

West is best? A post-colonial perspective on the implementation of inclusive education in Botswana

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Abstract

A large number of learners with Special Educational Needs (SENs) do not have access to even the most basic education in developing countries. To address this issue, United Nations organizations promoted the concept of inclusive education policies in developing countries. This concept was initiated in Western countries in the 1980s: with globalization and active participation of international donor agencies, the idea of inclusive education gained significant currency globally. However, in many cases, the inclusive education policy was imposed on the education system of many developing countries by international donor agencies. This study uses a post-colonial perspective to understand how this Western concept was implemented in former colonized countries, with a specific focus on Botswana. Thirty-six teachers from six primary schools in the South Central Region of Botswana participated in six focus group discussions. Data from the focus group discussions were triangulated with classroom observations and related documents. The analysis highlights a complex and contradictory phenomenon, where policies are mostly implemented as a top-down approach and teachers' indigenous knowledge is poorly recognized.

Keywords: inclusive education, post-colonial perspectives, developing countries, Botswana, qualitative research

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there have been a number of international conventions and declarations on the importance of equity, access, participation, and social justice for all learners in educational contexts. Despite these pronouncements, a large number of learners in developing countries do not have access to basic education. To promote access to education for all, policy-makers in several developing countries, including Botswana, have strengthened the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goal-2 (MDG-2) agendas.

In the drive to enhance access to education, Botswana achieved remarkable results in terms of primary school enrollment, compared to many developing countries. For example, in 2010, Botswana achieved primary school enrollment of 91% with a dropout rate of less than 2% (UNICEF, 2012). This could be attributed to good governance, a healthier economy, and the significant amount of budgetary allocation for education. Unfortunately, learners with Special Educational Needs (SENs) are still struggling to accomplish 10 years of basic education in Botswana (McBride, 2010). To promote access and participation of these learners in the education system, the Government of Botswana in 2011 adopted a policy on inclusive education (Government of Botswana, 2011), which is now used as a strategy for achieving Education for All (EFA) and enhancing overall quality of education.

Central to the argument of this paper is that inclusive education is predominantly a Western concept, which was initiated in the 1980s to promote access to education for learners with SENs. As the model became successful in some developed countries; it was considered a solution for global educational problems (Kalyanpur, 2014). With globalization, this concept has become a major policy agenda in developing countries. International donor agencies, such as the World Bank, the Department for International Development (DFID-UK), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), and the World Bank have been aggressive in funding education policies and projects in those countries. Interestingly, some researchers viewed this concept as a form of neo-colonization (Abdi, 2006; Curtin, 2005; Lunga, 2008; Osai, 2010; Pashby, 2012) and others have argued that these agencies continue to indoctrinate Western philosophy in the education systems of the developing countries (Pather & Nxumalo, 2013). This is based upon the view that globalization in fact paved the way for former colonial masters to continue to impose their education, economic and cultural standards on so-called 'developing' countries (Kim, 2010; Miller, 2014; Pashby, 2012). In response to this colonial propagation, increasing numbers of Southern African scholars (Pather & Nxumalo, 2013) are engaging in postcolonial counter-hegemonic approaches to decentralize the dominant discourses. These alternate discourses seek to reverse the relations of power and knowledge by repositioning the indigenous knowledge system. The policy hegemony of the West has influenced the local policies to such an extent that the current educational

approaches of many developing countries have borrowed and implemented Western education policies without considering the local context (A. C. Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010; Pather & Nxumalo, 2013). This clearly indicates that colonialism did not end with independence; it still exists today but in a different form and will continue to influence former colonies in relation to the enacting of legislations, policies and practices. In particular, this article provides a critique of the impact of the continued existence of colonialism within the field of education.

Theoretical framework

This study employs Post-Colonial Theory (PCT) to analyze the dominance of Western ideologies in the education of learners with SENs in Botswana. Although application of PCT in education for learners with SENs has been slow, it offers a critical lens (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Shakespeare, 2013; Slee, 2011) to investigate the practices of exclusion and oppression (Erevelles, 2011; McRuer, 2010). Oppressive social constructs usually originate from deep-rooted social stigma and the way society responds to the deviance from normalcy. Therefore, colonization is used as a metaphor to describe experiences of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion of individuals with disabilities (Barker & Murray, 2010; Sherry, 2007). PCT exploration is used to deconstruct the process of 'Othering' (Spivak, 1989), and investigate the process through which subaltern such as learners with SENs are marginalized, disenfranchised, and excluded by mainstream society (Grech & Soldatic, 2015; Sherry, 2007). While stressing the relevance of PCT to disability studies, Ghai (2002) noted that "postcolonialism can destabilize the totalizing tendencies of imported Western discourse" (p. 96) and investigated the dichotomy between the disabled and non-disabled, the same way one would compare between the colonizer and colonized (Shakespeare, 2013). Extending the argument, this study used this theoretical framework to investigate how Western ideas, knowledge, and practices have influenced, and continue to influence, the educational policies and practices of the former colonies (Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Crossley & Watson, 2003; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008; Rizvi, Lingard, & Lavia, 2006; Tikly, 2004). In the context of inclusive education, it was used to understand the relationship between the education of learners with SENs and the socio-political environment from ideological and epistemological perspectives (Barker & Murray, 2010; Erevelles, 2011).

The postcolonial framework invokes discussion of "colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism" (Loomba, 1998, p. 12) and challenges the unilateral Western dominance that tends to control the mind-set in the 'lower-income' countries (Coloma, 2009). For example, in contemporary times, we find emerging onto the global agenda, global theoretical and practical discourses of inclusive education that emanate from the West and that take cues in conceptualizing their own situation. In

this study, PCT offered a critical lens to investigate “imperial knowledge systems and languages and how they are circulated and legitimated and how they serve imperial interests” (Lunga, 2008, p. 193) – inclusive education.

Although inclusive education has gained significant currency internationally and in the academic literature, many countries are still struggling with the implementation process to make schools more inclusive (Walton, 2015). Researchers (D. Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011; Florian, 2012) have suggested that implementation should be context specific. More often than not, in developing countries, policies are imposed by various external forces and funding agencies. For example, soon after the Dakar convention on inclusive education, many developing countries gave impetus on inclusive education to achieve the global agenda for EFA. To accomplish the agenda, policymakers were dependent on donor agencies and consultants. In most cases, these consultants were affiliated to either Western research or academic institutions and they brought Western ideologies to the developing countries. In this process, indigenous beliefs, knowledge, and practices are undermined and regarded as inferior (Breidlid, 2013; Mapara, 2009). In addition, local ecology of education systems are rarely investigated critically to identify cardinal factors that may influence or hinder policy implementations. For example, in Botswana, the inclusive education policy is being implemented despite inadequate resources, infrastructure, and trained personnel (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). It raises critical questions regarding the way policy frameworks are conceptualized and how the epistemological belief of homogeneity between Western and other non-Western education should be thoroughly interrogated as well as critically evaluated (Subedi & Daza, 2008). Therefore, this study examines: (a) how a predominant Western concept-inclusive education is interpreted by local practitioners (Crossley & Watson, 2003; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008); (b) “manifestations of the power of the west to the rest” (Subedi & Daza, 2008, p. 2) to understand the implementation of inclusive education; (c) the dynamics of the process of implementation of an inclusive education policy for learners with SENs in regular classrooms. Using a PCT framework allowed for the emergence of the resistant voices that challenge the common conjecture that the expert knowledge, sophisticated ideas and systems exist only in the West (A. C. Armstrong et al., 2010).

Educational provisions for learners with SENs

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) estimated that 115-130 million children around the world are not attending school, and that more than 80 million of these children reside in Africa. Approximately, 80% of the world’s population of people with disabilities live in developing countries and limited numbers (2%) of learners with disabilities have access to basic education (UNESCO, 2005). Peters (2007) predicted that by 2025, the number of people with disabilities “will have risen from the current 600 million to

900 million worldwide, of which 650 million will be in developing countries" (p. 35).

In Botswana, the Inclusive Education Policy defines learners with SENs as those who "need something which is over and above what is generally provided as standard in the education system" (Government of Botswana, 2011, p. 7). Learners with developmental disabilities are one of the major groups that fall in this category. More often than not, these learners are considered inferior by society and face serious forms of stigmatization and exclusion from mainstream educational institutions. These learners are highly vulnerable and suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of isolation, which have far-fetching consequences, such as unemployment and compromised quality of life (UNICEF, 2013). To address these adverse consequences, researchers and disability activists recommended enhancing access to education. Education for learners with SENs started in the beginning of the nineteenth century and it was in a segregated environment, mostly for children with sensory impairments. Over time, special schools were extended to cater for the needs of children with mild or moderate intellectual impairments. The objective of such educational institutions was to teach survival skills to allow learners to live independently. The number of special schools increased and became a parallel system to general education. Special schools became popular due to the following advantages: low teacher-pupil ratio, specially trained teachers, individualized instruction in a homogeneous classroom, and an increased curricular emphasis on social and vocational goals (Johnson, 1962, as cited in Kavale & Forness, 2000). Wherever special schools were not possible, special classes were initiated with regular schools, which gave rise to the concept of mainstreaming. Currently these forms of education are highly criticized from a human rights perspective (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Since then, special education experienced a serious dilemma; some called for radical changes, whereas others looked for evidence-based approaches based on empirical analysis of the effectiveness of service delivery (Dorn, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1996).

Two pieces of legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have changed where learners with SENs receive education. NCLB and IDEA have mandated that students with SENs should receive instruction in the general education curriculum by general education teachers in the general education classroom. This movement was initiated in the West and popularized by UN mandates.

'Education as a fundamental right' has been articulated at various world congresses, in particular at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. In 1994, the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education was formulated to address the lack of access, equity, and participation in the education for learners with SENs (UNESCO, 1994). The EFA initiative was re-affirmed in 2000 at the Dakar congress (UNESCO, 2000); it brought EFA goals into much sharper focus in developing countries. In particular, the document endorsed the inclusion of learners with SENs in regular schools. Gradually, the concept of inclusive education broadened to ensure equal

opportunities and high-quality education for all learners (Peters, 2007; UNESCO, 2000) to create an inclusive society for the future. However, inclusion of learners with SENs has multiple interpretations (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & van Houten, 2009). For example, Slee (2011) called for a comprehensive analysis of the exclusion process to remove all forms of barriers to education, as well as enhancing overall quality of education for all learners. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), however, emphasized the inclusion of all learners regardless of their race, gender, social background, sexuality, disability, or other disadvantages. As stated earlier, in developing countries, the inclusion agenda has been linked to broader development goals, particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second of the MDGs aims specifically to strengthen the EFA agenda of achieving universal access to primary education for all children by 2015. Despite these efforts, progress in achieving these targets has been very slow (Mittler, 2005) and policymakers of both developed and developing countries are struggling to implement this policy (Walton, 2015). As a result, a large numbers of children are still out of school, with the majority of them being learners from developing countries and learners with SENs.

Internationally, countries developed inclusive education policies to achieve a global agenda for EFA without investigating whether or not they would be achievable. This raises critical questions about the ways in which inclusive education is conceptualized and contextualized, and invites debate about the complexity of the inclusion of learners with SENs. Ultimately, the epistemological belief of homogeneity between Western and other non-Western education should be questioned as well as critically evaluated (Subedi & Daza, 2008).

It is most likely that many developing countries will not meet EFA goals by 2015 (UNESCO, 2014). Regardless of whether the overall EFA goals will be achieved by 2015, the international donor agencies are strongly pushing for the adoption of an inclusive educational model in developing countries. UNESCO therefore developed an international monitoring mechanism (UNESCO, 2014) to oversee its implementation.

Inclusive education is perceived to be the best mode of enhancing access and improving the quality of education for all learners. In practice, emphasis has been given to the inclusion of learners with SENs, resulting in it being perceived as an alternative to special education. However, the concept of inclusive education has multiple interpretations. Researchers have recommended that implementation of inclusive education should be context specific, based on the social, political, economic, and cultural landscapes. Regrettably, during implementation, a unitary or 'one size fits all' approach is commonly used, without considering the uniqueness of the country's needs. This clearly indicates that policy makers in developing countries do not take into account the micro and macro systems (Tikly, 2015), and that monolithic post-colonial ideas have penetrated into educational policies, which are either consciously 'transferred' by Western consultants or unconsciously 'borrowed' by Western trained professionals.

At this point, it might be worth investigating the impact of 'policy transfer'

from one socio-cultural context to another. Policy transfer is not a new phenomenon in education. It is a process of educational 'lending' and/or 'borrowing' across national boundaries (Waldow, 2009). It investigates how and why educational knowledge or policies cross national boundaries and are interpreted (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003). Tan and Chua (2014) examined the cultural factors that influence education policy borrowing in China. They went on to argue that there is a cultural difference between Western and Chinese perspectives on the nature and transmission of knowledge, which makes education policy transfer in China challenging.

It is important to highlight that the field of disability and special education have been influenced by Western ideas for a long time. For example, the World Health Organization's definition of Impairment, Disability, and Handicap, as well as policies such as NCLB and IDEA dominated discourse in this field. On a similar note, Urwick and Elliott (2010) complained that domination of Western knowledge tends to popularize Western practice, and practitioners from developing countries have a tendency to follow them blindly. In doing so, local ideas, thoughts, and practices are marginalized (Brown, 2015).

Literature on inclusive education in developing countries is scarce, particularly in the context of Africa. However, the studies that have been conducted have mixed findings. For example, Urwick and Elliot (2010) analyzed the impact of inclusive education policy in Lesotho. They found that despite government and donor support, the program had no significant effect. The authors attributed its failure to the lack of consideration of local factors, such as inadequate trained personal, limited physical infrastructure, absence of availability of assistive devices for learners with disabilities, and so on. These findings are not unique to Lesotho; similar findings were also reported in other African countries. Scholars have identified negative social attitudes and stigmatization towards learners with SENs in many African countries, and have identified this as a significant barrier to inclusion of these learners in regular schools. It is therefore important to address such barriers while implementing inclusive education in these countries. Sefa Dei (2005) explored how African learners and educators work with differences and diversity in schools. The findings of the study highlighted that disparities and inequalities were deeply rooted and maintained by micro (classroom) factors and macro (culture, language, religion, gender) layers of bio-ecological systems nested around the learners (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009; Ocloo & Subbey, 2008).

Education policies in Botswana and the historical journey to inclusive education

It is widely accepted that, prior to the introduction of the Western form of education, many African countries, including Botswana, carried out its education informally, as part of day-to-day living. Learning was contextually driven, thus allowing it to be relevant and meaningful. Children learned through listening,

imitating, and practicing what their elders did. Elders transmitted cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next by using stories, folklores, and songs. Missionaries brought with them the Western form of formal education; at that time, it was mostly reserved for the children of the elite families who could afford to pay, while the masses were left out (Chilisa, 2000). Botswana attained its independence in 1966, at a time when Western formal education had made little impact on the majority of Batswana (Government of Botswana, 1977). There were only 251 primary schools and 1624 teachers; only 20% of school-age children were enrolled in primary school. Even after independence, the colonial educational structure continued. English remained both the official language and the medium of instruction. Colonial forms of curriculum, school organization and management continued and profoundly influenced the mindset of the people of Botswana.

Educating learners with SENs began about 40 years ago in Botswana. In 1969, missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Church started the first school for children who were blind or had severe visual impairments. Missionaries from the Lutheran Church opened the first school for children who were deaf or had severe hearing impairments in 1970. The first national education policy, commonly known as *Education for Kagisano*, recommended that each child should have the right to education, regardless of his/her disability, race, ethnicity, culture, or background. Nevertheless, it did not address the implementation of education of learners with SENs (Government of Botswana, 1993). The Government of Botswana did not take responsibility for the education of these learners at that time, leaving it, instead, to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In 1992, a commission was set up to review and consider the future of the education system in Botswana. Based on its report the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) was approved in 1994. The RNPE is still the major policy on education in Botswana. Its main focus was to promote access to education for all, including learners with SENs (Government of Botswana, 1994). Interestingly, this policy recommended social integration for learners with SENs by placing them as much as possible with their peers in ordinary schools (Government of Botswana, 1994). As a result, numbers of special units in regular schools increased in the last two decades.

With the implementation of RNPE, the enrollment of learners with SENs increased in Primary schools. Hopkins (2004) argues that learners with SENs are merely placed in mainstream education without paying attention to their educational needs, which compromises the quality of education received by these learners. In addition, this model created confusion with the service delivery. As a result, learners with SENs are placed in three different school set-ups (special, integrated, and inclusive) in Botswana, depending on the type of impairments. For example, at the primary level, learners with hearing impairments are either placed in residential special schools or special unit of a mainstream school, while learners with intellectual impairments as well as visual impairments are placed in special units of mainstream schools. Additionally, learners with learning disabilities are placed in regular schools.

In 2011, in alignment with global trends and with funding and technical

assistance from the European Union, the Government of Botswana adopted an Inclusive Education Policy to achieve EFA and the second MDG goal (McBride, 2010). The goals of the Policy are:

- All learners will complete their basic education and progress, where possible, to secondary or tertiary education, or to vocational training.
- Teachers will have the skills and resources to enable children of different abilities to learn effectively.
- Out of school education programs will be further developed and strengthened to ensure the inclusion in education and skills development of those children, young people and adults whose needs cannot be met in the formal system.
- Schools will be supportive and humane establishments that embrace and support all their learners and value their achievements, so that children will attend school regularly and work hard at their studies.
- All relevant governmental, non-governmental and private organizations will work in harmony to develop and maintain an inclusive education system in Botswana (Government of Botswana, 2011, p. 5).

It is evident from these statements that the cultural contexts and the indigenous knowledge system(s) were not given adequate attention in the policy.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to obtain a nuanced and insightful conceptualization of the teachers' perceptions about the process implementing the Inclusive Education Policy in Botswana primary schools. Specifically, it employed a multiple-case study research design to gain insights into the practice and process of inclusive education in the South Central Region of Botswana. Six government primary schools from three different locations (urban, peri-urban, and rural) that already included learners with SENs were purposively selected. Each school formed a case and presented a unique ecology of classrooms and school culture. The instruments and techniques for data generation included focus group discussions, document analysis, and observations.

Following informed consent and reassurance of confidentiality and anonymity, the author conducted six in-depth focus group discussions. Six teachers with varying amounts of teaching experience (from two to twenty years) from each school formed a focus group. The focus group discussions were based on the following themes: a) What is your opinion about the inclusive education policy? b) How is this policy implemented in your school, and c) What impact does this have on your day-to-day teaching and learning? Additionally, secondary questions were asked to clarify and further illuminate statements made by participants, enabling the research to be an emergent process (Creswell, 2008). Participants were encouraged to discuss freely

their feelings regarding inclusive education.

School and classroom observations augmented focus group discussions. Observations mainly focused on policy implementation indicators, such as school environment management, aesthetics, and mission statements on school notice boards. Two classroom observations per school were conducted during normal teaching hours. The purpose of these observations was to verify and validate data obtained from the focus group discussions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I triangulated the data gathered from the multiple sites, sources, and methods to “shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). I then followed the six basic phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) data familiarization, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) report production. Throughout this process, the aims and objectives of the research were used to guide the organization and interpretation of data. I used the data derived from these multiple methods for triangulation purposes and to arrive at common themes.

Results

The six focus group discussions for this research provided rich, descriptive, and insightful comments about the policy implementation in Botswana. The interview questions were open-ended, so the teachers could share their personal thoughts and opinions regarding inclusive education. The interview responses were diverse in content and scope. During the coding process, two predominant themes emerged and are presented in this section.

Inclusive education policy: Challenging dominant Western epistemology

Inclusive education in Botswana is very much grounded on a Western epistemological perspective that postulates that all learners, irrespective of their conditions, should be in regular schools. Since the concept emerged from Western ideologies, it is considered by many as flawless and universally appropriate, and therefore should be implemented indiscriminately without consideration of ‘cultural context, knowledge and resources’ (Crossley & Tikly, 2004). Policymakers in developing countries tend to echo Western ideologies and vocabularies. During the focus group discussions, the majority of participants reported that they were confused about the conceptualization of inclusive education, its terminologies and practices. The teachers felt that policies are imposed on them. One teacher explained it this way:

I am not sure how policymakers take decisions; there are many projects simultaneously running in our school. Last year they were talking about achieving 'Education for All' and 'Millennium Development Goals.' They used terms such as 'mainstreaming,' and 'integration;' today they are saying 'child friendly school' and 'inclusive education.'

Some other participants echoed these sentiments: 'teachers and students are the guinea pigs of educational experiments;' 'since we are powerless, what the ministry decides, we need to implement;' and 'we are rarely consulted.' While the government may claim to be working on 'education for all,' its commitment may remain on paper. Through this and similar reports, it appeared that implementation of inclusive education is complex (Thomas & Glenny, 2002) and requires much more commitment than merely placing students in regular education classrooms (Slee, 2002); therefore, consultations of all stakeholders is of paramount importance for policy implementation and opinions of stakeholders must be valued.

Defending the importance of consultations with local partners, one of the teachers raised the issues of 'Botho' and the importance of 'cultural resources' for policy implementation:

... cultural resources are important. They include the knowledge, practices, beliefs, norms, and values that are derived from culturally specific practice by the local communities. We believe in Botho, which means humanness, common good for society. Every individual must be valued and respected. In my opinion, it is the key essence of inclusive education and it should be practiced within and outside the school.

Elaborating on the cultural issues, a participant from a rural school said:

Learners with SENs have been stigmatized for many years. Disability is mostly associated with witchcraft, voodooism, juju, or satanic forces. Now, all of a sudden, you want to include learners with SENs in regular schools without preparing all the stakeholders. In my opinion, it might further lead to stigmatization or discrimination, and some of us might avoid them. We need to think collectively, what exactly can work for us in Botswana. Even if inclusive education is successful in the UK, it does not mean it would work for us.

This quote highlighted how policies are 'borrowed,' transferred and implemented without considering the local values, beliefs, and practices. Policies are mostly developed with the help of donor agencies. One of the challenges in any international collaboration is the power division between the donor agencies and the receiving countries, and in most cases the concepts such as equity, social justice, and human rights are often taken for granted (A. C. Armstrong et al., 2010). Implementation of policies in developing countries are mostly a top-down approach; local policy-makers try to push a foreign policy without taking account of local practitioners (Miller, 2014). As a result, resistant voices have emerged to challenge

Western dominance.

Teachers consistently emphasized the belief that inclusive education was imposed on them without adequately preparing them to include learners with SENs. One of the participants described it very well. When she said:

...the situation is changing rapidly in the schools; you have to keep pace with this change. Ten years back, when I was in college, we were told that special education is an ideal situation for learners with SENs. Then, when I went for my degree, we were introduced to the concept of integration. Now everyone is talking about inclusive education. What are you really saying?

Teachers who had learners with SENs in their classrooms emphasized the need to address the infrastructural problems, such as accessible toilets, libraries, and playgrounds to facilitate effective implementation of inclusive education. These findings were corroborated by data from the classroom and school observations. To highlight the issue, one of the participants said:

I don't know the policy-making process, but I feel policymakers come up with unrealistic goals, because they are not connected with reality. They sit in the offices and tell us what to do. Initially, the Inclusive Education Policy was for learners with SENs, later on we were told the policy caters to all learners. I am confused!

This finding suggests that the Government of Botswana has tried to include learners with SENs without prior extensive research. One of the teachers pointed out that:

It could be possible that inclusive education is being practiced in Western countries, and we have a habit of copying from them without analyzing the local context. Most of the consultants undermine our knowledge and practice, and force us to believe that 'West is the best.'

This quotation clearly highlights how the education policies for learners with SENs in developing countries mimic Western policies. As the policies are formed in Western countries, they are either 'borrowed' or 'transferred' to developing countries (Mundy & Verger, 2015) and local voices are marginalized (Brown, 2015).

Teaching and learning experiences

An additional purpose of this study was to unpack and explore experiences and practices of general education teachers in primary schools. Four subthemes emerged and they are discussed in this section.

Learning about context

Teachers were well aware about the teaching and learning context as well as the socio-cultural-political issues of the community. All primary schools in Botswana have established Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) as a means to be connected with the community. In most cases it was found to be dysfunctional. Teachers complained that, “some parents do not participate,” “the PTA seems to be a foreign idea to parents,” and “parents believe that schools and teachers are responsible for teaching learners, particularly when learners have some forms of limitations.” Echoing similar sentiments, one of the teachers from a rural school reported:

I tried to initiate parent-teacher collaboration, the problem was, I was not comfortable with the local language and some parents were not comfortable in speaking English, so, sometimes parents gave that as an excuse for not participating in meetings.

In focus group discussions, participants, particularly from rural schools, held out the possibility of non-traditional power relationships between teacher and parents. Teachers mentioned that they were often considered as “experts.” Explaining the scenario, one teacher from a peri-urban school said:

A learner was identified as having learning disabilities, I called the mother, and requested her to help her son in his education, the mother immediately replied, “I am not educated, how can I teach him, you are a trained teacher, you know how to teach him.”

Curriculum and pedagogy

The overwhelming impression that we gained from teachers’ narratives reflected Western hegemony in the curriculum - culture. Largely, the Botswana’s education system is based on the British system. For example, the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) is modeled on the British based General Certificate of Secondary Education GCSE examinations. Even the design of the most basic infrastructure, such as school buildings, classrooms, and playgrounds, was based on British public schools. At the same time, English is the medium of instruction; stories and rhymes that are used for teaching and learning mostly depict Western culture instead of Setswana culture. Throughout the interviews, the teachers complained that except for social studies and Setswana, they were forced to use more Western examples due to lack of linguistically and socially appropriate educational resources. One teacher with 26 years of experience who teaches in a rural school stated:

I am a general education teacher. I was not trained in special education; there was a learner with reading problems in my class. I wanted to use remedial materials, I could not find any materials in Setswana, I had to use Western-based resources.

This issue was echoed by other respondents as well, many of whom believed that, along with adequate knowledge and skills, appropriate resource materials are equally important to include learners with SENs. One experienced teacher from a urban school noted:

A teacher plays a key role in including learners with SENs, therefore he/she should be skillful; but most of us are not trained in special education. For example, there is a learner with communication disorders in my class for whom a speech therapist suggested to use communication boards. She gave us picture symbols of which many of them did not make any sense. A special educator introduced sign language for the student. However, when I explored further, I learnt that Botswana Sign Language system is based on American Sign Language.

Classroom practice and challenges

Nearly all of the participants reported inadequate knowledge and skills to deal with the inclusion of learners with SENs, and many talked about the need for professional development. One of the participants was highly critical about the current practice of inclusive education:

I don't see any advantage of inclusive education in our schools, because curriculum, instruction and our training are not designed for inclusive classrooms. In my opinion, these learners were better in special schools. Since inclusive education is a new fashion, we have to follow it. Tomorrow, it could be special schools and we would swing back to special schools.

Echoing the same sentiments, another participant said:

Our schools built ramps; does it mean we are practicing inclusive education? Interestingly, we don't have students who use wheelchairs in our school. On the other side, we have students who struggle to read but nothing is done for them!

Participants in all focus groups cited a number of barriers for the effective functioning of inclusive education in primary schools in Botswana. Apart from inadequate knowledge and skills, teachers identified several barriers to including learners with SENs in regular schools, such as lack of resources and funding, followed by lack of personnel, time, parental involvement, and large class-size. These issues are not unique to Botswana. A significant body of international literature also reported these as barriers to include learners with SENs (Florian, 2014). These scenarios display inappropriate implementation of a Western policy in the education system of Botswana, which applied 'one size fits all' approaches without considering local barriers to education.

Professional development

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of ‘knowledge and skills,’ and suggested a need for continuous professional development. When probed, one of the teachers responded, “I attended an in-service workshop, organized by one of the universities in the UK. It was good, but some of the strategies mentioned by the instructors were not applicable in our context.” Thus, Western forms of ideologies not only influence the pre-service curriculum but are also visible at the in-service level.

One objective of this paper was to examine how teachers’ day-to-day experiences were influenced by the inclusive education policy and how they navigated the process of policy implementation, rather than just looking at the challenges faced by the teachers. Through the teachers’ narratives and classroom observations, it was found that Western domination continues to play a significant role in the practice of inclusive education.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the implementation process of inclusive education in Botswana through an analysis of teachers’ perceptions towards inclusion of learners with SENs in regular primary schools. It is evident from the findings of this research that the inclusive education policy of Botswana is largely influenced by Western thinking. Cogan and Derricott (2014) argued that educational policies have the potential to create social change, and therefore, should be implemented keeping the socio cultural contexts in mind. The findings of this study pointed out that the inclusive education policy was imposed without examining the local context and adequate consultation of the local practitioners. Most of the teachers were quite disgruntled about the ‘top-down’ approach. Their opinions did not differ by location of schools. This created a rift between the practitioners and the policymakers, resulting in teachers perceiving inclusive education as a ‘foreign,’ Western concept imposed on them (Pathar & Nxumalo, 2013). The findings from this study also paint a complex picture of policy ‘borrowing.’

Borrowing educational policies from Western countries has been a longstanding tradition in developing countries. Policymakers of many developing countries support this practice as a part of ‘willingness to learn from elsewhere’ (Ochs & Phillips, 2002) and in many cases, it was frequently rewarded with financial commitment from donor agencies (Brown, 2015). This process could lead to a dependency on other countries and unequal power dynamics. Brown (2015) explicitly pointed out that in developing countries, policies are developed through agreement between government officials and donor agencies—a process in which local voices are marginalized.

The findings clearly show that the teachers felt that inclusive education could be a well-intended agenda but should be consistent with a locally evolving conceptualization, rather than being blindly adopted as an 'off the shelf' item for practice because it is a Western idea (Ocloo & Subbey, 2008). At the same time, policy frameworks or guidelines have not considered indigenous knowledge and skills as potential strategies for classroom practices. Teachers were forced to accept international policies as donor agencies pushed their agendas through international declarations such as EFA and MDGs. It was clear that policymakers of the developing countries act as local agents for the international donor agencies, and therefore push their unrealistic agendas (Subedi & Daza, 2008); thus, in many cases, policies are unevenly implemented. Phillips (2005) recommended that when borrowing a policy, a systematic analysis of the educational context as well as accepting local knowledge and practices are essential.

Although inclusive education has gained significant currency internationally and in the academic literature, both developed and developing countries are still struggling with the implementation processes to make schools more inclusive (Walton, 2015). Scholars (D. Armstrong et al., 2011; Florian, 2012) have suggested that implementation should be context specific. On the contrary, more often than not, it is imposed by various external forces and funding agencies (Miller, 2014). The findings of this study also support similar views and present a dilemma: on the one hand, policy makers are interested in strengthening the EFA and MDG agenda of universal primary education for all, including those with SENs; on the other hand, teachers complained about inadequate resources, lack of knowledge and skills of teachers. This situation is not unique to Botswana. The existing literature identified similar challenges to implementing inclusive education both in developed and developing countries (Florian, 2014).

Although the opinions of teachers did not differ much by location of schools, teachers from rural areas discussed stigmatization towards learners with SENs more. These issues were also reported by researchers from other African countries (Donald, Samia, Kakooza-Mwesige, & Bearden, 2014). This study went beyond these issues and highlighted the inherited complexities inherent in the postcolonial conditions. The postcolonial approach helped in rethinking the conceptual, institutional, and cultural ideologies that called for 'decolonizing the mind' to challenge dominant Western ways of seeing.

Limitations

This study has various limitations. The primary limitation is that inclusive education is multi-dimensional, and multiple stakeholders are involved in the implementation process. However, only teachers' perspectives were used here, and the study did not examine other stakeholders' perspectives. Future research using opinions of multiple stakeholders may provide stronger evidence of the Western influence in the process of policy implementations in developing countries.

Conclusion

The most important lesson learnt from this study is that adopting a policy based on Western models needs well-grounded research, and the local socio-political context should be taken into consideration to facilitate a smooth implementation process. For that reason, it is in the best interest of all stakeholders that local administrators and international agencies gain deeper insights into the local contexts and practices. The local beliefs, values, and experiences of those who practice in day-to-day situations must be considered when developing policy frameworks.

The postcolonial theoretical framework shows that imposing Western perceptions and beliefs of inclusive education with a preconceived understanding of its universal applicability has inherent problems. It is hoped that this study contributes to the appropriate development and implementation of inclusive education in developing countries such as Botswana. There is no doubt that, without appropriate understanding and/or commitment, the objectives of the policy will be difficult to realize.

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