referring students and the reality that it has limited trained/qualified staff to assess more children than currently being assessed. Another major factor in the lack of assessment is distance between the capital and some regions of the country. Many remote areas are too far to visit for sensitizing schools and conducting assessments.

In order to improve services, the CRC has introduced outreach programs (e.g. spending a week in a region to do assessments), workshops for teachers, and is outsourcing qualified personnel from other departments and designing assessment tools that can be used by teachers in schools to reduce the caseload of the CRC.

Research Question 2: Assessment and inclusive practices in schools

School Intervention Team (SIT) exists in the school

Teachers' responses for this question showed that 33 teachers (67%) answered in the affirmative, while 16 (31%) indicated that their school did not have a SIT team. Discrepancies around the existence of SIT among teachers in the same

school may relate to the role of SIT as discussed below. Results signal a need for teacher awareness training around SIT and the role of the teams in the school. Inconsistent answers generally show that the concept is understood differently hence the need for awareness workshops to strengthen the effectiveness of the teams in the schools. It may also signal that teachers in the schools do not own the systems or teams. Studies have shown that for these teams to be effective teachers must take ownership of them (Gloeckler et al. 2009)

Learners with special needs write modified exams

Only seven of the 49 teachers who participated in the study reported that learners in their schools sit for modified examinations. When looking at the data by school, it becomes clear that all teachers in five of the ten schools reported that their students did not write modified examinations. This is rather worrisome, given that students with special needs, who would require services such as modified examinations, can be found in all schools. Given the lack of assessment, however, they do not qualify to write the modified examinations. It can thus be concluded that learners with special needs in primary schools in Botswana are experiencing barriers to learning which can translate into poor academic performance.

Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) for learners with special needs

The results of this study indicate that learners with special needs generally have Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). However, inconsistencies in answers were given by teachers in the same schools on the design of IEP, suggesting that the practice is not a comprehensive one. The design of IEP is often contingent upon an assessment and given that many of these students are not assessed, it is not surprising that IEPs are not developed for students. It also suggests that teachers may not fully understand assessments and interventions for learners with special needs, underscoring again the need for in-service training sessions to highlight such issues.

Schools have measures to accommodate learners with special needs

Although teachers indicate that students in their schools tend to have IEPs, the results show that there are, at the same time, no measures in their schools to cater to the needs of learners. The responses of the teachers to this question are not necessarily contradictory, as individual teacher practice may differ from broader school level programs designed to accommodate students' special needs. This finding thus points to the possibility that many teachers are left on their own to cope with special needs in the classroom, a situation at odds with the recommendations of the inclusive schooling philosophy that advocates for a whole school approach. These results may also, once again, point to teachers' lack of knowledge on what needs to be done for learners with special needs in their schools so that those students receive assistance.

Learners with Special needs receive support

Responses to questions 10 and 11 suggest that special support services in the schools for learners with special needs are not adequate. More than 60% of teachers said that such services were not provided. Given that 33% said that such services were provided, more investigation is needed to determine what exactly is available. Again this might mean that teachers are not aware of what is going on in their schools, as their responses are somewhat inconsistent, or that there are no concrete school wide approaches in the schools investigated.

Table 1: Assessment practices and services to support students with special needs

Item and Response	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
School has SIT Team		
Yes	34	69
No	15	31
Students write modified exams		
Yes	7	14.5
No	41	81.5
IEP for students with special needs		
Yes	26	54.1
No	22	45.9
School has measures to accommodate students with special needs		
Yes	15	32.6
No	31	67.4
Learners with special needs receive support		
Yes	16	34.1
No	31	65.9

SIT role and assessment referral process

The majority of teachers noted that the SIT identifies students with special needs. However these responses were not universal. Similar results were reported for SIT's role in referring students for assessment in Table 2 below. The majority of teachers felt that SIT referred students for assessment, although some teachers again answered no to this question. Such a discrepancy suggests that either the practice is not consistently followed or that some teachers are unaware of the process. In any case, this question highlights the need for consistency in what SIT does and how it does its works in schools. These discrepancies in responses may again point to the fact that general education teachers may not consider SIT their responsibility, but a responsibility of only special education. There is consequently a need for awareness workshops in schools to make sure that such initiatives are not seen as "a new service," but rather as a service that builds on existing services and efforts in order to upgrade a school's ability to respond effectively to student needs.

Perception of need for assessment for learners and teacher actions

Almost all teachers in this study identified the need for the assessment of learners in their schools. The majority of teachers (98%) also reported that they were aware that the resource center was a center for assessing learners with special needs. Their responses were, however, incongruous with their views on awareness of the need to assess learners. If teachers are aware that learners with special needs need assessment, and are aware of the centre where this assessment is performed, the question becomes why are they not being taken to the centre for assessment? This answer may involve a number of factors, including lack of accountability on the part of teachers or that school intervention teams are not effectively doing their job. Research has revealed that effective intervention teams impact schools in several ways, including the provision of greater support to general education teachers (Bahr et al., 1999). This in turn implies that if such teams are not effective, teachers may not receive the support they need to assist learners. The government of Botswana thus needs to strengthen school intervention teams.

Table 2: Teacher knowledge of assessment processes

Item and Response	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Teacher knows SIT role		
Yes	28	59.6
No	19	40.4
Teacher knows assessment referral process		
Yes	29	64.4
No	16	35.6
Teacher knows where assessment is performed		
Yes	47	98.0
No	1	2.0
There is a need for assessment		
Yes	46	98.0
No	1	2.0

Inclusive practices

Teachers were asked to rate their use of modified instruction and curriculum on a four point-Likert type scale. The results indicate that teachers themselves are making an effort to meet the needs of learners with special needs in their classrooms. Approximately 75% of teachers indicated that they made modifications “sometimes” (2), “often” (3) or “all the time” (4). Although this is encouraging, reported measures such as these one may not reflect the everyday actions of teachers. This is a limitation of this study as it did not evaluate actual classroom practices.

Results for the curriculum modification question showed that only 19 teachers (39%) were modifying curriculum for students with special needs who had not been assessed. Participants’ rating of the extent to which they modified their curriculum was low ($M=1.8$) and so students in need are unlikely to benefit fully from classroom teaching if they are not assessed. Botswana has a centralized curriculum with stipulated objectives that must be covered by all teachers. Even though some teachers noted that they modified the curriculum to cater to special needs, this will remain an ongoing challenge as the curriculum is not flexible. This observation calls for increased awareness around such practices so as to strengthen both teachers’ efforts and school intervention teams whose mandate it is to guide teachers in situations such as these.

Table 3: Teachers modify curriculum and teaching for learners with special needs

Item and Response	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Modifies teaching for students with special needs		
Yes	37	78.7
No	10	21.3
Modifies curriculum for students with special needs		
Yes	19	41.3
No	27	58.7

Research Question 3: School and teacher challenges associated with implementing inclusive practices

Responses showed that the biggest challenge for teachers was the lack of resources ($n=23$, 47%), followed by a lack of knowledge and skills ($n=20$, 41%). Factors such as time limitations ($n=2$, 4%) and lack of administrative support ($n=2$, 4%) were also mentioned. This is in line with other research in this area (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011, Johstone & Chapman,

2011) as most of the challenges that teachers identify in teaching learners with special needs are not usually student related but are due to factors external to the child. The qualitative responses provided a range of challenges and these included knowledge of how to handle these learners, inadequate material/resources, congested curriculum, and a lack of time as the curriculum for the year is prescribed by the distant authorities (Ministry of Education Skills and Development, curriculum developers).

Table 4: Challenges associated with teaching learners with special needs

Issue	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Lack of knowledge and skills	20	40.8
Lack of resources	23	46.9
Students' slow pace of learning	2	4.1
Time limitations	1	2.0
Lack of administrative support	2	4.1
Total	48	99.8

Research Question 4: Exploring differences between schools' assessment processes and inclusive practices

This analysis sought to determine whether there were any significant differences in the responses of the different schools on the assessment and teaching practices items. The ANOVA showed a p value of .00 and the post hoc showed that means scores for schools 2, 6 and 8 ($m=11.0$) were significantly lower than those of schools 5, and 10 ($m=16.0$). Thus schools 2, 6 and 8 had lesser understandings of the procedures for assessment and supporting students with special needs. The other schools had lower scores but these were not significant. This finding suggests that not all schools are fully aware of the assessment process and are not making similar provisions for assessing and supporting students with disabilities.

Table 5: Mean Scores for schools' assessment and inclusive practices

School	N	Mean	SD
1	5	14.0	2.121
2	5	11.6	1.949
3	5	13.8	1.643
4	5	13.8	1.923
5	5	16.4	1.140
6	5	11.0	.707
7	5	12.8	2.588
8	5	11.6	2.408
9	5	14.6	1.816
10	3	16.3	1.154

Table 6: ANOVA: School assessment and inclusive practices

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	144.112	9	16.012	4.614	.000
Within Groups	131.867	38	3.470		
Total	275.979	47			

Table 7: Post Hoc – Dunnetts' C

(I) School Name	(J) School Name	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
1	10	-2.33	1.360	.372
2	10	-4.73*	1.360	.008
3	10	-2.53	1.360	.294
4	10	-2.53	1.360	.294
5	10	.066	1.360	1.000
6	10	-5.33*	1.360	.002
7	10	-3.53	1.360	.071
8	10	-4.73*	1.360	.008
9	10	-1.73	1.360	.668

Further analysis was undertaken to determine whether any of the other background variables were contributing to differences in scores in regards to knowledge of assessment and teaching strategies. The t-test analysis for gender, showed no significant differences between males and females (M=4.8) and Females (M=4.9). A one-way ANOVA analysis of teaching qualification and assessment and teaching knowledge showed that those with a bachelor's degree had a higher mean score (m=5.2) than other categories of teachers. However, the result was not significant. For years of teaching experience, those with 16-20 years of experience had a slightly higher knowledge of the assessment and teaching that could support students with disabilities, but the finding was also not statistically significant (See Tables 8 and 9 below).

Table 8: Teacher qualifications and responses to assessment and inclusive practices

Variable	N	Mean	SD
BGSE/IGSE	1	5.0	.
PTC	8	5.0	.755
Diploma	27	4.7	.775
Bachelor Degree	11	5.2	.603
Master's Degree	1	4.0	(....)

Table 9: Years of teaching experience and responses to assessment and inclusive practices

Variables	N	Mean	SD
0-5 years	7	4.6	.534
6-10 years	6	4.8	.753
11-15 years	7	4.7	.756
16-20 years	15	5.1	.834
21 and Above years	13	4.8	.725

DISCUSSION

This study examined how the sole Botswana assessment centre (Central Resource Centre (CRC)) addressed the needs of students needing assessment. Data was also collected on teachers' knowledge of assessment processes, the ways in which schools try to accommodate students with special needs who are not formally assessed, and the challenges teachers face in teaching such students. It also explored the availability of services for un-assessed learners with special needs.

The Botswana assessment centre (Central Resource Centre (CRC)) is unable to assess all students who require assessment and there is a long wait time for assessment. This difficulty in meeting the needs of all students stems from the fact that the centre is critically under-staffed and many more trained specialists are required to close the gap between existing need and available service capacity. Another cause of this lack of assessment is the failure of schools to refer

students for assessment, even though the CRC organizes workshops to raise awareness of the importance of assessment. The latter points to the possibility that teachers are fully aware or are being negligent, given that many teachers in this study lamented the difficulties associated with adapting teaching to students who are not properly assessed.

In terms of school level responses, our study found that the majority of schools did have School Intervention Teams (SIT) and that these teams were responsible for referring students for assessment. However, within schools there were often discrepancies about the existence of SIT. Such inconsistencies point to the possibility that the role of SIT is differently understood, that SIT expected actions/processes are not consistently followed, or that some teachers are unaware of these processes. These inconsistencies may also result from a lack of ownership or responsibility among general education teachers for SIT and the fact that they fail to participate in the teams' activities. Studies have shown that for these teams to be effective general education teachers must take ownership of the team (Gloeckler et al., 2009). This draws attention to the need for schools to have some consistency in what SIT does and how it does its work. There is also a need for teacher awareness training on SIT and the role SIT teams play in the school with regard to securing assessment for children.

All teachers in this study said that there was a great need for students to be assessed, signaling that teachers are indeed aware of learners with special needs and that assessment can play an important role in their effort to assist these students. However, many students requiring assessment were not referred to the CRC. This confirms the results of the study by Okumbe & Malasi (2005) who found that many students with special needs in primary schools in Botswana are progressing through their education un-assessed. These learners are more likely to struggle with the curriculum, examinations and ultimately experience school failure or dropout. This potential for failure and dropout was observed by both Dart (2006) and the 2008 Education Report (Government of Botswana, 2008).

The question remains, if teachers are aware that many learners with special needs require assessment, and also know where such services are provided, why are so many students not referred for assessment? The implications of this failure cannot be ignored. When SIT and teachers do not refer students for assessment, knowing fully well that the outcome of such an exercise will inform better learning strategies for students, it amounts to an implicit disregard for the relevance of assessment to school success, or teacher complicity in the provision of poor quality education to such students. This is certainly an unacceptable practice from the point of view of Ministry policy and professional ethics.

Research has shown that effective intervention teams may impact schools in several ways, one of which is increased support for general education teachers (Bahr et al., 1999). The obvious flip side is that if teams are not effective, teachers don't receive the support they need to assist learners. There is need therefore to strengthen the school intervention teams by being clear about their roles and expectations with regard to referrals, assessment-linked instructional planning and execution, and accountability across the spectrum of these actions.

This study's findings also show that in five of the ten schools surveyed, students did not write modified examinations. This is a direct outcome of not referring students for assessment. The Ministry of Education stipulates that access to services such as modified examinations is contingent upon assessment. Rough estimates show that there are substantial numbers of learners with special needs in all primary schools in Botswana and that these learners are experiencing barriers to learning which may result in their poor performance. However, since most of these students are not assessed, they do not qualify to write modified examinations. Many of these students are thus disadvantaged compared to their peers with similar needs who have been assessed and further accentuates educational inequality.

Despite the finding that many learners do not access modified exams, teachers reported that they were making an effort to meet the needs of learners with special needs in their classrooms. About three-quarters of teachers reported that they modified their instructional strategies and this is encouraging. Indeed, modification should run throughout the system to benefit learners, not just in the classrooms but all settings including examinations. Sadly, reported measures such as this one may not reflect the everyday actions of teachers and this is a limitation of this study. Further in-classroom research on the modification practices of teachers is recommended.

The findings with regard to curriculum modification showed that only 19 teachers (39%) were modifying curriculum for students with special needs who had not been assessed and their rating of their extent of modification was low. The implication is that students in need are unlikely to fully benefit from classroom teaching if they are not assessed. Botswana has a centralized curriculum with stipulated objectives that must be covered by all teachers in Botswana. Modifying the curriculum for learners with special needs thus remains challenging, given its inflexibility. Issues with curriculum flexibility need to be addressed at both the policy and school instructional level; workshops on such practices may also strengthen teachers' efforts.

While many teachers in this study indicated that they developed Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) for learners with special needs, there were inconsistencies in teacher responses suggesting that the practice is not widespread.

The design of an IEP is often contingent upon an assessment. In fact in many countries, the development of an IEP – a concise plan of action based on diagnostic information for addressing a student’s special needs using specific educational strategies – is undertaken by a team based on assessment information. Given that many of these students have not been assessed, who designs the IEPs for un-assessed students and to what extent can the IEPs effectively target the students’ real learning problems? Indeed a proper assessment will obligate schools, as per the Botswana Ministry of Education policy, to use a team of experts and stakeholders to develop an IEP. It may be that teachers in these schools do not fully understand the true relevance of assessment backed IEPs or the other issues of assessment and interventions for learners with special needs. It is thus critical that the Botswana Assessment Centre (CRC) take more proactive steps to sensitizing teachers to referring students, and training teachers on ways to assist learners in their schools.

This study found that while teachers reported that students in their schools had IEPs, they also reported that there were inadequate or no measures in the schools to cater to the needs of learners with special needs. Although this might appear contradictory, it is perhaps a signifier of the gulf between individual teacher practice and broader school level measures designed to accommodate special needs. In other words, many teachers are left on their own in the absence of uniform school measures for special students. Such a situation is at odds with the recommendations of the inclusive schooling philosophy that advocates for a whole school approach (OECD 1995, 1997; Lipsky, 2003; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, 1998). It is essential that schools be encouraged to adopt this philosophy and pursue a more whole-school approach so that teachers are all on the same page.

Responses to questions about special support services in the schools for learners with special needs showed that these were inadequate. More than 60% of teachers said that such services were not provided at all. However, since 33% reported that such services were provided, more investigation is needed. Again, these inconsistent responses might mean that teachers are not aware of what is going on in their schools, or that there are no concrete school-wide approaches in the schools investigated. This conclusion is supported by the one-way ANOVA, which sought to answer the question of whether there were any significant differences in the responses of the different schools on the items of assessment and teaching practices. The results showed that there were significant differences ($p = .00$) between the mean scores of schools 2, 6 and 8 ($M = 11.0$) and schools 5 and 10 ($M = 16.0$). This finding implies that not all schools are fully aware of the assessment process and are not making similar provisions for assessing and supporting students with disabilities. Together, these findings suggest that the Ministry of Education’s policy on assessment and inclusion of students with special needs is not comprehensively being followed by all schools. It also indicates that while schools may have clear inclusion policies, implementing these policies still requires considerable effort, including dealing with conflicting objectives of schools and contradictions in school operations. A proactive and vigorous approach to achieving a uniform policy implementation agenda is therefore essential if the goals of inclusiveness are to be realized.

An important part of this study was the findings in relation to the challenges teachers face in trying to teach students with special needs. The results showed that the biggest challenges for teachers were the lack of resources (47%), followed by a lack of knowledge and skills (41%). Factors such as time limitations (4%) and lack of administrative support (4%) were also mentioned. Qualitative responses mirrored the quantitative responses and included limited knowledge of how to handle these learners, inadequate material/resources, congested curriculum and the lack of sufficient time as the curriculum for the year is prescribed by education authorities (Ministry of Education, curriculum developers). Similar challenges have been found in other Botswana studies affirming the fact that most of the challenges teachers face in teaching learners with special needs are related to factors external to the student (Jolstone & Chapman, 2011, Kuyini & Desai, 2007; Kuyini & Mangope, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have some implications for the success of inclusive education practices and promoting better outcomes for students with special needs in Botswana.

This study sheds light on the fact that the single assessment centre in Botswana is unable to meet the needs of all schools. Most children who would get a better education after a comprehensive assessment are thus missing out because school teams are inadequately informed about specific student needs and therefore unable to employ the best instructional strategies. Correspondingly, schools are providing inadequate accommodations and services to optimize learning for students with special ends and this suggests that there is disconnect between the espoused policies of the schools and their practices. This clearly aligns with the conclusions of Clark et al. (1999) on the UK’s experience of inclusion in the 1990s which showed widespread discrepancies between the espoused policies of schools, their practices through which the policies were realized, and teachers’ understandings of diversity within the schools.

If this situation remains, teachers will continue to encounter difficulties because of the conflict between official policy and the realities of school environments. This will in turn prolong both curriculum inaccessibility for students and the difficulties that come with translating inclusion principles into practice.

It can be concluded from this study that, in Botswana today, there are conflicts between Ministry policies about assessment and inclusive education and the contextual realities of schools, whereby local school policies and practices are falling short of the inclusive education vision. The Ministry of Education, Skills and Development, must take action to overcome this problem, because, "the principles espoused by the schools, however sincerely held, are (sometimes only) articulated at a level of generality. In translating them into practice, however, that generality (has) to give way to specific forms and practices, which were not given in the principles themselves, and which might stand in apparent contradiction to them" (Clark et al., 1999, p. 9)

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