Inclusive Education in Ghana: What are the levers for change?

Emmanuel Kofi Gyimah (PhD)

and

Irene Vanderpuye

Department of Educational Foundations

University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast

Abstract

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

Introduction

The policy guiding the principle and practice of inclusion was first adopted at the World Conference held in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994. Now regarded as the Salamanca Statement (Unesco, 1994), the statement has drawn global attention to access and quality in delivery of special needs education. Considering the importance this could have, it was later emphasised at the World Education Forum Dakar, Senegal in 2000 and supported by the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities proclaiming participation and equality for all.

The Salamanca Conference recommended the following to governments as a matter of urgency to:

- Give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve 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 to enroll all children in ordinary schools unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise.

- Ensure that organizations 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 vocational aspects of inclusive education.

Most important, paragraph 2 of the Salamanca statement, spelt out 5 major clauses as key issues in inclusion:

i. Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning;

ii. Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs;

iii. Education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs;

iv. Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs;

v. Regular schools with this 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.

By this, all children including those with special educational needs were to be educated in the regular school where equal opportunities and access were to be guaranteed.

Meaning of Inclusion

The principle of inclusion is novel and laudable in developing the potentialities of persons with disabilities. However, there has not been a substantive definition for inclusive education (Pearson, 2005; Beveridge, 1999) nor is there any consistent government definition of inclusion making the practice of inclusion difficult (Sheehy, Rix, Nind and Simmons, 2004). It was to

overcome this difficulty that Ainscow (2004) and Mitchell (2005) proposed principal features to ease understanding. Ainscow provided 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, and

▸ Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement.

Mitchell's (2005) principal features are:

▸ Entitlement to full membership in regular, age-appropriate classes in their neighbourhood schools;

▸ Access to appropriate aids and support services, individualised programmes, with appropriately differentiated curriculum and assessment practices (p. 4)

These will mean that inclusive education is developmental in nature and seeks for ways to make children with special educational needs (SEN) participate actively in regular education. It is about valuing diversity and individual differences, and assuring equality and access. It was in the light of this argument that Deiner (2005: 24) pointed out 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 whereby all children including those with special educational needs (SEN) receive their education in the mainstream with structures in place to ensure participation and progress.

Challenges to Inclusion

Inclusive education has not been without challenges in spite of its novelty. Lewis (2000: 202) 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' (2000) fear is about the possibility of including the vulnerable and being hostile to them. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (1996)

notes how challenging it becomes if time and resource allocation are poorly done. And the Audit Report (2002) is concerned about the possibility of their having a poor time as a result of schools not having a sustained investment in staff and school facilities to make inclusion work for those with SEN. It will therefore mean that for children with special educational needs (SEN) to fully participate in the regular curriculum and achieve academic and social success, educational systems (Unesco, 1994) have to make provision for appropriate aids and support services, with appropriately differentiated curriculum and assessment practices.

Ghana's experience with inclusive education

Ghana's attempt to develop the potentialities 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. 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. It has an objective to fully implement inclusive education by 2015, by providing "equitable educational opportunities by integrating all children with non-severe special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream school and full enrollments of hard-to-reach and out of school children by 2015".

The government has through the promulgation of Act 2006, Act 715, made provision for the education of the child with SEN. 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 disability on account of the disability unless the person with 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 disability'. By this all schools are mandated to enrol children with disabilities unless otherwise specified.

There has been the formation and inauguration of National Disability Council to oversee provisions for the disabled. There is a National Assessment and Resources Centre for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Achimota, Accra. Also, there are Speech and Hearing Services in

University of Education, Winneba and Units in major Hospitals for assessment of vision and hearing e.g. 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 (SpED) of the Ministry of Education, has embarked on pilot projects. Since 2003, SpED has targeted a number of regions in the country to pilot inclusive education programme. Some of the regions and districts that have been targeted are:

a. **Greater Accra**:
i. Accra Metro (Tudu) (4 schools targeted).
ii. Dangbe East (Ada-Foah) – (3 schools targeted).
iii. Ga West (Amasaman)- (3 schools targeted).

b. **Central Region**:
i. Cape Coast Metropolis (4 - schools targeted).
ii. Ewutu/Afutu/Senya (Winneba) (4 - schools targeted).
iii. Agona Swedru (3 - schools targeted).

c. **Eastern Region**:
i. New Juabeng - (4 - schools targeted).
ii. Birim South (Akim Oda) - (4 - schools targeted).
iii. Yilo Krobo (Somanya) - (3 - schools targeted).
iv. Manya Krobo (Odumase) (3 - schools targeted

Ghana's challenge to inclusion

In spite of the attempts and provisions, the country is faced with a number of challenges in practising inclusive education namely:

- Insufficient Health and Para-medical personnel e.g. Neurologist, Audiologist, Speech and Language Therapist.
- Lack of comprehensive and multi-disciplinary assessment practices
- Seemingly negating 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 meant to develop the capacities of persons with disabilities are not made available to the disabled.

- Poor teacher competence in adapting the physical environment and curriculum to meet the needs of the disabled in educational settings.

- Inaccessible buildings making it impossible for those using wheelchairs to access facilities.

- Large class size 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 the backdrop that Ghana's attempt to go inclusive is fraught with certain challenges; certain leverages are worth considering to improve practice. Senge (1990: 4) regards levers as 'actions that can be taken in order to change the behaviour of an organisation and those individuals within it'. Measures are needed to be taken to help the country realise the vision and push the practice and frontiers of inclusive education. The writers are of the belief that Ghana can take cues from some of the measures the United Kingdom is taking towards enhancing inclusive practice. Though the United Kingdom has not fully attained the status of inclusive education, at least it has certain legislations in place to guide practice.

Lessons from the UK

In practicing inclusive education, the United Kingdom Government's Green Paper addressed issues related to:

- Policies for excellence. In the document, 'Every child matters' (DfES, 2003) all children are to be valued irrespective of their location.

- Working with parents, and

- Planning SEN provision among others.

By this, every step had to be taken to ensure that the potentialities of every child are harnessed in order to make them contributing members and independent. Parents are

recognised as key stakeholders who have to play 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 for SEN provisions, 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:

- Requiring all children to be registered on the roll of the mainstream school supported as appropriate by specialist provision;
- Targeting specific grants towards measures which will enhance mainstream schools' ability to include pupils with special educational needs. Grants could be earmarked for disability awareness training and special educational needs specific training of teachers and others in mainstream schools;
- Seeking ways of celebrating the success of those schools which improve their ability to provide for a wide range of special needs;
- Giving some priority for capital support where possible to planned school reorganisations which would enhance special educational needs provision in mainstream schools (DfEE, 1997: 46, 47);
- Seeking ways of celebrating the success of those schools which improve their ability to provide for a wide range of special needs;
- Giving some priority for capital support where possible to planned school reorganisations which would enhance special educational needs provision in mainstream schools (DfEE, 1997: 46, 47).

The Government Strategy for SEN (2004) sought for partnership. Target participants were:

- The local authority;
- Between schools;
- With health and social services; and
- With Voluntary organisations

In order to crystallise the vision, there is the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) and Toolkit (DfES, 2001) which came into effect in

January 2002 (DfES, 2001). Though the documents do not explicitly define step by step how inclusive education should be practiced, at least, they set out certain structures that could be considered. Some of the fundamental provisions the SEN Code of Practice recommend include:

- A stronger right for children with SEN to be educated at a mainstream school;
- Working in partnership with parents;
- Pupil participation;
- Working in partnership with other agencies.

What Ghana can learn?

In Ghana's bid to include, focus should be on the following:

- Forging stronger co-operation between Special Education and Regular education;
- Providing funding for logistics and support services;
- Training of teachers on principles and methodology;
- Appropriateness of school curriculum/flexible school curriculum to facilitate adaptation. Include more SEN information in School and Colleges' Curriculum. When students are well informed, they can know the measures to adopt to accommodate persons with disabilities;
- Training more Health personnel including audiologists and speech and language therapists to collaborate;
- Involving agencies such as those in the fields of health, social services, psychology and counselling. Each of these should be assigned specific roles in meeting the needs of children with disabilities;
- Having a programme to bring improvement in social attitudes. This could be achieved through the active involvement of parents who have children with disabilities;
- Improving assessment practices in the country. The present situation where individual assessors assess and recommend placement is not suitable in meeting the needs of children with SEN.
- Improving physical architecture to facilitate access.

From the fore-going, it can be concluded that the practice of inclusive education is not simple. It demands lots of preparation including a strong political will and community participation. Inclusion draws so much on sharing of experiences for it is developmental in scope. While admitting that the United Kingdom has not yet got full answers, their legislations on the practice of inclusion can be learned and where necessary adapted to improve the education of children with SEN and to push practice forward.

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