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# Inclusive early childhood education practices for ECD learners with intellectual and learning disabilities: The ecological systems theory as a framework for a participatory action research

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to probe whether the inclusive education practices at Early Childhood Development (ECD) adequately prepared learners for primary school. The study was conducted at a private primary school in Harare, Zimbabwe using a participatory action research design. Data were generated from interviews with key informants, participant and non-participant observations, as well as from document analyses. Our results showed that although the private school was open to inclusion and was well resourced for it, challenges emerged which were as a result of inadequate teacher training practices, and the lack of collaboration between the school and the parent ministry. It was also found that learners with severe learning disabilities were not adequately catered for. We concluded that there was a need for more support from government for inclusion to succeed. The teacher training colleges were not offering adequate practical modules to prepare teachers, and the schools could also do more to capacitate teachers for inclusion. The recommendations made should help the government and school administrators to improve the quality of early childhood education for learners with intellectual and learning disabilities.

**Contribution/ Originality:** The study was unique because Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework was used to explore the inclusive education practices at an ECD centre in a participatory action research. The study also used a broad sample of participants which included teachers, parents, learners, university lecturers, and school administrators.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education (IE) means teaching all children in one class irrespective of their physical or learning disabilities. An extended definition of inclusive education, describes it as a philosophy which incorporates students, families, educators and community members in creating schools that welcome, acknowledge, affirm and celebrate the value of all learners to receive a high quality and age-appropriate education (Resvani, Eleftherakis, Kalerante, & Kaspiri, 2020). Full inclusion, therefore, places the learners with disabilities in the same educational environment as their typically developing peers, where they can benefit from the same quality educational experiences.


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## 2. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Inclusive education was made a universal legal requirement following the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) , a human rights treaty that was adopted in 2006 (UN, 2008). The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Education (UNESCO, 1994a) compelled all nation states to be committed to providing education for all, stating that children with special educational needs should have access to regular schools (UNESCO, 1994b). UNESCO (1994b) was signed by 92 member nations and 25 international organisations, all who believed in the doctrine of inclusive education as one that would bring about equity in education and social justice. The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) was convened in order for its participants to reaffirm their commitment to the Salamanca Statement. The Dakar framework for Action was hailed as the most comprehensive evaluation of education ever conducted by an international body, with the Education for All (EFA) 2000 Assessment. Assessment meant tracking the progress of each country towards the achievement of the goals set at Jomtien (UNESCO, 2000).

The World Education Forum which was convened in Incheon, Republic of Korea in 2015, was driven by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and other international partners to come up with a long-term vision for education. The Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 set out a 15-year vision for education that was based on the United nations (UN) Sustainability Development Goal (SDG) 4 which had a mandate to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2015b). The Incheon Declaration is of particular relevance for this study because it is one that specifically highlighted pre-primary education with a special focus on inclusion and the school readiness agenda. SDG 4.1 states that its goal was that, "by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development and care, and pre-primary education, so that they are ready for primary education" (UNESCO, 2015a). SDG4.a reaffirms its commitment to "Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all" (UNESCO, 2015b). The International Bill of Human Rights states that IE is a moral and legal human right. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) fact sheet on children with disabilities (2022), there are almost 240 million children the world over who have disabilities. The report adds that the likelihood of children with disabilities never having attended early childhood education is 25 percent, while that of having never attended school is 49 percent (UNICEF, 2022). Research shows that children with disabilities are less likely to complete primary, secondary, or further education as compared to children without disability (UNICEF, 2022).

### *2.1. Research Question*

To what extent do inclusive education practices support learners with intellectual and learning disabilities to have positive learning outcomes after ECD?

### *2.2. Theoretical Framework*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory states that a child's development occurs in five systems or structures (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) with each level impacting differently on the development of each individual.

These systems are:

i) Microsystem – The microsystem represents the immediate environment in which the child interacts, e.g., the classroom, playground, recreation centre, home, neighbourhood and religious institution.

ii) Mesosystem – The mesosystem represents the relations that exist among microsystems, such as between family experiences and school experiences, or of between school experiences and neighbourhood experiences.

iii) Exosystem – The exosystem is a social setting in which the person does not have an active role.



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iv) Macrosystem – The macrosystem represents the larger cultural context such as the society, and the community surrounding the individual which include cultural norms, religious beliefs which surround that person (Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013).

v) Chronosystem – The outermost layer of the ecosystem is the chronosystem which represents the developmental time frames which influence the development of the individual (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory which was later revised and renamed the bio ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) encompasses all the protagonists in the young child's learning and social sphere as laid out in the ecological theory. The role players who support the education of the child with learning disabilities are the parents, teachers, teacher preparation institutions, the government and the overarching international organisations that advocate for the rights of the child. Chimhenga (2014) explains that Bronfenbrenner's theory is the best one to explain the experiences of a child with learning disabilities in the inclusive classroom because it allows for the assessment of all possible factors and influences, interactions as well as inter-relations between the learners and the different role players that may impact on their learning in the inclusive setup (Chimhenga, 2014).

## 3. RELATED LITERATURE

While the world's governments have appreciated the need for a place for inclusion in their education policies, these policies have meant different things for different countries. In the United States of America, the Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA) of 1975, provides for free and appropriate public-school education to all eligible students from the age of 3 years to 21 years old. The learners are identified as being eligible for special education by a team of professionals (US Department of Education, 1975). On the other hand, China did not commit to a wholesale inclusion policy. In China, the Learning in Regular Classroom (LRC) try out initiative, was adopted as the official regulatory instrument to ensure the education of children with impairments. It preceded the revised Chinese Constitution of 1982, and the Compulsory Education Law which empowered the state to put in place special schools and special classes for school age children with disabilities (Deng & Harris, 2008). Communist China leans toward a collectivist ideology which concentrates on the majority rather than the minority. As a consequence, the Compulsory Education Law for example, is said to only address government's commitment to addressing three types of disabilities in children, and ignoring compulsory education for other disabilities such as autism (Xu, Cooper, & Sin, 2017). This selective policy therefore means that the inclusive policy does not adequately cater for the special educational needs of all children with disabilities, in contrast to the American model which includes all "eligible" disabled learners.

In New Zealand, the 1996 government policy called "Special Education 2000" was designed to bring about "mainstreaming" for all children. The New Zealand 1989 Education Act created a system of self-managing schools, where individual schools could devise their own policies and practices including decisions on how they would carry out inclusion (Hornby, 2014, 2020). The New Zealand model was silent on specific legislation for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It did not put forward any statutory guidelines for inclusion, and where teachers were required to work with children with SEND in schools, there was no specific requirement on training for teaching children with learning challenges (Hornby, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, the 1981 Education Act, which was borne out of the recommendations of the Warnock Report of 1978, resulted in a move away from special education, to inclusive education (Lauchlan & Greig, 2015). Government legislation on Special Educational Needs (SEN) which preceded the 1997 Green Paper Excellence for all children (Department of Education, 1997) and the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) (DfES, 2001a) seemed to advocate for a move away from inclusion. Successive Conservative Governments deemed inclusion a failed policy therefore advocating for special schools (Lauchlan & Greig, 2015).



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Research reveals that although African countries realise the importance of catering for the special educational needs of children with disabilities, the policy of inclusion has not been easy to implement. This is due to the problems emanating from lack of resources, inadequate knowledge and training on how to deal with children with disabilities, as well as the vagueness of government policy in some instances. For example, in Zambia the 2012/13 national budgets for early education did not include children with disabilities, and as many as 133 000 children were out of school in 2013 (Ndhlovu, Mtonga, Serenje-Chipindi, & Muzata, 2016).

In South Africa, the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001) was borne out of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training, and the National Committee on Education Support Services (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit, & Van Deventer, 2016). The White Paper 6 highlighted some important prerequisites for inclusion such as social justice and human rights, equal and equitable access to education, participation, and social integration and redress, (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). It is, however, important to note that the situation in South Africa is unique in that the historical imbalances brought about by Apartheid still hinder wholesale development of the country. Previously disadvantaged and poor societies still have to contend with inadequate resources and a school system which is a far cry from the elite private schools in the rich areas of the country which are still dominated by whites. South African teachers also have to contend with barriers that inhibit inclusion such as inadequate resources, and some feel that they are not adequately skilled for it (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018).

On the local frontier, the Nziramasanga Commission Report of 1999 recommended the need to "educate children with special educational needs alongside their peers in regular school contexts", (Nziramasanga, 1999). The Government of Zimbabwe (1987) sought to remove discriminatory barriers by stating that education was a basic human right that should be available to all regardless of colour, race, gender, class, religion, disability, culture or sexual preference. Mandepa's 2013 study (as cited in Mapuranga, Dumba, and Musodza (2015)) found that 1.9 % of the population are people with disabilities, where a quarter of the people with disabilities have intellectual disabilities, and of the intellectually disabled, 30% are children.

In 1990 the Government of Zimbabwe declared that Early Childhood Education was a basic human right, therefore, it should be viewed as an integral part of the formal education system (Government of Zimbabwe, 1990). This pronouncement thus put the onus on education practitioners to put theory into practice, and it became their mandate to ensure that children who experience learning disabilities receive an education that prepared them for the future. However, as witnessed in other African countries that put inclusive education policies into motion, Zimbabwe too is faced with the dilemma of putting theory into practice. Chimhenga (2014) laments that the Education Act failed to elaborate on how special education needs were to be addressed. The barriers to inclusion are not unique to Zimbabwe. As cited in other country studies around the world, these include a lack of training and support for teachers, the lack of theory and practice of inclusion, the absence of a differentiated curriculum to teach children's unique needs in the general education classrooms, and a lack of adequate infrastructure which is suitable for lesson delivery for children with exceptionalities (Majoko, 2018).

Extant research therefore points to a disconnect between the quality of education that is required to address the special educational needs of children with disabilities at ECD level, and the preparedness of educational institutions and governments to meet the expectations of the primary school curriculum. Ngwena (2013) posits that there is a need for quality ECD and pre-primary education so that these learners can be well prepared for primary education.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative research approach. Gray (2014) posits that qualitative research is appropriate when the information about an investigated phenomenon is limited, and when the study attempts to explore and describe experiences by identifying themes. Gray (2014) also maintains that qualitative research is appropriate in research for the development of theories that are grounded in the informants' perceptions of events (Gray, 2014).



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The research method employed for the study was that of participatory action research (PAR). Donato (2003) posit that action research is most suitable for educational environments because " it can inform teachers about their practice and empower them to take leadership roles in their local teaching contexts" (Donato, 2003). As researchers, we were able to play an active part in this research in our role as education practitioners who were insiders in the research situation, with the aim of ultimately influencing what was happening by being physically present in the situation, (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

The population in the case of this research refers to the chosen private school in the Northern Central District of Harare which has ECD "B" classes that accommodate children with learning disabilities. In Zimbabwe preschool education is distributed amongst three types of schools. There are ECD centres attached to state run primary schools, ECD classes attached to independent / private schools, and privately owned early learning centres which are usually located on converted residential premises. Currently, ECD in Zimbabwe is divided into ECD 'A' for 3–4-year-olds, and ECD 'B' for 4–5-year-olds following the recommendations of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education (Nziramasanga, 1999) which sought to make preschool education available to all children in Zimbabwe. With regards to this study, learners with intellectual challenges were purposefully selected from ECD "B", Grade 1, and Grade 2. The learners as participants were not limited to ECD because we also wanted to investigate how the learners who presented learning disabilities who had passed through the ECD "B" inclusive classroom were faring in Grade one and Grade two. The participants and key informants that were purposely selected for this research included; the ECD "B" teachers, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers, the parents of children in ECD "B" and Grade 1 and Grade 2 who presented learning challenges, the school administrators, university lecturers, teacher training college lecturers, and the learners with intellectual and learning disabilities.

This research followed a multimethod system of data collection which included interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and document analyses. The research participants gave their written consent to participate in the research. The parents of the learners who were included in our research also gave their consent for their children to participate. The research participants allowed the researchers to make audio recordings of their interviews. These audio recordings were subsequently transcribed using the transcription application called "Transcribe" which converted the audio recordings into text. The researchers also made use of purposely constructed observation guides which we used to record our observations in the classroom and on the playground. We also prepared our lesson plans and lesson evaluation sheets to record the action cycles that we performed when we conducted lessons in the classrooms. Our findings were, therefore, informed by the observations that we made in the classroom and on the playground, interviews with participants and key informants, the perusal of teaching records and school policy documents, as well as what we learned when we were given the opportunity to teach in the classes with children with learning challenges from ECD "B" to Grade two.

After we recorded our observations, we evaluated our data and recorded our reflections on our findings. Action research by its nature is reflective. Hendricks (2006) maintains that the purpose of action research for practitioners is for them to investigate and improve their own practices (Hendricks, 2006). Our actions and subsequent reflections led us as researchers to propose ways by which the inclusive education practices at the school could be improved for the benefit of the learners with intellectual and learning disabilities. The information generated from interviews, document analyses and from observations was used to facilitate triangulation. Our data analysis was performed using the NVivo data management system where our data was coded. As researchers we were able to make judgements on the emergent themes to answer our research questions.

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Ecological Systems theory was used as the guiding principle for this study due to its suitability for the study of educational settings. The learners with intellectual and learning disabilities were purposefully selected for this study. The learners were drawn from ECD "B" to Grade two. Our sample included three learners from ECD



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"B", two learners were in Grade one, and two learners from Grade two. All seven of the learners in the sample were boys. The three learners with intellectual disabilities were autistic. The other four learners had learning disabilities which were distributed as two having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the other two learners presenting developmental delays respectively. By making reference to the different levels of the ecological system we were better able to understand the learning experiences of the learners with intellectual and learning disabilities in their positions at the centre of the ecosystem.

The EST places the child who needs support at the centre of the model with the microsystem being the ecosystem closest to the child's existence. The family is the most proximal process that affects the development of the child with learning disabilities. The support of the family members is key for the young learner, because it is only when the family members accept their child's condition, that they can comfortably let go and send their child off to pre-school. In an interview at the school where we conducted this research, one mother intimated that as a family they had considered that;

> *'He should do it (Education) at home because he is like this. Now he loves it (school), and he looks forward to coming to school every day' (Mateko).*

Other family members are also important in the development of the challenged child. The siblings offer age appropriate support which includes positive play experiences as well as fostering a sense of belonging when one who is 'different' is included in play and conversation. One family alluded to the support that the siblings gave to their younger brother with intellectual disabilities. The child's father shared that;

> *'His brothers play golf, so he joins them as well. So, he just, he does everything, what the others are doing, he now plays with his siblings' (Mutero).*

The classroom environment is at the centre of the child's life at school. Proximal experiences at school involve the teacher, the assistant teachers, the paraprofessionals, as well as the child's peers. From our lesson observations, we realised that the teacher's assistants (TA's) played a significant role in supporting the learners with educational challenges. While the teacher was preoccupied with lesson delivery and the marking of books, the TA was always the one who was assigned to work with the challenged learner, either helping them to write, repeating concepts, or dealing with behaviour issues and helping the learners with challenges to calm down and settle down to do their class work. One teacher expressed her predicament when dealing with learners of vast mixed ability in the same class;

> *'Um, you know, it's, it's not easy having to deal with the child who is very intelligent and with all the abilities, and at the same time having to deal with the child that is autistic. These are two children who are completely different. And, um, so now if I introduce a topic, this child is intelligent and very fast and can understand it, that quickly writes the work, and this one again needs some attention from the same teacher' (Hakuna).*

Two learners out of the seven learners with learning disabilities that we included in our research had a paraprofessional each. These paraprofessionals were engaged by the learner's parents to support their children with learning challenges at school. The paraprofessional's role was to assist the learners with all their activities at school, in the classroom, on the playground, and at extra-curricular activities in the afternoons. The teachers found this support to be most beneficial because the two children had extreme intellectual challenges and needed the one on one support. Without this special support the teacher and the teacher's assistant would otherwise have been overwhelmed. The teacher's assistants are employed by the school to assist the teacher with all the learners, and to help prepare the classroom for activities such as art and crafts, as well as to facilitate the class as a whole to transition from one lesson to the next.

The peer group is another group that lies at the centre of the challenged learner's environment. It was gratifying to learn that both parents and teachers reported that the typically developing learners did not exhibit any negative feelings towards their peers with intellectual and learning disabilities. They appeared to understand that they had colleagues who were different but were a part of them. The learners with learning challenges were said to



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be happy and looked forward to coming to school. The school head teacher alluded to the point that Inclusive education alleviates the issue of stigma. The school head explained;

> *'Um, so if they start at an early age, children get to appreciate that, uh, you know, uh, people, learners with learning disabilities are the same as them……If they are separated, uh, it's very difficult to, to integrate them because already they've been known to be a separate group from what I would say the normal group' (Mhandu).*

It was however our observation that the teachers did not take full advantage of peer support opportunities in the class room and on the playground. In a number of classes, the classroom layout did not facilitate group learning. The learners with exceptionalities sat either at their own desk with the paraprofessional by their side, or they were positioned at their own desk close to the teacher's desk. In our opinion, grouping desks in fours or fives could have facilitated group learning. On the playground, the learners were left to form their own groupings or to play alone. It could have been beneficial if the teachers on playground duty had initiated some group games to include the challenged learners so as to promote socialisation skills.

The second level of the ecosystem is the Mesosystem which is made up of the interrelations that exist among two or more settings in which the developing person participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These interrelations as they occur in the child's ecosystem include, the home, school, and the peer group. The relationship between the challenged child's home and the school are important. It would be to the child's benefit if there is effective communication between the school and the learner's parents. Regular updates on the child's progress are essential to keep abreast of the learner's educational support needs. One parent highlighted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was able to reach out to the teacher for assistance;

> *'…..because of Covid she (the teacher) was always available on the phone, yes, and anytime, even at 4pm' (Mutero).*

Another family which did not have a close relationship with the class teacher and were not actively involved with their child's learning alluded that;

> *'Reading is a challenge. The first days that they were reading, he was reading the pictures. Now there is a challenge, with say phonics. We don't know how they teach it, how the sounds should be' (Soko).*

Close collaboration is key to the learning support needs of the challenged learner. A synergistic relationship between home and school should result in better learning outcomes for the young child with learning disabilities.

Moving outward on the ecology model, the exosystem represents settings that do not necessarily involve the child directly, but environmental factors that influence their development indirectly. An example of such a setting would include the school system which is responsible for the inclusive education programme (Tahir, Doelger, & Hynes, 2019). We found that the school allowed teachers to adjust the school curriculum to the level of the learners with intellectual disabilities. There were no restrictions on the implementation of a differentiated curriculum for these learners. The teachers were grateful for this flexibility because it allowed them to achieve some positive outcomes with these special learners. One teacher commented;

> *'……a teacher is now to draw up an individualised plan for the child, but not out of the syllabus. There are different types of children. Children like Abbas can follow what everyone is doing. But, I have to reduce that to his level and consider how he is. Then children like David, he does not follow that. That's where we really make an individualised education plan because it's him on his own. His level is way behind' (Rwodzi).*

The same teacher alluded to the present school culture and the resultant change in teachers' attitudes towards learners with disabilities;

> *'Of late I have not found teachers in this school who don't appreciate these children. I haven't identified anyone who shows it, but a long time ago, a long time ago, so, some people who just made these children the talk of the staff room. Like, "Oh you have this one, you are with this one, oh, you've got that one!" But, I have noted the changed attitudes. They all now try, each one with their own special child with their special needs' (Rwodzi).*



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While the attitudes of the teaching staff towards inclusion have improved, the school itself is believed to be falling short of support for the inclusion of its learners. The school head lamented that not enough was being done to provide personnel who were competent in assisting the teachers and the learners who required specialist support. The school head made the assertion that;

> *'The school is more prepared to employ enough maths teachers, but, uh, maybe they would just allocate you with just one space for special needs' (Mhandu).*

Bronfenbrenner maintained that the task of the school was to provide a learning environment that would promote positive outcomes for the learner with exceptionalities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The macrosystem envelops the micro, meso, and exosystems, and it is that which defines the individual's overall societal culture. The cultural context includes written and unwritten principles (legal, economic, political, religious, or educational) that regulate human behaviour (Chinhara, 2016). In the educational sphere, the gap between the universally accepted principle of inclusion for all which speaks to the 'no child left behind' mantra, and the reality on the ground is quite apparent. The private school system is typically better resourced and more prepared to accommodate the inclusion policies as laid down by the state. It is, however, also apparent that even the private school system also struggles to expedite full inclusion. Our experience in the classroom as participatory action researchers, was that we found that some of the teachers were aware of the national requirement for inclusive education, but they had not actually seen the government policy documents to that effect. One university administrator made a case for the inclusive education policy to be made an act of law sighting that;

> *If anything is just talked about, and not enacted into policy, then you know, people may not take it seriously. But anything that has been enacted as policy and uh, uh, uh, you know, uh, put across to the various education levels, then you are sure it is going to be implemented (Gore).*

Another university administrator was of the opinion that the universities and teacher training institutions were offering theoretical inclusion, moreover the lecturers themselves were not well prepared to teach it. He made the assertion that the lecturers were 'handicapped' in this regard (Mavambo). This opinion was supported by one of the teachers that we interviewed after observing her lesson, pointing out that.

> *As a teacher I wasn't well prepared, but because you come along and you meet these children, you really have to do something. You can't just let them sit and not do anything..... I wasn't trained, like, for special needs (Rwodzi).*

The government of Zimbabwe has put in place various pieces of legislation that mandate inclusion in general and inclusion at ECD level in particular. Manzunzu and Mutovosi (2021) posit that following (The Dakar Framework for Action, 2000) Zimbabwe adopted the policy of compulsory Early Childhood Development (ECD), a policy that has since proved elusive as challenges exist at all levels of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. It that regard, the school administrator lamented that;

> *The (inclusion) programmes that we have been running here are very school tailored and uh, not much from ministry, if anything at all (Mavambo).*

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Inclusive education is not important just for the adherence to policy's sake. Children with disabilities and learning challenges need to be viewed and treated as whole human beings who deserve the same quality education as their typically developing peers. This study brought to light some useful information which alludes to the inclusive education practices at private educational institutions in particular, as well as some which could be applied to the nation as a whole. We found that the school was very open to enrolling learners with learning and intellectual challenges. These children did not have to go through a screening process for admission. It was an unwritten school policy that all learners were welcome to join the school provided there was a vacancy. The private school was well resourced with both learning materials and teachers. Each teacher was allocated a teacher's



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assistant from ECD to Grade 2. There were also two learners who had their own paraprofessionals to assist them at school daily. It was apparent that the school did go some way to include the learners with learning disabilities.

As we conducted the research, our findings were that, although the school had embraced inclusive education there still remained some areas of concern with regard to the education practices at the school. Firstly, our findings were that it was not abundantly clear how some of the learners had been diagnosed as having learning or intellectual disabilities, or whether each of the teachers was confident in the intervention methods that they were following to assist the challenged learners. We only found medical diagnostic letters for two learners in their anecdotal files. The rest of the children did not have these, probably because their parents had held on to them, or because they had not been clinically diagnosed. It was our fear that this scenario could be problematic because a child could be wrongly diagnosed if this were not done by an expert.

The school teachers were very keen to assist the children with learning challenges in their classes. However, some found this task daunting because they did not have the training to deal with learners with such challenges. They explained that they just had to find their own way once these learners where placed in their classes. Of the four teachers that we worked with in their classrooms, only one had a Bachelor of Science in Special Needs Education, the only one with a special needs qualification in the whole department. Another had a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology, and the other teacher had a diploma in primary education. The other teacher held a general education degree.

There were children who had severe Intellectual disabilities whom we felt could have benefited more from a special class or individualised learning programme. Their learning abilities were far behind those of their age mates. It was our observation that these learners were just being pushed along in the system from one grade to the next, without having achieved the requisite educational outcomes at each stage of their class progression. Some of the children who participated in the research had enrolled at the same school at ECD and were now at the end of Grade two and graduating to Grade three.

At the macrosystemic level, it was clear that there was no collaboration between the school and the parent ministry. Such collaborative initiatives could benefit the learners with disabilities because the school would have a clear reference point in terms of policy decisions or policy development undertakings. The parent ministry could also benefit from collaboration with the schools to learn more about the challenges that they face in implementing inclusion, and for suggestions on how the practice could be improved to benefit all learners who need special educational support.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the preceding conclusions, our recommendations as researchers were as follows:

- That schools could conduct regular in-service inclusive education training for staff focusing on the needs of the special children that are enrolled at individual schools.
- That the universities and teacher training colleges should make special needs education a compulsory course for all teacher training qualifications. This would ensure that teachers were better informed and, therefore, more confident to include learners with exceptionalities in their classes.
- That the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should be more proactive on the ground in terms of ensuring that schools have access to the relevant inclusive education policy documents. The parent ministry could also conduct inclusion related workshops in an attempt to bring education practitioners together to collaborate and share ideas about inclusive education practices at their schools.
- The parent ministry could establish localised testing centres where teachers could refer learners for assessment. This would be done with parental consent. In cases where children are diagnosed as having severe intellectual and learning disabilities, alternative plans could be made for them for their unique educational requirements.



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Our recommendations should go some way in improving the present inclusion practices in ECD centres and primary schools. Future research on early childhood inclusive education practices could be carried out using the same research model in different educational settings.

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