

Breaking down Barriers

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School leaders as positive deviants in Cameroon:

Champions of Inclusive Education

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Executive summary

While inclusive education (IE) has been promoted since the 1990s, most schools in Cameroon in practice are far from being inclusive. This study focuses on those schools that are the exception to the trend: the positive deviants. In seeking to understand why and how these schools have achieved reasonable degrees of success, it focuses on the role of school leadership (headteachers and teachers). In the five schools studied, the study found that school leaders act as champions of inclusive education. Building on their passion and knowledge of the topic, these leaders act to ensure that inclusion remains firmly on the agenda whilst practical steps are undertaken to make it a reality, despite the extra effort this takes.

Furthermore, the study found that the five schools employed almost similar strategies to implement and promote inclusive education successfully. These included community outreach activities, external fundraising, capacity building of teachers, and the promotion of sign language skills. To a certain extent, all these strategies draw upon some kind of support (knowledge, trainings or funds) from external stakeholders, most notably CBCH Health Services. Without this external support, it seems unlikely that these leaders would achieve the same levels of success.

Photo header:
An English teacher
teaching through speech
while his colleague signs
the lesson for pupils who
are hearing impaired



A child with mobility impairment in a mainstream classroom

Introduction

The international community has seen a push toward including children with disabilities in the mainstream educational process, starting with the Conferences on Education for All in Jomtien (1990) and Salamanca (1994). In Cameroon, however, initiatives to promote and implement Inclusive Education (IE) by and large have not been very successful. Key obstacles include the lack of resources, inhibitive socio-cultural beliefs, negative stereotyping of children with disabilities, inaccessible infrastructure for learners with disabilities, and lack of trained personnel for the learning needs of children with disabilities. Despite all these, some schools in Cameroon have demonstrated magnificent progress in IE.

In this study, we look at five schools in the North-West of Cameroon that have realized impressive progress in the field of IE and as such can be seen as 'positive deviants'. We are particularly interested in teasing out the roles that the school leadership played as catalysts in promoting IE. Besides bringing to light the personal characteristics that enable school leaders to be inclusive education 'champions', this paper also aims to identify the main strategies used by the school leadership to

promote IE. In grasping the role of the school leadership, it is important to understand that the five schools under study have all received support from the civil society organization CBC Health services. The latter has a long-running program that offers technical support and material and financial resources to several pilot schools for IE in the North-West Region, including the five schools that participated in the study.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design, namely the Case Study Method. Data were collected from a sample of 24 respondents purposively selected from five 'positive deviant' schools in the North West and Centre regions of Cameroon. These schools were selected based on success indicators in the implementation of IE, using expert suggestions and the contextual knowledge of the research team. Four of these schools were part of the above-mentioned program of CBC Health Services. Here it is key to point out that these schools were considered among the best of the CBC supported schools. The methods of data collection were Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions. Data were analyzed using the techniques of thematic and descriptive analyses.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS ABOUT CREATING
BETTER WORLD FOR EVERYONE

Findings

Personal qualities of Champions of IE

What the five successful IE schools had in common was that they all had outstanding leadership that played a key role in promoting and implementing IE. Throughout the schooling period, the school leaders supervise the implementation of IE in all aspects of their school life, including curricula and non-curricula activities. They also take the lead to engage the communities in advocacy for IE by pushing for the breaking down of barriers, minimization of stigma and sensitizing the communities on the advantages of IE. Overall, the school leaders acted as pillars and catalysts for the promotion of inclusive education.

In all cases, a personal passion and intrinsic motivation for inclusion played a major role. Getting IE to work in Cameroon requires serious commitment to go the extra mile making the motivation of the school leaders of the utmost importance. The environment in Cameroon is such that school leaders have to go above and beyond regular headteacher and teacher duties to make IE work. For example, the school leaders in the five schools all dedicated a considerable part of their time to sensitization campaigns and partnerships with external stakeholders. These sensitization campaigns aim to increase the level of awareness of IE in communities to address cultural barriers to and social stereotypes about the education of children with disabilities.

Also, the school leaders' knowledge of IE and best practices as well as exposure to IE rhetoric and efforts appeared instrumental in their realization of inclusion. This knowledge is crucial because you cannot implement what you do not know. Moreover, understanding governmental policies and the situation at hand greatly facilitates the implementation of IE. The five schools in this study all had the benefit of being able to

participate in capacity-building training on IE organized by CBC Health Services. This provides a support system to the schools participating in the earlier mentioned pilot-school program of CBC Health Services on IE. The research findings confirm the importance of this support system as school leaders in Cameroon typically lack any training in IE.

Overall, two core messages regarding school leadership emerge from the analysis: 1) promoting IE requires committed and capable school leadership and 2) the capacity strengthening of school leaders is essential in an environment where school leaders typically lack IE knowledge.

IE strategies

In addition to identifying the characteristics of school leaders as IE champions, this study also set out to identify the main and recurring strategies pursued by these leaders to promote IE in their respective schools. The following strategies appeared key: community outreach, external fundraising, capacity building of teachers, and promoting sign language.

Community outreach

In Cameroon, persons with disabilities are often stigmatized and discriminated against. Often they are viewed as helpless, unable, and as a burden upon society. As such, the school leaders realized that if they are to convince different audiences to embrace IE, they would also have to address the broader negative views on disability. Should these negative views remain unchallenged; people would not consider the school attendance of children with disabilities as a pressing problem in need of addressing. Therefore, all five schools seek to change mindsets and make people more accepting of children with disabilities in general and be more positive about their academic achievement potentials in particular. Their overall message is that disability is not inability, but diversity.



A hearing impaired teacher is teaching hearing impaired children to master sign language skills before they are moved to the mainstream classroom

In all five schools, continuous effort is put into sensitizing parents and neighboring communities. The school leadership ensures that community outreach stays on the agenda because cultural misconceptions are slow to deconstruct and there is always a tendency for people to return to them if constant education and re-education are not implemented. In addition to raising awareness, the organization of seminars and talks by school leaders within the school provides an enabling climate for both teachers and parents to update their knowledge and competencies on best IE practices. When parents learn skills appropriate for IE, they can give their children assistance with assignments and other school needs.



A disability inclusive class in session

The school leaders explained how their community outreach activities benefit from linking up with Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) activities in the area which are organized by CBCHS. In four of the five schools, school leaders make use of external community mobilizers such as CBR workers to identify children with disabilities in communities and bring them to school. These workers already have skills in the assessment and placement of children with disabilities and as such play an important role in promoting IE. This important strategy arises as a benefit of the partnership that the schools have with CBC Health services who manages a CBR program in the North-West region.

External fundraising

The school leaders in the study invest in maintaining relations with external stakeholders for fundraising purposes. Besides CBC Health services, the leaders have relations with various stakeholders, including benefactors abroad who are solicited to help sponsor children with disabilities. One key area for which

external funding has proven crucial has been scholarships. Private schools in Cameroon (which ask for school fees) are doing much better in terms of implementing IE compared to public schools (which offer free public education). It is very challenging, however, to convince parents to send their child with a disability to a private school, particularly if the family already lacks resources. Scholarships for children with a disability from impoverished families mitigate this constraint.

Besides scholarships, all the five schools in the study have used external resources (building upon the support of CBC Health Services) to build resource centers with the necessary learning equipment (such as projectors, computers, braille machines, hearing aids, etc.) to facilitate inclusion. Many of these resources are expensive and thus difficult for individual families to purchase for their children. The centers serve as common platforms for parents and teachers to have access to resources that allow for tailor-made support for children with disabilities.

Capacity building for teachers

Most teachers in Cameroon have not been trained in the field of IE. The teachers in all five schools have been able to acquire IE skills thanks to the capacity-building initiatives from CBC Health Services. School leaders, who have also benefited from IE training, are a driving force to ensure that besides IE resource persons both established teachers and newly-recruited teachers participate.

The training undertaken by teachers involves understanding what IE entails, the need for and how to carry out community outreach and sensitization, how to manage cases and how to exploit the resources in the center for the educational needs of learners with intellectual disabilities like autism, dyscalculia and dyslexia. Also, the trainings encourage teacher-pupil interaction in the use of sign language. Throughout the schooling period, the school leaders supervise the implementation of what is discussed during the IE training in all aspects of their school life, including curricula and non-curricula activities.

Promoting sign language

For the inclusion of children with hearing impairments, teachers require a certain mastery of sign language. In four of the schools, sign language was an important part of the strategy for promoting IE. Since these schools espouse the principle of cooperative teaching, teachers who master sign language are available to assist colleagues who are new in the schools and who still need time to master sign language interpretation.

In two of the five schools with a greater population of children with hearing impairment, the leadership had made the teaching of sign language every Friday compulsory for all pupils and teachers. This practice proved beneficial to close the communication gap between teachers and children with a hearing impairment, and between children with and without impairment in general. Some school leaders have made the teaching and learning of sign language compulsory in their schools for all teachers and pupils. In one of the schools, the school adopted the policy of providing free training in sign language for parents of pupils with hearing impairment to enable them to be able to follow up and supervise the learning of their pupils at home after school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In examining five 'positive deviant' schools in the field of IE, this study established the importance of committed and capable school leadership. Implementing IE in a country like Cameroon is very challenging and requires time, energy, and resources. This is not possible without the strong dedication and extra effort, collaboration and expertise of headteachers and teachers. These teachers promote best practices for IE like being sensitive to the learning needs of children, carrying out sensitization campaigns, and collaborating with CBR workers to ensure the placement of children with disabilities in schools.

The findings also illustrate that in the Cameroonian environment, committed and capable school leadership by itself is not enough. As mentioned, the identified strategies to promote IE all draw upon some kind of external support (knowledge, trainings or funds). For the schools in this study, the support of CBC Health Services was particularly important.

Without this external support, it seems unlikely that the school leaders in the IE unfriendly environment of Cameroon would have achieved the same levels of success. Yet without the unrelenting efforts of the school leadership, it is equally unlikely that the external effort would have blossomed to the same extent. Therefore, the overall conclusion is that IE in Cameroon requires strong leadership as well as external support. Or put differently: the school leadership was central to ensuring that the external support provided resulted in IE successes.

The take-away message for decision-makers is that IE initiatives should at the very least focus on inspiring school leaders about inclusion whilst strengthening their IE capacity. More concretely, such initiatives may consider prioritizing the allocation of scarce resources to schools with already committed leaders, whilst making sure that the leadership has the capacity and support necessary to overcome the many obstacles towards inclusion.



Children with and without disabilities enjoying learning together in a mainstream class

Editors

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For further reading

Banlanjo (2022) Learning from Successful School Leaders: Inclusive Education in Primary Schools in Cameroon. Research study, University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Notes

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