

Inclusive education for the Visually Impaired Persons

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Introduction and background information

Demographics

Swaziland is known to be among the smallest countries divided into four regions and 4 districts. According to 1997 country's census there about 1000000 total populations. The [W.H.O.] statistics suggest that in general 0.7-1 % of any country's population is Visually Impaired. However, the assumption in the 1997 census estimated that there are about 3 % of the total population are Persons with Disabilities [over 30,000 People]. Again the clinical statistics estimate that there are 10000 Visually Impaired Persons. This further statistics in the country suggest that there are over 900 school going age students who are remaining in their homes due the fact that there is only one Integrated School with a Resource Centre for the Blind in Swaziland. This school can only admit not more than 15 Pupils in a year.

The missionary factor

It was not until the late 1950s to early 1980s that the Missionaries started introducing schools Persons with Disabilities, and this gave persons with disability an opportunity of going to school. However, Many Parents of Persons with Disabilities continued to hide their Disabled Children in their homes because they thought that having a child a child with disability was bad omen in the family or a curse. Indeed many parents could not visualize the outcome of sending a Disabled Child to school. For some parents sending such children to school was a waste of money, and consequently some of these children were hidden to prevent them from coming into contact with educational authorities, medical personnel and other professionals. This shift in paradigm-hiding the children were of some concern to service providers, because unlike the earlier times schools were now available.

The extremes in this aspect were that of parents who in transition used the Mission Boarding Schools as a dumping site for the Disabled Children. Much as this Missionaries' agenda was a rescue to the Disabled Children when they were integrated

in School, but it also created the social exclusion of the Disabled Children. Some Parents would take their Children to the Mission Schools once and for all for life and some would just be seen in the beginning of the year until the last day of the third term in December. Of course even this extreme made the Child to feel isolated from the family which would some times create a serious gap between the non Disabled Children and the Disabled Child.

The idea of special Schools has been jeopardized by the limited budgets and phasing out of donor funding from the Mission Schools. As a result, there were thousands and thousands of Disabled Children in Africa in particular who could not access education because they were always referred to the special Schools which were either too far to reach or unaffordable to the poor families. Therefore, it has gradually become clear that special schools and integrated schools for the Disabled are not the ultimate solution for the education of the Disabled Persons; instead the world is shifting to advocate for the mainstreaming in all spheres of life. It is for that reason that inclusive education has become the ideal model of education globally. However it is worth noting that it will take time to be operational especially in the developing countries like Swaziland in particular.

Educational difficulties and minimal government commitment

The education of Persons with Disabilities is still inadequate and it has always been attached to certain schools instead of addressing the education model in a holistic approach. As a result, the education of Persons with disabilities in Swaziland still leaves a lot to be desired.

Models of education and the right to be included

There are basically three ways of educating disabled children, special schools, integration, and inclusive education.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

These are the schools specially designed for the specific group of Children with Disabilities from primary to secondary education. But Students with different disabilities can school together within the same school but not the non Disabled Students.

Special schools are still, in many cases, the only available way of educating and training VI children. Support of special schools should be continued, but only if the services delivered by a particular school. Special schools should be encouraged to, where possible, become involved in integrated education.

Inclusion is not a simple matter, and it is definitely not only about placing a blind child in a classroom with sighted peers. For some, inclusion is only a philosophy, believing that it is better for a child to be in a “normal” environment than being “excluded from society” in a special school, particularly because most of our schools are residential.

This is still a hotly debated issue that will not be pursued in this paper. It is perhaps fair to say, considering some people circumstances, that a special school is the best place for a child to LEARN, but that an inclusive school is the best place to BE. However, such statements are often articulated by those who are protective of the Disabled Learner than reviewing the practical outcry for education for all.

In actual fact, one can never dispute the fact that there are Children with severe disabilities who still need the basic support for effective learning such as Deaf and Blind, Multi-Disabilities etc. It is therefore not always useful to not do away with Special Schools. One Teacher for the Blind in South Africa known as Ben Pizer stated that there are many more built Special Schools even in Europe and America where it could have been much more easier to operational inclusive concept in full measure without Special Schools. But there is a need for comprehensive justification for any situation preferably at the best interest of the Learner.

Integrated Schools

Another model of education is the integration approach. There are already many integration programmers in Africa and these can take various forms. In some countries they are called resource centres and in others special units. These usually consist of a resource room, attached to an ordinary school, where new students are taught the basic requirements for integration, namely, Skills of Daily Living, Orientation and Mobility and Braille. When they reach the required level of proficiency they attend class with their sighted peers on an occasional or permanent basis. The research teacher continues to support students wherever it is needed.

Some schools also have special classes for disabled children.

Every effort should be made to improve and extend existing integration programs and new programs should be started where it is possible. Integration is the immediate answer to the problem of getting more children to attend school.

Inclusive Schools

These are ordinary schools which eventually admit one or handful of Students with Disabilities to be part of the school. It becomes the responsibility of the school to ensure the Students with Disabilities get the relevant material to learn. However, it does not mean it is just the burden of the Head Teacher to fix things for the Student. The Ministry of Education should pay a vital role in spearheading such initiatives in collaboration with Service Providers and NGOs as well as the Private Sector. Inclusive must be seen in broad terms first. And this broad view is the inclusion of disabled people in society at large and the respective communities from which they come. We all know that disabled people are discriminated against in many ways and that they are often marginalized to

the point where they do not even enjoy the most basic human rights. In some cultures they are even despised and shunned. Inclusion, in its very essence, requires the acceptance of people with disabilities in every sphere of life.

Politicians and government ministries must include the rights and needs of people with disabilities in their very thinking and in their planning. And this should be manifested in the provision of school facilities, properly trained teachers and appropriate teaching materials.

Looking at it more narrowly, and in particular to education, the state, who is ultimately responsible for education, should ensure that every child has access to a school near his home, and that every school be open to all children. Inclusion is not an event, it a process and we have to use every opportunity to advance this process. The world-wide drive towards inclusive education does not support the popularly held notion that special schools should be condemned.

The Salamanca Principle and Frame work states that:

- *Every person with a disability has a right to express their Wishes with regard to their education, as far as this can be Ascertained. Parents have an inherent right to be consulted on The form of education best suited to the needs, circumstances and aspirations of their children.*

Within the same document it is established that a case is made for inclusive education, as an alternative form of education as the most effective system of education

- *Within inclusive schools, children with special educational Needs should receive whatever extra support they may require to ensure their effective education. Inclusive schooling is the most effective means for building solidarity between childrenwith special needs and their peers.*

Interestingly however, the document states that schools or units within inclusive Schools - may continue to provide the most suitable education for the relatively small number of children with disabilities who cannot be adequately served in regular classrooms or schools and that Investment in existing special schools should be geared to their new and expanded role of providing professional support to Regular schools in meeting special educational needs.

From such an analysis it would seem obvious to me that the Salamanca statement did not suggest abolishing of special school, but rather made a case for strengthening them to meet specific requirement of children ho are unlikely to benefit from an inclusive context

Rights debate and inherent institutional practices

Even though there are very different models of educating children with disabilities, the concept of inclusive education has received considerable attention universally because of its human rights orientation. Interestingly, however, many governments intend to be very unwilling to understand that education within an inclusive setting is a human right issue. Such attitude has led to massive discrimination against the visually impaired and other individuals with disability within the society and the schools they attend.

To illustrate the difficulties persons with disabilities go through I would cite a number of case experiences to illuminate the point

The problem statement

In spite of all the effort and declarations by the United Nations' as well as educational models, the education of the Blind in has remained undeveloped in response to the need.

The Ministry of Education is having very little interest in developing the education of Persons with Visually Impaired Persons in Swaziland. This is evident in the struggling of the only Resource Centre for the Blind in Swaziland ever since its establishment in 1969 to date. The Government is currently supporting the education of other groups of disability except for the Visually Impaired Persons.

Also, there will be a need of specialist for technical support in the school as well as the Braille material for effective learning. It seems Government admired the good work initiated by the Missionaries and fails to prioritise this education for intervention in the case of the Dona phasing out.

The effects are that, ever since the establishment of the Resource Centre for the Blind, there had been less than 100 Students with Visually Impairment who had completed their high school education. As for 2005 educational year, there are less than 30 Pupils at Saint Joseph's Resource Centre for the Blind. Amongst the product of this Centre, there are less than even 2 Visually Impaired Persons who had been in a position to access the tertiary training within the local Institutions. As a result, there are only 4 Blind people who are employed in the country. This implies that all the other Visually Impaired Persons are forced to depend on relatives and families for survival.

Concerns

For how long should the Blind and Low Vision Children continue to be placed in Resource Centre for the Blind?

- Is there no alternative model of ensuring that Visually Impaired Persons have access Braille literacy and pursue their education?

Case analyses

Over the years, The Resource Centre for the Blind in Swaziland has produced a handful of Students. It may be interesting to learn the three classic cases of Visually Impaired leaders in the country, have gone to the same integrated school just like any Blind Students. In all of these cases access to tertiary education has been problematic and opportunities for work unavailable. But the endless effort of pleading with the training Institution would not have paid if they had not persisted. In one instance, the school of interest had no Brail facilities, and consequently the school was unwilling to accept a Visually Impaired Person.

But it took a visionary Dean of Students and Principal to consider an option to resolve the problem. When eventually an opportunity was offered, there were specific terms of reference agreed on between the Institution and the Learner as a basis for continuous attendance, and one such agreement was the enrolment of the spouse of the student, who would facilitate note taking and assignments. Every after class the couple spent the whole afternoon and night dictating notes from print to Braille. This process lasted the whole first 3 academic years before Save the Children Swaziland came in to support the student through the purchase of Hi Tech Adaptive computer with a package of a speech synthesizer and Brail software. Surely it made all the difference. It is interesting that the individual being referred to successfully graduated with a B.A. degree in Theology in 2002. I am happy to be a living example of such experiences.

In another case, there had been a very brilliant fellow from the same Integrated School. He completed his high school education a year before the above identified Student. The Organization of the Visually Impaired in Swaziland in collaboration with the Resource Centre for the Blind negotiated with almost all the Tertiary Institutions especially the only one University of Swaziland to admit him. It dismally failed. The excuse had always been the lack of Brail facilities for the Learner. This had not just been an over one year negotiations. But all had been in vain. Maybe one would sound bias to assume that it was because even the candidate was not necessarily in a position to take it as an individual desperate matter to pay the price for his education. At some point the University admitted him to do Distant Education by post after a long struggle for the Association. This could not work for him since it would have been difficult for the Learner to access information at home

Thirdly, there had been a number of Visually Impaired Students who had been referred to the only Resource Centre for the Blind in Swaziland in interest of using Braille. Some of these students were not necessarily Blind, but they had low vision enough for the to use print. They eventually made their way out of the Resource Centre joining the ordinary schools and using print. Many times these Students had been highly opposed by the professionals to be straining their eyes. They would channel them to depend on Braille. But most of those Students have succeeded to tertiary training as opposed to the

Braille users who had been dismally disadvantaged for the training and employment in Swaziland so far.

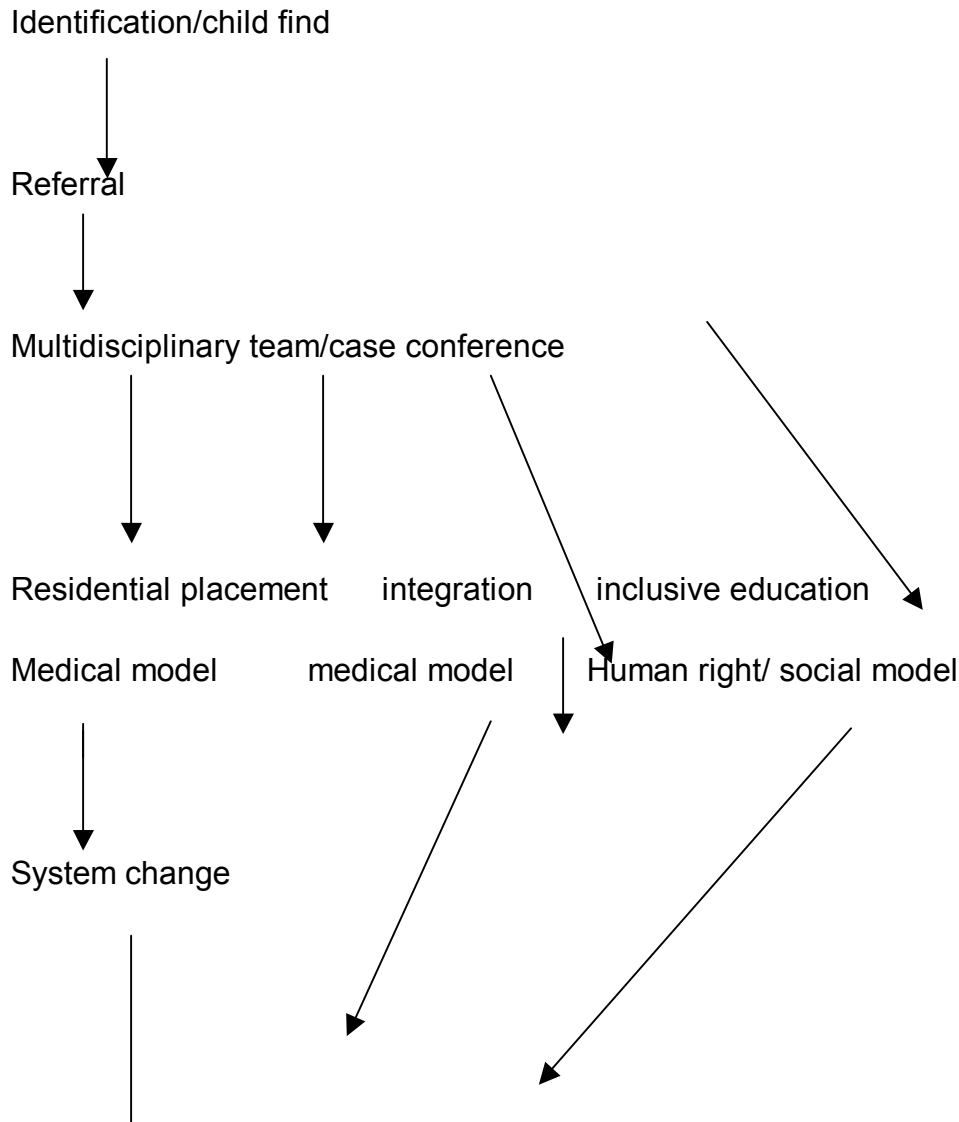
What should be the way forward?

One can never deny the fact that education in general is expensive. This does not in anyway exclude the education of the Learner with special needs. It is equally important to consider the expected resources in order to have a true picture of the amount of task in this regard. However, the exposure to such requirements should never be made a stumbling block to shun the inclusive concept. Botwe argues that “The education of Persons with Disabilities must be address based on outcome of the individual Learner and as whole group approach.” This implies that the Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and Service Providers should continue advocating for full supplying of necessary equipments for Learners with Disabilities for them to have maximum effort educationally. But again, the individuals who are able to persuade the normal system and include themselves in an ordinary Institution should not be stopped for the sake of the ideal situation. But as long as they can be willing to be adventurers.

Moreover, for effectiveness of inclusive education in such developing countries, there is an agent need to introduce the full concept of inclusive education to all Teacher Training Institutions. A comprehensive model is to be operational by all people concerned not just by the Professionals who are said to be the custodians of the Special Education System. Eventually, there must be a resource Centre for Special Education to supply with relevant materials to any school with a Disable Child who can afford the inclusive education. Off course this will mean government having a special allocation of fund to the Special education Unit to incorporate the ready Students into the mainstream. It is worth noting that this does not discredit Special Schools. They should be equally supported as well. Such Special school helps to remedy the situation of those Disabled Students who can not easily fit into the main stream school without the regular support.

Proposed model of education

Over the last century the education of Persons with Disabilities was determined by the medical models which had always been need based. After a Child had been identified to be having a certain disability, the Professionals would then direct the parents to a special school or an integrated school. But if we are to vigorously challenge and adapt to the social approach of inclusive education, it would be ideal to appeal to the human rights approach as suggested below. The operation of this model can function just like the National Council such as Sports Council, Youth Council. It can be a vehicle for government to support the Inclusive Education in its autonomy.



Inclusive education for all

However, this model challenge that the early identification of a child to do the assessment basing on the innovative thinking than just assuming he/she might need a special school. It is then that the Child can be referred to the medical Professionals for informed assessment for suitable education forms of education as alluded above. Thereafter, a case conference composed of all interested stakeholders reviewing and advising the parents about the relevant placement of the Child for schooling. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the line Ministry for Disabilities in Swaziland [Ministry of Health and Social Welfare] to make sure the support system is adequate.

It will surely be easy for the Learner make an informed and secured choice for schooling either in special school, integrated school and inclusive education. However, there will be a need for the NGOs, Private Sector and Government to join hands in the accomplishment of the education of Persons with Disabilities. Those are the positive means to promote the inclusive education in its essence.

Anticipated outcome

If the education system of the developing country can just pay special attention to the actual education of Learners with special needs such as the Multi-Disabilities, Physically Disabled, Hearing Impaired, Mentally Challenged and the Visually Impaired Student, the country will soon enjoy the benefits. There can be major improvement in the lives of individual Learner in terms of academic excellence even to the Pupil as they shall be having living models for whatever ceria they may intend to pursue.

Also, this can give an opportunity to most under privilege Learners to advance their course to the highest level of education in any field of their choice without many obstacles. As a mater of fact, it is amazing to learn that most countries in the SADC region have gone an extra mile in upgrading the education of the Disabled People let alone the rest of Africa Continent. One can even sight Lesotho who is said to be Moro less in the same economic status with Swaziland. But so far the University of Rome in Lesotho had successfully produced more that 5 Lawyers within the last 20 years. One of them is currently the Minister for Justice Law and Constitution despite the fact that he is totally blind. In the same manner, Lesotho had produced several Professional Teachers with Visually Impairment and other professions.

Indeed it cost a lot of money to set up an education system that in some way contribute meaningfully to the general Citizens of any country, but it is worthwhile. When there is a rapid increase in the number of educated among Persons, it opens more opportunities to skillful society. As a result, it becomes so easy to even for them to access employment. When Persons with Disabilities are employed, they do not just maintain themselves. But they as well regain their human dignity within the family ad they are eligible for authority. Moreover, they are not just dependent to Government and family members who are tax's payer. But the Government end up increasing her revenue through their contribution to the national taxation role.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that the has been significant number of the Swazi Citizens who still need an agent attention in terms of being prioritized for education. Despite the endless effort exerted by the Roman Catholic Mission to champion the provision of the education for the Blind, but the poor commitment of Government to advance this course has caused a serious sad back in the development of the Blind.

The 3 models of schools [special and Integrated schools] accessed by the other Students with Disabilities had not made a serious impact to the Visually Impaired Learners. This had been demonstrated by the problems facing these Students when trying to further their studies. But if the Swazi Government, Service Providers, NGOs and the DPOs as well as the Private Sector can join hands and effectively advance the inclusive concept, it would be ideal to appeal to the proposed model above. If the education of the Disabled can be viewed as a social right that just a need based approach.