

Breaking down Barriers

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS ABOUT CREATING
BETTER WORLD FOR EVERYONE

POLICY
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Best practices in Inclusive Education in Zambia

Leadership matters

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Executive summary

Many children with disabilities go to special schools where they remain segregated from mainstream society or do not attend school altogether. In response, Inclusive Education (IE) has been promoted globally as a solution. Particularly in low-income countries implementing IE has proven to be a major challenge. This also applies to Zambia where most schools have failed to make much progress in this field. This study seeks to learn from the positive deviants: those schools that have managed to implement IE with a reasonable degree of success. It identified five of such schools and aimed to tease out what they have in common.

Two broad patterns emerged from the analysis. The five schools in this study (1) all have school leaders who act as IE champions and 2) employ a range of similar (best) practices in to implement and promote IE. Regarding the first, it is clear that school leadership plays a crucial role in the IE successes achieved. In all schools the headteacher is an IE champion who combines a strong intrinsic motivation with specialised expertise in the field. While the former gives them a strong personal drive to push for inclusion, the latter gives them a clear vision of what needs to happen practically. Regarding the second, the study also found that the five schools employed a very similar set of (best) practices to implement and promote IE. These include the formation of IE committees, the assessment of children, capacity building of teachers, partnering with external stakeholders, sensitisation of parents, infrastructure development and monitoring, evaluation and learning.



Leadership is vital to realise inclusive education

Right to Left:

Deputy Head Teacher at Mchini Primary School.
 Head Teacher at Mchini Primary School, Eastern Province - Nelly Mumba
 Oscar Kahemba - Student Researcher, University of Zambia
 Esther Kamaara - Student Researcher, Erasmus University Rotterdam
 Benson Phiri - PTA (Parent Teacher Association) Vice-Chairman at Mchini Primary School

Introduction

Over the past three decades, diverse international efforts have been made to include children with disabilities in the mainstream educational process and ensure that their right to education is fully promoted and protected. The 1990 Jomtien Conference on Education for All and the 1994 The Salamanca Conference are among the stepping stones in the international policy on IE.

In Zambia, however, initiatives to promote and implement IE by and large have not been very successful. Studies seeking to understand the difficulties in implementing IE in Zambia found numerous constraints, including insufficient financing of inclusive policies in mainstream schools, inaccessible infrastructure for learners with disabilities, lack of assessment regarding the learning needs of children with disabilities and negative attitudes to disability by parents, teachers and peers.

Despite the overall difficulties in Zambia to implement IE, there have been examples of schools in which substantial progress has been made against all odds. In this study, we look at some of these positive deviants and seek to tease out their shared characteristics.

Methodology

The fieldwork of this study was done in three provinces in Zambia involving five schools in the period of July and August of 2021. The five schools were selected in consultation with the district education officers of the respected areas using a checklist of the requirements for an IE school. The schools that were identified by the district officials corresponded with the advice of non-governmental organisations who were consulted as part of the sampling procedure.

The study used qualitative data-collection and analysis. Forty-eight participants participated in the study, consisting of five headteachers (one from each of the five selected schools in the sample), three officers from the 3 District Education Boards, twenty teachers (four from each school selected in the study) and twenty parents (four from each of the selected schools).



Purposive sampling was used to select respondents by virtue of their position and the responsibilities. Data was collected using interviews and a self-administering questionnaire.

Findings

The study found that the five schools have two key characteristics in common. First, in all schools the school leadership emerged as the driving force behind the implementation of IE. Second, across all five schools the study found a set of (largely) similar practices for the promotion and implementation of IE.

School leaders as Inclusive Education champions

In all five schools the headteacher played a decisive role as IE champion. As school leaders, headteachers shape all education practices and have the power to make or break inclusion. The study found a range of best practices with regard to IE, in which the headteacher fulfilled an important supporting and/or catalysing role (see below). Without the support of the headteacher it seems unlikely that these best practices would have blossomed to the same extent.



Inclusive education requires a school to be accessible for all. Thanks to maintaining enduring relations with external stakeholders, ramps and handrails were constructed.

Assessment of children

In Zambia, it is common for children with disabilities to not be accepted in the mainstream schools due to their specific impairment. And when children with disabilities are allowed to go to school, their needs are not always adequately met. The headteachers in the study insist on assessing all children who come to their schools in terms of potential disabilities. Therefore, the teachers in the IE committee have basic knowledge in identification and screening of children. Assessments happen when children are being enrolled in their first grade for placement. Due to adequately done

assessments, the specific needs of the children get identified and addressed in an appropriate way and as a consequence the children feel welcome at school.

Two qualities enable the school leaders to assume the role of IE champion. First, the five school leaders share a strong intrinsic motivation to make their school inclusive. All headteachers have made up their minds to do everything that is needed to make their school inclusive, even if it costs extra time, effort and resources. For them, achieving inclusion is a personal mission which propels them to do whatever it takes.

Second, all five headteachers had a degree of specialised knowledge and expertise on IE. While the headteachers in the five schools have not interacted with each other, they have similar resolutions and ideas on the implementation of IE in their schools. These resolutions and ideas have been shaped by the specialised IE schooling they received. Overall, the intrinsic motivation of school leaders provided the drive to make their school inclusive, while their knowledge and expertise on IE enabled them to see the path towards this goal.

Shared practices

The study found that the schools shared a set of very similar practices to implement and promote IE.

Formation of Inclusive Education committees

All five schools have IE committees comprised of teachers and parents and led by an IE coordinator. The headteachers had formed these committees and support the teachers involved in the committee. These committees assess children with disabilities and place them in their correct classrooms. In addition, they determine what teaching and learning materials would be best suited for the learner. The committees also plan and find solutions to problematic situations involving learners with disabilities. For example, in one of the schools a teacher learned about parents hiding their child with physical disabilities from school. He reported this to the committee which subsequently came up with a strategy on how to approach the parents and convince them to bring the child to school. Ultimately, the committee members could convince the parents with the support of community members. The parents explained they thought the child would be a burden to themselves and the school because of his disability.

Capacity building of teachers

One of the reasons IE fails in most schools in Zambia is the absence of teachers with knowledge and expertise on how to teach learners with disabilities. The headteachers in this study know this and four of the five schools continuously invest in the capacity development of their staff in the field of IE. The headteachers encourage teacher group meetings where teachers support each other on how to handle certain learners. Headteachers also promote workshops and seminars which contribute to a greater understanding of different disabilities whilst offering support in integrating new pedagogical skills into the classrooms. For instance, through teacher group meetings, seminars and workshops, teachers at one of the schools learnt the basics of sign language in order to provide some communication to learners with hearing impairments.

Partnering with external stakeholders

The five schools have in common that they try build a broader community of support as opposed to implementing IE in isolation. Partnering with external stakeholders has been crucial to the IE successes achieved. In each of the five schools the headteacher maintained enduring relations with external stakeholders in the field of disability, such as Leonard Cheshire Zambia or the Norwegian Association for the Disabled. In one of the schools, for example, the headteacher had arranged for Leonard Cheshire Zambia to construct ramps and hand rails. Overall, school leaders use their network to acquire teaching and learning materials, raise funds or bring technical knowledge or expertise to the schools.

Sensitization of Parents

All five schools invest time and resources in the sensitization of parents of children with disabilities. Much of this sensitization work is done by the IE committees who have programmes involved in child identification and the education of parents on how they can support their children with disabilities.

This sensitization work encourages parents to realise that disability is not inability and that the education of learners with disability increases their potential of being independent in future. Further, parents are motivated to take their children to school while helping them to appreciate the efforts being made by the schools to educate all children. In all schools, the headteachers are a driving force behind the sensitization of parents based on the conviction that IE is bound to fail if the parents of learners with disabilities are not on board.

Development of infrastructure

In all five schools, the head teachers have pushed for infrastructural adjustment to accommodate learners with physical or visual impairments. In three schools, the modifications were (partly) funded by external partners. However, even those schools that did not receive financial support from external partners, the headteachers succeeded in finding resources to work on some ramps, hand-rails and concrete pathways. Interestingly, several of the schools undertake income generating activities such as selling vegetables grown in the school garden or selling popcorn. Such activities help the said schools to have some petty cash to pay for infrastructure or to attend to immediate needs of learners with disabilities.



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Monitoring, evaluation and learning

All schools engage in monitoring, evaluation and learning activities which is done by external monitoring staff (mostly educational standard officers) in interaction with the IE committees. During the external monitoring process, the school staff has an opportunity to engage in an open dialog with the monitoring officer on the strengths and the challenges that the school is facing in the process of inclusion and finding possible solutions. Bringing an external perspective into such a dialogue has proven very helpful for tracking progress, identifying challenges and learning about how other schools have managed to overcome particular challenges. The involvement of the headteachers in this context appeared crucial. When the external monitoring staff make observations, the headteachers ensure follow up activities including the implementation of the recommendations.

Conclusion & recommendations

The 'positive deviant' schools in this study share two key characteristics: 1) they have school leaders who act as IE champions, 2) they employ a (largely) similar set of IE practices. While the best practices identified deserve further replication and upscaling, the findings clearly show that implementing IE in a country like Zambia is very challenging and requires a lot of extra time, energy and resources. This makes the intrinsic motivation of the school leadership pivotal for the success of IE initiatives.

Decision-makers need to recognise that initiatives to promote IE are unlikely to yield sustainable results when the schools involved lack capable and committed leadership. Not only should the strengthening and supporting of committed leaders be a central part of any IE strategy, it also may make sense to prioritise schools with highly committed leadership in the allocation of scarce resources.



For further reading

Oscar Kahemba (2022). Learning the best practices of successful school leaders in the implementation of inclusive education: lessons from primary schools in Zambia. Ma-thesis, University of Zambia

Notes

¹ Thomas Mtonga is a Blind Zambian disability scholar, activist and consultant. Willem Elbers is academic project-leader of Breaking down Barriers.