School Leadership: It's influence on the Improvement of Access and Quality Education for Students with Disabilities in Junior Secondary Schools in Botswana

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Abstract

Since the inception of Education for All countries worldwide were mandated to develop Millennium Development Goals. One of the goals is to provide universal education by 2015 as is equitably provided to all citizens. This pressurised the educational leaders to exercise their critical role of making education accessible, relevant and high quality. The study investigated the influence of school leadership on the improvement of access and quality education for students with disabilities in Botswana junior secondary schools. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to one hundred and sixty-two in-service student teachers in the University of Botswana. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants. Data were analysed using frequency tables and percentages. The research has revealed teachers negativity towards integrating students with disabilities in their classes. Basing on the research findings the study recommends that schools should work tirelessly to enhance access and quality education for students with disability.

Key words: Inclusive education, Students disabilities, Education policies

Introduction

After the inception of *Education for All* proclamation, countries around the globe developed Millennium Development Goals. One of their mandates is to provide universal basic education by 2015. To achieve this, changes in education systems took place which affected the teaching and learning in schools. New education policies were introduced which changed the roles of schools in their provision of education. The roles are geared towards developing students as good citizens, and their growth into ethically responsible members of society, and the promotion of learning and equality in society (Sala, 2003). According to Boit, Njoki and Chang'ach quoted in Kimani, Kara and Njagi (2013), the purpose of education is to equip the citizenry to reshape their society and eliminate inequality. This is based on the assumption that education helps the individual develop his capabilities, attitudes and behaviour that is acceptable by the society (Rovaniemi, 2006).

It is mandatory that all students irrespective of capability should have access to quality education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26(1) states that everyone has a right for education. The benefits of having quality education are that education is able to adapt to the changing needs of the country as the world around us changes; and spearhead the development of human resource and the country's economy. Research has indicated that quality education has benefited public health, demography, economy, human rights, governance and political stability through increasing people understanding (OECD, 2001).

The Botswana education system has taken great strides in the welfare of students with disabilities (Dart, 2007). This is evidenced by erecting special schools, reviewing the national curriculum to cater for the disabled and special training for teachers to handle children with abnormality; and the policy of inclusive education is among the top priorities in the provision of education for all. Students who passed a certain criteria to determine the disability are sent to these special schools or centres. Those who are physically or mentally impaired, but do not fall within the set impairment range are left to be integrated in the mainstream education.

These disabled students are exposed to the same conditions, same infrastructure, same curriculum and write the same examination together with the normal students. Under such conditions do we expect the physically and mentally challenged students to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for their life-long learning? Can educators and facilitators proudly claim that the physically and mentally disadvantaged students in mainstream schools receive quality education? The focus of this article is to investigate how the school leadership can have impact on improving access and quality education for students with disability in the mainstream.

Statement of the problem

Botswana education system has introduced two main policies that protect the interest of people with disability. The Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 and the National Policy on the rights of people with disability of 1996 advocate for access and quality education for all citizens including those with disability. Despite the Ministry of Education and Skills Development efforts to make education accessible to all including the physically and mentally challenged students, the implementation of the above policies seems to be a nightmare. There is evidence of some students with disability who are not accessing education (Raditloaneng, 2011). If this tendency of poor implementation of government policies persist it will frustrates the ideals of ensuring that all citizens of Botswana including those with special needs to have equality of educational opportunity as envisioned in RNPE of 1994 and the National Vision 2016. It is against this background that a study on the school leadership capability to influence access and quality education for students with disability in ordinary schools was conducted.

The research questions

The following research questions guided the study.

  a) What influence does school leadership have on access and quality education for students with disability?
  b) What are the in-service teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the integration and inclusion of students with disability in mainstream schools?
  c) What strategies can school leadership implement to enhance access and quality education for students with disability?

Literature review

For the past decades the provision of quality education for all children was debated worldwide. This was triggered by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26(1) and United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2000) proclaiming that every child has a right for quality education and countries have to provide high quality education for their children. This became a challenge to a number of countries as it meant the existing education policies had to change to align to the *Education for All* proclamation. The schools as centres of learning are mandated to effect the teaching and learning of children irrespective of socio-economic status, colour, gender, race and physically or mentally impaired. The assumption is that school leaders should be held accountable if schools fail to provide life-long skills to students who are enrolled in their institutions. The current trend is that institutions should be learning organisations. As learning institutions teachers are expected to develop learners instead of teaching them. Teachers are also expected to help their pupils to become independent (learning to learn), provide students with motivation and interest for life-long learning and urge them to become autonomous learners (Bubblews, 2013).

The success of any school undoubtedly depends on the type of leadership that the school has. It is an open secret that the current school leaders perform multiple functions as compared the past leaders. They perform managerial, instructional, curriculum, counsellor, arbitrator and in some cases advisory roles in the community. Sala (2003) suggests that school leaders must possess a wide variety of managerial and leadership skills to be successful in academic environments. Research has revealed the link between quality leadership and high quality education. Odewunmi quoted in Yusuf (2012) and DfEE (1999d) believe that no schools can be greater than their leaders and that a school is as good as its leadership. Emerson & Goddard (1993) asserted that there is a strong link between the quality of a school and the quality of its leadership.

By virtue of their position the School Heads are overseers of all activities taking place in a school and answerable to activities within the school compound. In addition to their core business of making teaching and learning enjoyable, the school leaders are expected to have ethical and moral obligation. The ethical decisions should aim at worthy ends. The school leaders should have compassion and passion to have children with disability be educated like any other normal child.

Dala (2012) maintains that universal education is the best method to deliver relevant education to all learners. Lunenburg (2010) asserts that the principal's primary responsibility is to promote the learning and success of all students. Therefore the school leaders should be seen to lead in the access of quality education by people with disability.

Botswana education system has significantly addressed the welfare of people with disabilities since the inception of the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 and the National Policy on the rights of people with disability of 1996. This is evidenced by the establishment of special schools or resources centres around the country for mental and visual impairment students, majority at primary level. The Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 advocated for the integration of students with disability into the main stream schools as stated by one of its goals which states that "To prepare children with special educational needs for social integration by integrating them as far as possible with their peers in ordinary schools" (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p.38). The Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 also recommended that teachers should have an element of special education needs which can be acquired during their pre-service or in-service training. As a result, interventions such as the modification of teacher training institution curriculum, enlightenment programmes geared towards attitudinal change and special education programmes in the University of Botswana were introduced.

In an attempt to implement the National Policy on the rights of people with disability of 1996 the Ministry of Education, Skills and Development shifted its focus from integration to inclusion education. The Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) was formulated in 2011 to address the special needs of students with disability from a narrow perspective to a wider focus. The overall goal of Inclusive Education Policy of 2011 is to achieve an inclusive education system which will provide children, young people and adults with access to relevant, high quality education which enables them to learn effectively, whatever their gender, age, life circumstances, health, disability, stage development, capacity to learn or socio-economic circumstances. The policy recognises the importance of professional development of teachers as a facilitator for students learning. The policy also emphasise the need for community involvement and partnership between school and community in this inclusive exercise. As a result of the Inclusive Education Policy recommendations, programmes were designed by the Division of Special Education to impart rare knowledge to teachers. Some of the programmes such as School Pastoral Care and School Intervention Teams (SIT) have been instituted in schools (Republic of Botswana, 2011). Since the inception of the RNPE (1994) and IEP (2011) the development of special education and provision for people with disability is a top priority in the education of Botswana. Apart from encouraging central and local administrations to establish special education facilities, government provides annual subsidy in the form of grant to all Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) offering special education. More of government commitment to the welfare of people with disabilities is envisaged in the National Development Plan (NDP 2009-2016) 10. The NDP 10 calls school leaders to go an extra mile when executing their roles (Republic of Botswana, 2009). Although the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994, the National Policy on the rights of people with disability of 1996 and the Inclusive Education Policy of 2011 strongly recommend to schools strategies to be engaged when dealing with people with disabilities the implementation has remained a nightmare(Raditloaneng, 2011). This implies that the school leadership is not doing much for the benefit of all people including those with disability.

Botswana still has school age-going children who do not attend school. These children constitute the 7% missing students in the education system. Some of the children who are physically and mentally challenged are among the missing group. According to Botswana Education Statistics (2008) the junior secondary school enrolment was 120, 895. Out of that number 2, 139 were students with disabilities (1.8%). The disabilities includes visual, physical, hearing, speech, mental handicap and multi disability. So what influence does Botswana school leadership have to enhance access and quality education for the people with disabilities? An effective instructional leadership is expected to build a culture of learning, provide resources needed for quality teaching and structure the classroom environment to stimulate teachers and learners motivation. They are also expected to exercise their advisory roles in the community. These roles include encouraging the community and Family Welfare educators to avail records of identified children with various disabilities to school management. This will assist the school leadership to uncover children with disability that might be hidden by parents and encourages the parents to take their children to school. Despite the fact that education is not compulsory in Botswana school leaders as leading agents in education are morally and ethically obliged to promote access, equity, quality and relevant education (Moitoi-Vension, 2014).

Methodology

The study used quantitative (positivist) approach and employed the natural-science inquiry paradigm. The paradigm portrays that there is a reality out there which is tangible, stable and apprehensible; and can be investigated on a large number of participants resulting in the finding that can be analysed statistically and pruned for the purpose of generalisation. This ideology corroborate the idea that we inhabit a relatively stable, uniform, and coherent world that can measured, understood and generalized about (Gay & Airasian, 2000). This suggests that in order to understand the reasons for a small number of students with disabilities in schools; the existing information can be sourced basing on the feelings and opinions of the researched.

Participants

The sample comprised of one hundred and sixty two (162) participants selected from in-service student teachers from the University of Botswana, who were taught by the researcher Educational Management courses. Consent was required from the participants and they agreed to be involved in the study. The informants represented all cadres of all teaching fraternity. Out of one hundred and sixty two participants, fourteen were the School Heads, eight were Deputy School Heads, six were Heads of Departments, fifty-seven were Senior Teachers and seventy-seven were teachers. One hundred and twelve were females and fifty were males. The respondents' age ranged between twenty-six and fifty- four years. As regard qualification all participants had a diploma in education. Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents. Creswell (2005) describes convenience sampling as a procedure where "the researcher selects the participants because they are willing and available to be studied" (p.149). As such convenience sampling was favoured because the participants were the researcher's students and readily available.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected using quantitative methods mainly questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher. The questionnaire was favoured because it tends to be more reliable than an interview because it avoids face to face interaction, thus reducing bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morris, 2007) and less costly in terms of money and time. The questions were both open-ended and closed–ended. The questions were piloted using teachers, senior teachers, a deputy School Head, a Head of Department and a School Head from a neighbouring junior secondary school. Piloting was tried out for purposes of improving the questions' ability to do the job for which they are needed. After the corrections were made the questionnaire was ready to be used in the main research. The researcher administered the questionnaires.

Data analysis

Data analysis adopted a computer package form of data analysis normally used for quantitative research. The package is known as the Statistical Package for Social science version 19. The Likert scale analysis followed Oppenheim's (1996) methods of working with the frequencies and percentages of the levels of agreement and disagreement of the respondents. The data collected were represented in the form of frequency, tables and percentages. As for open – ended questions code frame was used to interpret the findings.

Results

The findings of the study are shown in the table below

Statement	Participants Responses									
	S/D	%	D	%	A	%	S/A	%	N	%
Parent support										
1. Parents hide their children from the public.	0	0	5	3	45	28	112	69	162	100
2. Parents have negative attitudes towards disability.	0	0	17	11	57	35	88	54	162	100
3. Lack of parents' education contributes to children inability to access to quality education.	0	0	3	2	10	6	149	92	162	100
4. Parents are encouraged by the school leaders to send their children with disabilities to school.	0	0	0	0	8	5	154	95	162	100
Teachers attitudes										
5. Teachers must teach students with disabilities	122	75	2	1	9	6	29	18	162	100
6. Teachers must not be forced to teach students with disabilities	0	0	0	0	2	1	160	99	162	100
7. Teacher are not trained to teach students with disabilities	2	1	0	0	8	5	152	94	162	100
8. School leadership discourages teachers and peer abuse on students with abilities to increase access.	0	0	0	0	16	10	146	90	162	100
Infrastructure										
9.Inadequate resources disadvantages students with disabilities	6	4	2	1	95	59	59	36	162	100
10. School leaders have a say in the design of infrastructure.	96	59	64	40	2	1	0	0	162	100
11. School leaders can modify structures that exist in schools.	5	3	0	0	155	96	2	1	162	100
12. School leaders are allowed to erect buildings suitable for students with disabilities.	0	0	2	1	2	1	158	98	162	100
Curriculum										
13. The curriculum is not relevant to the disabled students.	23	14	38	24	36	22	65	40	162	100
14. The curriculum is the same as that of normal students.	0	0	0	0	0	0	162	100	162	100
15. The school leaders are mandated to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities.	162	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	162	100
16. The school leaders assist to design a curriculum that meets the needs of students with disabilities.	0	0	2	1	160	99	0	0	162	100
School leadership										
17. Prohibition of segregation and stigma of students with disability increases students' access to quality education.	0	0	0	0	75	46	87	54	162	100
18. Requesting sufficient funds to cater for special education needs enhances quality education.	1	0	0	0	16	10	145	90	162	100
19. Heads of schools are allowed to recruit special education staff.	1	0	0	0	19	12	142	88	162	100
20. School leaders understand the policies regarding special education.	67	41	47	29	38	24	10	6	162	100
21. School leaders are able to identify the special education needs timely.	121	75	34	21	5	3	2	1	162	100
22. Community involvement in child's education increases access and quality education.	0	0	2	1	24	15	136	84	162	100

As illustrated in the table above, one hundred and fifty-seven (97%) participants believe that parents hide their disabled children, while five (3%) disagree. One hundred and forty-five (89%) felt that some parents have negative attitudes towards disability and seventeen (11%) did not agree with the statement. One hundred and fifty-nine (98%) were in agreement with the statement that lack of parents' education contributes to children inability to access to quality education, while three (2%) were not.

The findings regarding teachers' attitude show that one hundred and twenty-four (76%) participants felt that teachers must not teach students with disabilities, while thirty-eight (24%) were of the view that teachers must teach students with disabilities. All informants agreed that teachers must not be forced to teach students with disabilities. It has been indicated by one hundred and sixty (99%) participants that teacher are not trained to teach students with disabilities and only two (1%) showed that teachers has been trained.

Concerning infrastructure one hundred and fifty-four (95%) respondents strongly believed that inadequate resources disadvantages students with disabilities, while eight (5%) disagreed. One hundred and one (62%) showed that the curriculum is not relevant to the disabled students and sixty-one (38%) felt is relevant. All respondents indicated that the curriculum is the same for all students.Regarding the school leadership influence the respondents were unanimous that the school leadership has an influence over the access and quality education for students with disabilities.

All informants illustrated that parents are encouraged by the school leaders to send their children with disabilities to school and the school leaders discourage teachers and peer abuse on students with abilities to increase access. Although one hundred and sixty (99%) participants showed that the school leadership does not have a say in the design of infrastructure, but the school leaders can modify structures that exist in schools as indicated by one hundred and fifty-seven (97%) respondents. Also one hundred and sixty (99%) participants showed that the school leaders are allowed to erect buildings suitable for students with disabilities. The school leadership influence is also shown in the design of the curriculum (99%), prohibition of segregation and stigma of students with disability, acquisition of funds and recruitment of special education staff.

Another revelation was that one hundred and fourteen (70%) participants illustrated that school leaders do not understand the policies regarding special education, while forty-eight (30%) disagreed. One hundred and fifty-five (96%) respondents showed that school leaders are not able to identify the special education needs timely, while seven (4%) indicated that school leaders are able to identify the special education needs timely. Finally under the school leadership influence one hundred and sixty (99%) participants showed that community involvement in child's education increases access and quality education. Only two (1%) disagreed.

Discussion

From the research findings above, it is certain that many participants perceive parents' educational background as having an impact on access and quality education for children with disabilities. In some tribes in Botswana disability is strongly linked to superstition. Having a disabled child in the family means a curse or bewitched. Such families tend to hide their children and deprive the children of the assistance that could have been provided by government. This is affirmed by a spokesperson for disability organisation quoted in Dart (2007) when she said "the fact that the beliefs about disability is still linked to superstition and revenge forces the disabled hide and shy away from seeking help even when it is available" (p.58).

Another revelation is that teachers have a negative attitude towards teaching students with disabilities. Other studies have indicated that many teachers have a negative attitude towards teaching students with disability in the mainstream (Lambe & Bones, 2006). In most cases the reasons forwarded include having not been trained to teach students with disabilities; teaching students with special needs is demanding and resources are inadequate to teach the disabled students. Lack of knowledge, skills and experience to teach students with disabilities can affect teachers' attitudes towards including the disabled in their classes (Carlin, 2003). Attitudes and segregation towards disability are some of the factors that make it difficult for students with disabilities to attend school.

The study also revealed that school leaders as agents of change have an influence in access and quality education for students with disabilities. It has been revealed that heads of schools have the ability to influence parents to send their children to school, they have the power to stop harassment of students with disabilities by teachers and peers, the heads have a say in the design of the curriculum, can modify the infrastructure, accorded the opportunity to recruit special education teachers and source funds to cater for students with disabilities.

This is an indication that strong leadership is critical in the provision of high quality education for all students. Klingner, Arguelles, Hughes and Vaughn (2001) have demonstrated that school leaders who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcome for students with disabilities. The study revealed that many school leaders are not conversant with policies governing special education. It is important for school leaders to understand the policies pertaining to special education. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) suggest that although principals do not need to be disability experts, they must have fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks. Clear policies concerning how to deal with disabled students should be availed to the school leaders in Botswana community junior secondary schools.

Students with disabilities in Botswana junior secondary schools should be offered special education focused towards the inclusive approach. The Botswana inclusive policy must be implemented as it is concerned with quality and relevance. The knowledge and skills that the students with disabilities that will be acquired through the inclusive curriculum can expose their talent. For example in Botswana there is a centre for the visually impaired which is famous for producing good musicians. Using their talent the disabled can become breadwinners, and in such people there is ability in disability.

Limitations of the study

The limitations are outlined in view of the fact that the approaches used are reliable and valid; but they also have their shortcomings which were beyond the researcher's control. Due to time and financial constraints it was not possible to cover all teachers in the field. The study was confined to 1.5% (162) of informants currently involved in enhancing pupils with disability access to quality education out of a population of approximately eleven thousand junior secondary school teachers. Although the sample is relatively small, it is a representative of teachers and school leaders in the 206 junior secondary schools because the respondents were sampled from the ten administration regions which have different settings. This brings the issue of generalisation which is vital in determining the validity and reliability of the research design.

The data collected were mainly the respondents' perceptions about the school leadership influence on access and quality education for students with disabilities in Botswana junior secondary schools as well as their interpretation of the questions asked in the questionnaire. Being at the mercy of the respondents' good will, might produce findings that favoured them and affect the quality of data collected. It is the researcher's opinion that sometimes data collected based on people's opinion can be tainted by personal bias. This was taken into account during the data analysis. The other limitation was failure to investigate staff from Special Education Division views about the pupils with disabilities illegibility to access and quality education. This would act as a proof for or against allegations that the school leaders have influence on access and quality education for students with disabilities in Botswana junior secondary schools.

Future research

The study provides a foundation for future research on the provision of access and quality education for students with disabilities. The findings of the study have implications for school leaders, teachers, education officers, parents and students. The study suggests that in order for the disabled students to successfully acquire quality education in the mainstream schools, cooperation and understanding of disability amongst all stakeholders in the education of the child are priorities. Evidence from this study is meant to trigger interest for further research on the subject as very little research was carried out on access and quality education for the disabled students in secondary schools in Botswana. Future research could involve education officers, family welfare officers, parents and disabled students to get their views on access to quality education by the students who are handicapped. Another research could be finding out the transition rate of students with disabilities from junior secondary schools to senior secondary schools. This could challenge for the practitioners to reflect on their practice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Education is the foundation where the development of a nation is based on. Onwuka (2013) maintains that a society is said to be developed when it has adequately provided for the entire citizenry, irrespective of exceptionalities and gender. This can be achieved if all people including those with disabilities have been accorded the opportunity for quality education. In many developing countries, there are certain traditional beliefs associated with curse of disability, such as curses and contagion which results in the disabled children being shunned and isolated (Mukhopadhyay, Nenty, & Abosi, 2012). Access to high quality education and other social services normally affect children with disabilities. For people with disabilities to access quality education requires strong school leadership. Effective school leadership is critical in the support of parents and teachers when executing classroom practices that help students with disabilities learn to higher standards. Benz, Lindstrom and Yovanoff (2000) believe that school leaders are the agents of change and are in position to change the teachers and parents attitudes towards students with disabilities.

The study has revealed that teachers have negative attitudes towards inclusive education. Although inclusive education is a government policy majority feel that the policy is not clear, hence poor implementation. The major challenge that junior secondary schools faced is lack of qualified special education teachers. Many teachers indicated that they are not trained to teach students with disability and are not confident when dealing with handicapped students. These teachers need school leaders who should ensure that diverse needs of students and their families are addressed. The unfortunate part is that even the leaders are not conversant with issues related to special education. Although the school leaders are not expected to special education specialists, they must have fundamental knowledge as well as change their attitudes, beliefs and values. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) posit that school leaders "need a thorough understanding of the laws that protect the educational rights of students with disabilities" (p.11). The study also showed that the school leadership have influence on access to education, curriculum, funds and infrastructure.

With such influence on the above facilities it would be easy for school leadership to improve access and quality education for students with disability. It is envisaged in an action plan for Botswana inclusive education (2011) that schools will be supportive and humane establishments which embrace and support all their learners and value their achievements, so that children will attend school regularly and work hard at their studies. Basing on the research findings the study recommends that:

- School leaders and teachers should work tirelessly to enhance access and quality education for students with disability.
- School leaders should be given power to develop the school curriculum.
- Clear policy on dealing with students with disabilities should be dispersed to schools.
- Both policy makers and implementers must strengthen the idea of inclusive education.
- Parents and school leadership should be in partnership when addressing the issue of access and quality for students with disabilities.
- All teacher training institutions (including Non-Governmental Organisations) should offer special education programmes.

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