



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GHANA: WHAT ARE THE LEVERS FOR CHANGE?

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of inclusive education necessitates rigorous changes in the school system for it to be effective. In order to respond to the challenge, countries are required to develop structures that make it possible for schools to adapt curricula and pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of all children, including those with special educational needs. Such changes must be ecosystemic, requiring the involvement of all stakeholders, including schools, the home and community, and voluntary organisations. What are the changes that need to be made to effectively translate theory into practice to celebrate the outcomes of inclusivity? On the basis of the experience of the United Kingdom, this paper explores certain levers that have to be critically considered to make inclusive education a reality in Ghana.

Keywords: inclusive education, special educational needs, regular schools

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INTRODUCTION

The policy guiding the principle and practice of inclusion was first adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, where delegates, representing 92 governments and 25 international organisations, met in Salamanca, Spain, in June 1994, under the sponsorship of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to deliberate on and sign a Framework for Action on Special Needs Education and a statement on the rights of the child. Now known as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the statement has drawn global attention to access and quality in the delivery of special needs education.

The Statement was later emphasised at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. The forum committed itself to various goals, including expanding and improving early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. This, of course, included children with disabilities and special educational needs. The Dakar Framework for Action was attended by 1 100 participants. The forum reaffirmed its commitment to achieving education for all by the year 2015. In order to achieve the goals set, the forum entrusted UNESCO with the overall responsibility for coordinating all international players and sustaining the global momentum, supported by the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, proclaiming participation and equality for all (http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/wef_2000/).

The Salamanca Statement recommended that governments should, as a matter of urgency, do the following:

- Give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improving education services so that all children could be included, regardless of difficulties.
- Adopt, as a matter of law or policy, the principle of inclusive education and enrol all children in ordinary schools, unless there were compelling reasons for doing otherwise.
- Ensure that organisations of disabled people, along with parents and community bodies, are involved in planning and decision-making.
- Put greater effort into pre-school strategies, as well as the vocational aspects of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994:ix).

Most importantly, paragraph 2 of the Salamanca Statement spelt out the following major provisions as key issues in inclusion:

- Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning.
- Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs.
- Education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs.
- Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools that should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy that is capable of meeting these needs.
- Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

According to this statement, all children, including those with special educational needs, were to be educated in an ordinary school, where equal opportunities and access were to be guaranteed.

THE MEANING OF INCLUSION

The principle of inclusion is novel and laudable in developing the potential of persons with disabilities. However, there is no substantive definition for inclusive education (Pearson, 2005, Beveridge, 1999), nor is there any consistent government definition of inclusion, which makes the practice of inclusion difficult (Sheehy, Rix, Nind & Simmons, 2004). It was to overcome this difficulty that Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2004) and Mitchell (2005) proposed principal features to facilitate understanding. Ainscow et al. (2004) proposed the following:

- Inclusion is a process.
- Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.
- Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students.
- Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement.



The principal features cited by Mitchell (2005) are the following:

- Entitlement to full membership in regular, age-appropriate classes in neighbourhood schools.
- Access to appropriate aids and support services, as well as individualised programmes with appropriately differentiated curriculum and assessment practices.

These features mean that inclusive education is developmental in nature and seeks for ways to make children with special educational needs participate actively in regular/ordinary/mainstream education. It is about “engendering a sense of community and belonging, and encouraging mainstream and special schools, and others, to come together to support each other and pupils with special educational needs” (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). It is about valuing diversity and individual differences, and assuring equality and access. It was in the light of this argument that Deiner (2005) pointed out that successful inclusion involves “placing children in an education setting that provides the support that meets children’s emotional, social and educational needs”. Inclusion may, therefore, be regarded as the process through which all children, including those with special educational needs, receive their education in the mainstream with structures in place to ensure participation and progress. These structures include collaboration with support personnel, professionals and parents (Kathryn, Daniel, Angelia & Norah, 2007, Department for Education and Skills, 2001). Collaboration occurs when people work together towards a common goal (Isichei, 2007) and is necessary. As Gyimah, Sugden and Pearson (2008) succinctly argue, it can reduce or eliminate the stress teachers experience in meeting the needs of children with disabilities and special educational needs in inclusive settings.

CHALLENGES TO INCLUSION

Inclusive education has not been without challenges. Lewis (2000) questioned what rationale is “behind getting same-aged groups of students to learn where the real achievements of the less able will never be recognised as they will always be below the artificial average of their peers and where their final efforts are bound to be degraded in the common exam system?” Lewis’s (2000) fear is about the possibility of including persons with disabilities and not catering for their needs. The Council for Exceptional Children (1996) in the USA noted how challenging it becomes if time and resource allocations are poor. If time is efficiently managed, those who have to

participate in the delivery of service for the child with special educational needs can do so reasonably easily. Resource availability can allow for curriculum access. The Audit Report (2002) expressed concerns about the possibility of children with special educational needs having a poor time as a result of schools not making a sustained investment in staff and school facilities in order to make inclusion work. It will therefore mean that for children with special educational needs to fully participate in the regular curriculum and achieve academic and social success, educational systems will have to make provision for appropriate aids and support services, with appropriately differentiated curriculum and assessment practices (UNESCO, 1994).

GHANA’S EXPERIENCE WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Ghana’s attempt to develop the potential of all children in the educational system, including those with special educational needs, dates back to the early 1960s soon after the attainment of independence (Okyerere & Adams, 2003). The Education Act of 1961 provided for free and compulsory education for all children. The country was among the first countries to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Ministry of Education’s Strategic Plan for Inclusion manifests the country’s objective to fully implement inclusive education by 2015 by providing equitable educational opportunities. It aims to do this by integrating all children with non-severe special educational needs into mainstream schools and fully enrolling hard-to-reach and out-of-school children by 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2003). The Ministry of Education’s Education Strategic Plan has now been revised to cover the period 2010–2020 (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The government has, through the promulgation of Act 2006, Act 715, made provision for the education of children with special educational needs. For instance, article 20(1) stresses that “a person responsible for admission into a school or other institution of learning shall not refuse to give admission to a person with a disability on account of the disability unless the person with a disability has been assessed by the ministry responsible for education in collaboration with the ministries responsible for health and social welfare to be a person who clearly requires to be in a special school for children or persons with disabilities”. In terms of this, all schools are obliged to enrol children with disabilities, unless otherwise specified (UNESCO, 1994).

The National Disability Council was formed and inaugurated to oversee the implementation of provisions for the disabled. There is a National Assessment

and Resources Centre for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Achimota, Accra, as well as Speech and Hearing Services at the University of Education, Winneba, and units in major hospitals for the assessment of vision and hearing, for example, Korle-Bu Teaching and Okomfo Anokye hospitals in Accra and Kumasi, respectively.

In order to realise the vision of inclusion, the country, under the direction of the Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education, has embarked on pilot projects. Since 2003, the Special Education Division has targeted a number of regions in the country to pilot inclusive education programmes. The following are some of the regions and districts that have been targeted:

Greater Accra:

- Accra Metro (Tudu) (four schools)
- Dangbe East (Ada-Foah) (three schools)
- Ga West (Amasaman) (three schools)

Central Region:

- Cape Coast Metropolis (four schools)
- Ewutu/Afutu/Senya (Winneba) (four schools)
- Agona Swedru (three schools)

Eastern Region:

- New Juabeng (four schools)
- Birim South (Akim Oda) (four schools)
- Yilo Krobo (Somanya) (three schools)
- Manya Krobo (Odumase) (three schools)

GHANA'S CHALLENGE REGARDING INCLUSION

In spite of the attempts and provisions, Gyimah, Sugden and Pearson (2009), Akyeampong (2003), Avoke (2001), and Avoke and Hayford (2000) observe that the country is faced with a number of challenges in practising inclusive education.

These include the following:

- Insufficient health and paramedical personnel, for example, neurologists, audiologists, and speech and language therapists.

- Lack of comprehensive and multidisciplinary assessment practices.
- Seemingly negative social attitudes.
- Poor parental involvement and community participation.
- Inadequate central government and district assembly funding. It is common knowledge that the 2% District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF), which is meant to develop the capacities of persons with disabilities, is not made available to the disabled.
- Poor teacher competency in adapting the physical environment and curriculum to meet the needs of the disabled in educational settings.
- Inaccessible buildings that make it impossible for those using wheelchairs to gain access to facilities.
- The large class sizes and high pupil-teacher ratio (PTR). In some classrooms, especially in the urban school environment, class sizes range between 50 and 70 or more. This makes it difficult for teachers to give individualised attention to those likely to underachieve academically.

LEVERS FOR CHANGE TO IMPROVE PRACTICE

Given that Ghana's attempt to implement inclusive education is fraught with certain challenges, certain levers to improve practice are worth considering. Senge (1990) regards levers as "actions that can be taken in order to change the behaviour of an organisation and those individuals within it". Measures need to be taken to help the country realise the vision, and improve the practice and expand the frontiers of inclusive education. Although a growing number of countries have legislation on inclusive education (Curcic, 2009) that can be considered, the authors are of the belief that Ghana can, in particular, take cues from some of the measures the United Kingdom has adopted to enhance inclusive practice (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). The United Kingdom's Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and Toolkit (2001) gives some guidance to local educational authorities, health and social services as to how children with special educational needs can be included in regular or ordinary settings.

LESSONS FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM

In practising inclusive education, the United Kingdom Government's Green Paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) addressed issues related to the following:

- Policies for excellence. In terms of the document "every child matters" (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and all children are to be valued, irrespective of their location.
- Working with parents.
- Planning, among others, to make provision for special educational needs.

In terms of this green paper, every step had to be taken to ensure that the potential of every child is harnessed in order to make them contributing and independent members of society. Parents are recognised as key stakeholders who have to play an active and valued role in their children's education. They are encouraged to make their views known about how they want their children to be educated. In planning to make provision for special educational needs, parents are to be fully involved in the school-based response for their child and to understand the purpose of any intervention or programme of action.

Other measures to be taken include the following:

- Requiring all children to be registered on the roll of the mainstream school supported as appropriate by specialist provision.
- Targeting specific grants towards measures that will enhance mainstream schools' ability to include pupils with special educational needs. Grants could be earmarked for disability awareness training and special educational needs, as well as the specific training of teachers and others in mainstream schools.
- Seeking ways to celebrate the success of those schools that improve their ability to provide for a wide range of special needs.
- Giving some priority to capital support where possible to planned school reorganisation that would enhance provisions for special educational needs in mainstream schools (Department for Education and Skills, 1997).

The Government Strategy for Special Educational Needs (2004) promoted the idea of partnerships. Target participants were the local authorities, partnerships between schools, partnerships with health and social services, and partnerships with voluntary organisations.

In order to crystallise the vision, the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and Toolkit, which came into effect in January 2002 (Department for Education and Skills, 2001), envisaged specific roles for local educational authorities. Local educational authorities were to ensure that parents have access to essential services

that help them meet the needs of their children. They were to welcome their involvement and value the contributions they make to their children's development. They were also to ensure that information was available in a language parents can understand.

Best practices should be shared and spread among schools. In other words, practices that facilitate the inclusion of children with special educational needs should be shared. In this way, schools could learn from one another.

The role health and social services could play in the partnership was specified. For example, social services were required to liaise with the home to identify social factors that might make it impossible for the child to be fully included. Similarly, health personnel were to ensure that up-to-date medical and health records of the child were kept to facilitate service delivery.

Voluntary organisations had roles to play in assisting parents to obtain information. They could talk to parents and explain the types of services that were available. They could share the experiences of best practice and encourage schools and local educational authorities to adopt them. Although the documents did not explicitly define step by step how inclusive education should be practised, at least they set out certain structures that were worth considering.

WHAT GHANA CAN LEARN: WHAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED?

In Ghana's bid to implement inclusive education, there is a need to forge stronger cooperation between special education and mainstream education (Fletcher-Campbell, 1994). Mainstream education teachers can receive much help from special educational needs teachers when there is such cooperation. For example, it will be possible for special educational needs teachers to team up with their counterparts in mainstream education to successfully accommodate children with special educational needs in the regular classroom. Most importantly, there can be better understanding of issues pertaining to services for children with special educational needs. Barriers that may impede achievement can be collectively identified and removed.

Central government, metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies should make funding available to schools for logistical and support services. Schools need to

be adequately resourced if they can be successful in accommodating the needs of different ranges of children. Money is needed to purchase equipment such as Braille machines for visually impaired children and hearing aids for children with hearing impairments, and to engage the services of professionals. Without sufficient funding, access to the curriculum can be difficult for certain categories of children with special educational needs and – most importantly – for training resource persons to manage these children.

Furthermore, teachers should be trained on principles and methodologies to accommodate the needs of all children, including those with special educational needs. There may not be the need to have different curricula for different ranges of children, but some curricular adaptations are necessary if children with special educational needs are to have access to the regular school curriculum.

There is a need for the country to encourage the design and/or use of appropriate school curricula. If the school curriculum is flexible and friendly to the needs of all children, it facilitates adaptation. This suggests that the Curriculum Research and Development Division of the Ghana Education Service should include more information on special educational needs in the curriculum of schools and colleges of education. When prospective teachers are well informed, they will know the measures to adopt to accommodate persons with disabilities.

There is a need to train and involve more health personnel (including audiologists, and speech and language therapists), social workers, psychologists and counsellors to assist in meeting the needs of different ranges of children in regular schools. Health personnel can assess the health status of children, and also provide information to teachers on best practices. Social workers can liaise with the home, and support parents and professionals in service provision for children. Each of these professionals should be assigned specific roles or duties to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Efforts should be made to encourage active parental involvement. Parents are key stakeholders and their involvement cannot be taken for granted. Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua and Norah (2007) suggest that “productive collaboration with parents” should be pursued. If parents are actively involved in the education of their children, the children “achieve more, stay in school longer and engage in school more completely” (Ferguson, 2008).

The assessment practices in the country should be seriously examined to allow for holistic assessment. The present situation, where individual assessors assess and recommend placement, is not suitable to meet the needs of children with special educational needs. The team approach, which involves professionals in health, social services and education (Gyimah, Sugden & Pearson, 2009) can be more helpful as it will reveal hidden difficulties.

Finally, the physical environment or architecture in most schools should be improved to facilitate access for people with handicaps (Pivic, McComas & LaFlamme, 2002).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that a great deal of preparation, including a strong political will and community participation, is needed to successfully practise inclusive education. Inclusion draws much on the sharing of experiences for it is developmental in nature. While we recognise that the United Kingdom does not yet have all the answers, its legislation on the practice of inclusion can be studied and – where necessary – adapted to improve the education of children with special educational needs and enhance practice.



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