

Breaking down Barriers

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School leaders as Inclusive Education champions in Zambia

Brokers of Inclusion

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Executive summary

The glaring gap between inclusive education policy and practice for children with disabilities is attributable to implementation barriers that are physical, technological, attitudinal, financial and systemic and are both school based and structural. Against this backdrop, this study conducted in 2021 in Zambia, examined school leaders' who show exceptional commitment to inclusion implementation enabling schools to make huge strides in Inclusive Education implementation to overcome existing challenges and barriers. The study highlights the key strategies employed by these school leaders including how they address the self-esteem and self-confidence of children with disabilities as well as building relations with parents, optimizing limited resources, and mobilizing alternative resources in implementing Inclusive Education.

Header photo: A mother sharing on the impact of inclusive education implementation on her physically challenged daughter.



School Head Teacher (centre), Deputy school head teacher (extreme right) and researchers.

A parent sharing on the impact that a school leader has had in ensuring her son living with disabilities has access to education.



Introduction

Roughly 90% of the millions of children with disabilities in Africa remain underserved signifying a massive violation of their right to education. This statistic prevails because of the discrepancy between the well-designed Inclusive Education (IE) policies and the persistent implementation gaps and constraints. School leaders serve as the connecting link of Inclusive Education policy and practice making them crucial for successful implementation. However, their role in promoting Inclusive Education remains poorly understood and documented.

In Zambia, school leaders are faced with an exceptionally challenging environment flooded with barriers such lack of IE training, lack of teaching and learning materials, unfavorable infrastructure designs etc. Nevertheless, some 'positive deviant' leaders have created an enabling environment for inclusive education despite existing barriers. Based on a study carried out in Zambia between July- August 2021, this paper highlights how these positive deviant school leaders were able to make progress in the field of IE. The study frames them as brokers of inclusion based on the strategies they employed to navigate, maneuver around and overcome the barriers to IE implementation.

Methodology

This research was carried out across Zambia's Eastern, Southern, and Lusaka provinces, focusing on one school per province. The schools were identified through the guidance of district officials and non-government organizations working on IE. The criteria for selection was based on schools that (1) were high performing in IE, and (2) practiced IE predominantly due to the actions of their school leaders (as opposed to external support). From the three schools, five school leaders were identified comprising three headteachers and two teachers in charge of the special units. In addition to semi-structured interviews with school leaders, key informant interviews were conducted with 30 additional diverse inclusive education stakeholders who were identified through snowball sampling. These stakeholders included heads of IE policy implementation at the district level, schoolteachers, parents, children with disabilities and their able-bodied peers.

Findings

The school leaders differed in terms of their areas of IE focus and how they used their knowledge and skills to advance IE. However, what is common among them is their exceptional commitment to inclusion which several of them described as their 'calling.' These school leaders were professionally trained in IE, and three of them had special education training as well. The findings strongly suggest that both the leaders' commitment and competencies contributed to the success of IE implementation in their schools. In addressing the barriers to IE, the study found that these school leaders all invested time and energy into (1) tackling negative attitudes towards disability and IE and (2) overcoming resource scarcity.

Tackling negative attitudes

Two sets of activities appeared central in the school leaders' efforts to tackle negative attitudes: addressing children with disabilities' self-esteem and school-home links in terms of active engagement with parents in implementation.



Able bodied students sharing their experience of learning alongside children with disabilities.



School Head teacher showcasing the school garden. All proceeds gained from selling of fresh agricultural produce from this garden go directly to purchasing of assistive devices.

• Addressing Children with Disabilities' Self-esteem

Most of the children with disabilities in the study sites experienced discrimination and stigmatization which caused them to develop negative perceptions about themselves. Some of them experienced being 'hidden' from society and were considered a source of shame for their families. Strengthening the children with disabilities' self-esteem was imperative since such self-images or feelings could hinder them from believing in their abilities and from fully participating in school. The school leaders cultivated positive self-esteem and confidence in children with disabilities by offering admission despite having a record of rejection from other schools. This acceptance enabled children with disabilities to feel worthy of education and thus enhanced their perception as capable beings.

The school leaders also ensured the development of children with disabilities beyond enrollment through designing and following up on their individualized education plans. These plans encouraged the transition of children with disabilities from special unit classes into mainstream classes. The children with disabilities' improved performance in class and the acceptance and support they receive from school leaders and fellow pupils further strengthened their self-confidence. For example, one of the school leaders boosted the confidence of a children with disabilities with limited vision in his school by providing emotional and academic support. He diligently taught the child how to read without any specialized assistive devices. This enabled the transition from a special unit class to a mainstream class and the child was later able to complete his national primary school examination.

• School-Home Links

The school leaders in this study also understand the importance of engaging with parents and enlisting their support in implementing IE. In Zambia, parents with a children with disabilities can be hesitant when asked to bring their children with disabilities to school. This is understandable given the prevailing societal views on disability in which persons with disabilities are widely viewed as helpless, unable, and a burden upon society. From these parents' perspectives, bringing their children with disabilities to school may initially not make sense.

conditions. Through the child find exercise, the school leaders sensitively present parents with available educational opportunities for children with disabilities and do their best to negotiate with these parents the next steps for the children.

Specifically, dedicated school staff visit communities and search for out-of-school children with disabilities who could be admitted to schools. The school leaders persistently and patiently encourage the parents of children with disabilities to enroll their children in school. Once parents agree to enroll their children and the latter are officially admitted into the schools, the school leaders ensure parents' active involvement as co-implementers of inclusion by inviting them to join the 'Family Pack.' This exercise invites parents to observe how their children learn in school by sitting beside them and watching them as they learn for half a day. After this interaction, school leaders ask for feedback from parents and incorporate this information into the school's policies or into their children's individualized learning plans.

Overcoming resource scarcity

Schools in Zambia lack the financial and human capital resources to create a genuinely inclusive environment. They are grossly underfunded and lack the resources to offer mainstream education adequately. Less than 5% of professionally trained teachers in Zambia have been trained in IE, which makes many schools perceive IE as a far-fetched goal, resulting in IE apathy. However, the school leaders in this study are committed to inclusion and do not accept the notion of IE as an unreachable goal. They do, however, recognize the importance of resources as a precondition for successful IE and therefore put much time and effort to overcome resource scarcity.

The study identified two main approaches employed by school leaders for overcoming resource scarcity. First, we see that they put much effort into optimizing their limited resources and second they mobilized alternative resources.

• Optimizing their limited resources

they do not allow the lack of financial and human capital resources to keep them from implementing IE. In one school, for example, only two professionally trained teachers assess all

children when admitted to grade 1, create and follow up on the individual learning plans of 18 children with disabilities in mainstream classes, and prepare and facilitate implementation of individual learning plans for the 11 children with disabilities in their special unit. In all schools, the IE-trained teachers, including the school leaders, are involved in training colleagues on the various aspects of inclusion. Across the schools, the school headteachers use the government-mandated 'Continuous Professional Development Program' for this purpose.

In all the study sites, the school leaders used 'muddling through' as a strategy to implement IE. This meant using currently available resources to start an IE practice at their schools without having all the necessary resources to implement it sustainably. This strategy proved effective as it bought time for school leaders to reallocate funds pragmatically and pushed them to become innovative about resource mobilization. Muddling through requires intense conviction and willpower as starting activities without budgetary clarity in the long term is a significant source of uncertainty.

• Mobilize alternative resources

In the implementation of this strategy the school leaders used several creative approaches:

- The schools were all involved in income-generating activities. These included a popcorn selling business, the proceeds of which went towards supporting the purchase of learning materials for children with disabilities; the nurturing of a garden in the school compound to produce vegetables for sale to the community to raise funds for assistive devices; and organizing events allowing community members to support parents of children with disabilities from low-income families in paying school fees.
- One school created an IE committee in the community with parents, teachers, a social worker, a nurse, a police inspector, etc. The members of this committee use their own resources to meet the various needs of children with disabilities.
- School leaders lobby at their respective District Education Offices for budget allocations to be reviewed. They specifically request funding for IE practices that had been previously excluded from budgets. For example, one of the school leaders petitioned for funds to open a special unit at their school that would act as transitional classes for children with disabilities with severe disabilities into mainstream classes, and the grant was approved.
- In one school, the school leaders played a crucial role in implementing a child-to-child transport system to help parents with children with disabilities drop off and pick up their child from school. It involved assigning able-bodied children the task of picking up their schoolmates with disabilities before school and dropping them off after school. This innovation contributed to the social inclusion of children with disabilities within the school as friendships emerged and children learned from each other.

Recommendations

The school leaders in this study were, without doubt, a significant driving force behind the IE successes achieved in the schools. These leaders all share commitment and competency for IE and devote much time and effort to addressing negative attitudes towards disability and IE and overcoming resource scarcity. From the findings, the following recommendations emerge for decision-makers involved in designing IE initiatives:

1. Recognize the critical importance of diverse school leaders;
2. Prioritize schools with committed and capable leaders when selecting schools for initiatives aimed at promoting IE;
3. Recognize the importance of addressing the negative attitudes of children with disabilities (self-esteem and confidence), parents and other stakeholders as pre-condition for successful IE;
4. Support schools in designing and strengthening strategies to raise alternative resources for IE implementation.



A home based interview with a child with disabilities, his guardian and his friends.

Editors

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For further reading

Kamaara E.W. (2021). Brokers of Inclusion: Understanding the role of school leaders in the successful implementation of Inclusive Education practices in primary schools in Zambia. MA-thesis. The Hague: Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Notes

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