

Training Special Needs Education Teachers: Some Experiences from Uganda

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Abstract

The Salamanca Statement on the education of children with special needs and other international declarations emphasize the need for inclusive education as a strategy for achieving Education for All. This is in line with the proclamations made in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which, among others, urges schools to be responsible for the education of all children. Furthermore, the Dakar Framework for Action on quality Education For all (2000) had significant implications on the role of teachers world-wide. Although many countries have adopted these principles, even developing countries experience challenges in implementing it. This article presents experiences regarding the implementation of inclusive education in Uganda. The focus is on the training of teachers for children with special needs. We argue that teacher preparation should be a key consideration in the implementation of inclusive education. Drawing from the experiences in Uganda, the authors suggest that the preparation of teachers for inclusive education requires flexibility in the implementation of the existing policies and an adequate allocation of funding in order to meet the increasing demand of trained teachers in the education sector. There is need to have a deliberate policy for training and reorientation of teachers at all levels of education to support children with special needs. It seems certainly useful to think before hand about the mode of training; how, who, when and where it should be carried. We believe that a healthy, enlightened and innovative population, which is equipped with the necessary skills and positive attitudes forms a solid foundation for the development of inclusive education.

Introduction

In this paper, children with special needs are seen as those who experience barriers to learning and development. These barriers can be temporal or permanent conditions which may be from within the child, from the environment or a combination of the two. Special needs education in Uganda was started in 1952. This was a small beginning which was initiated by the Colonial Government and provided services for only a few children. The provision was then referred to as “Special Education” because it was focusing on the education of children with disabilities, such as children with visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental retardation and children with motor impairment.

This development came into place because it was realized that there were many children and youth with disabilities who were not benefiting from the existing general educational provision. However, persons with disabilities were often marginalized due to traditional beliefs and negative attitudes by society, and therefore development was slow.

This provision was started with the following aims:

- To provide educational facilities for children and youth with disabilities;
- To provide educational programmes that would prevent the increase of disability and the development of secondary impairments;
- To enable persons with disabilities to develop their full potential; and
- To create awareness among families and communities on the needs and potentials of persons with disabilities.

Although the Government had the goodwill to support the training of personnel in this field, it lacked the necessary resources to do it on its own. International and local Non-Government organizations gradually supported the training of a few Ugandan teachers by sponsoring their training abroad. This limited number of personnel was not able to meet the country's demand.

Policies on teacher training

Initially, the Government of Uganda did not have an effective policy for the training of teachers in special education. It was in 1992 that the Government established a policy entitled “Education for National Integration and Development”. In this policy, Government pledged to support special education by providing funding and teacher training. This gave a mandate to UNISE and the Ministry of Education and Sports to train special needs education teachers. The same policy enabled the broadening of the target group to include other children and youths who experience barriers to learning and development. The broadening of the target group therefore led to the new concept of “Special Needs Education” rather than just “Special Education”, which was focusing on “traditional” disabilities.

Other policy provisions that have supported teacher training for special needs education include:

The National Constitution (1995). Article 30 of the Constitution recognizes the Right to Education for all Citizens. Article 35 states that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of sex, disability, religion or ethnic/cultural background.

The Children Statute (1996). This policy document was put in place to protect and ensure that all children get the necessary support for their growth and development. The policy document was enacted by Parliament to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Among others, the Statute emphasizes the need to provide opportunities for children with special needs to attain education and support so as to enable them develop to their full potential.

Universal Primary Education Provision (1997). In 1997, His Excellency the President of Uganda announced an initiative to enable four school-going age children in every family to attain basic education by providing free education. Priority during

registration is given to children with special needs and the girl child. As a strategy for ensuring the success of the UPE provision, Government supports training of teachers for children with special needs at national and local (district) levels.

Policy on Basic Education for Disadvantaged Children (2002). This policy recognizes the need to address the educational needs of various categories of children who experience barriers to learning within and outside school. The policy outlines a five year strategy for addressing the needs of such children. The focus of the policy is on teacher training, provision of instructional materials and facilities, and strengthening the collaboration between Government Agencies and Non- Government Organizations in providing services for children with special needs.

All these policies / legal provisions have enabled Uganda to respond to the call for Education for All, as advocated for in the Jomtien Conference (UNESCO, 1990) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994).

Training of teachers for special needs education

In 1988, UNESCO provided initial technical support to the Government of Uganda to establish a Department for training teachers in special needs education in an Institute of Teacher Education. This training was designed for regular teachers to be able to work in special schools and units for children with Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Physical disabilities and Mental Retardation.

In 1991 the Governments of Uganda and the Kingdom of Denmark signed an agreement by which the Danish Government gave technical and financial support to develop special needs education and related services in Uganda. This agreement led to the establishment of:

- A centralised Institute of Special Education called the Uganda National Institute of Special Education (UNISE). The Institute has now become part of Kyambogo University; and
- A decentralised programme, known as Special Needs Education / Educational Assessment and Resource Services (SNE/EARS) established in 1992, and based in the Ministry of Education and Sports. This programme established centres in all districts country - wide to provide services such as identification and assessment of learners with special needs, referrals, training, guidance and counselling. This programme has now become part of the Department for Special Needs Education, Career Guidance and Counselling in the Ministry of Education and Sports.

UNISE was established in 1991 with the following objectives:

- To train teachers and other personnel in the field of special needs education and rehabilitation;
- To act as a national resource centre for the production and dissemination of information about special needs and rehabilitation;
- To carry out research in special needs, inclusive education, rehabilitation and related fields for better understanding and development of persons with special needs;
- To develop instructional and information materials to promote special needs education and inclusive education; and

- To collaborate with Non-Government Organisations which provide related services.

Today, the Institute offers academic programmes which target teachers, medical and para-medical workers, social workers and community development personnel to enable them implement inclusive education and rehabilitation.

The following programmes target teachers:

- (i) Diploma in Special Needs Education (Dip. SNE)
- (ii) Bachelor of Education - Special Needs Education (BEd. SNE)
- (iii) General and Tailored Certificate Programmes in Special Needs Education

A Masters Degree in Special Needs Education and Inclusion Programme is currently being planned.

These programmes offer opportunities for teachers to acquire knowledge, skills and experience necessary to teach persons with disabilities and those with other barriers to learning and development. They are designed to address the learning needs of a broad target group which include:

- Children with visual impairment
- Children with hearing impairment
- Children with multiple difficulties
- Children with motor difficulties
- Children with health problems
- Children living under difficult circumstances which include parenting children, street children, children from disadvantaged areas, children living with or affected by HIV/AIDS, children from nomadic tribes, orphans, child soldiers and children who are traumatized and children with chronic health problems.

The broadening of the target group is in line with the international call for Education for All.

The training of teachers in UNISE takes two forms: the **Full Time Approach** and **Distance Education approach**. These are discussed below.

The Full Time Training Approach: This is the most common approach used in teacher education institutions in Uganda. In UNISE, this mode of training is used in the following teacher education programmes:

- (i) The Diploma in Special Needs Education (Dip.SNE): This is a two-year programme offered to teachers who have had initial regular teacher training. The programme offers general courses of study in the field of special needs education. The courses were developed as a result of the great demand for teachers arising from Universal Primary Education (UPE) provision. The UPE provision (as mentioned before), gives access to many children with special needs to enroll not only in special schools and units but to any nearest regular school as proposed in the Salamanca Statement (1994). Among the courses that the teachers study is a sixty - hour course

on Inclusive Education. On completion of the program, the teachers are employed in schools, teacher training colleges and district special needs education centers.

(ii) Bachelor of Education - Special Needs Education (BEd. SNE): This a two-year programme for teachers who initially qualify in regular Teacher Training Colleges, and have undertaken special needs education training at Diploma level. The programme has general courses in special needs education, and in addition, the students choose one of three areas of specialisation: Mental Retardation, Hearing Impairment and Visual Impairment. On completion of the two year training, graduates from the Bachelor of Education programme can be employed in schools, teacher training colleges, and District Special Needs Education Centres.

Number of Teachers Trained through The Full Time Approach:

Year of Completion	Programmes		Total
	BEd.	Dip SNE	
1990	-	25	25
1992	-	25	25
1994	-	67	67
1996	-	80	80
1997	-	55	55
1998	-	44	44
1999	-	68	68
2000	28	69	97
2001	20	65	85
2002	22	73	95
2003	20	55	75

*Note: Up to 1996, the intake was every second year.
BEd. SNE started in 2000.*

The Distance Education Programme: This programme leads to the award of a Diploma in Special Needs Education. It was set up as a result of the greater demand for special needs education teachers to support the increased enrolment of children with special needs. It is a three-year programme which is equivalent to the two-year Conventional Diploma in Special Needs Education.

The delivery mode is through self study modules, and two weeks residential face-to-face sessions at selected centres during school holidays. Each academic year has three face-to-face sessions in which UNISE lecturers guide the students on the pre-prepared modules.

Number of Teachers Enrolled for the Distance Education Program 2000-2003:

Year	No. of Teachers
2000	433
2001	317
2002	392
2003	309
Total	1,451

In addition, the Institute from time-to-time runs Certificate programmes for teachers to acquire basic knowledge and skills in special needs education. General Certificate programmes offer a variety of courses of study which are compulsory, but geared towards enabling the teachers meet the needs of all learners. Tailored courses are run for teachers in specific areas which include sign language, braille, mobility and orientation. Teachers who successfully complete the Certificate programmes have an added advantage for admission into the Diploma Programme.

Initial teacher training

In Uganda, initial training of primary school teachers is carried out in 45 Primary Teachers' Colleges, which are spread throughout the country. Students are admitted by the Ministry of Education and Sports on successful completion of secondary school education. The training in the Primary Teachers Colleges lasts two years, and the teachers are posted by the Local Authorities to teach in primary schools.

UNISE, in collaboration with the Institute of Teacher Education (the two institutions are now part of Kyambogo University), and the Ministry of Education and Sports, developed a component of Special Needs Education as part of the course of study for teacher trainees in the Teachers Colleges. The aim of this component is to give all student teachers basic knowledge in special needs education.

The Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for all issues pertaining to education and sports. The Ministry's mission statement is "to provide for, support, guide, coordinate, regulate and promote quality education and sports to all persons in Uganda for National integration, individual and National development". To fulfil its mission, the Ministry, among others, undertakes the following functions:

- provides technical, professional, material and financial support for the delivery of education services.
- coordinates teacher training programmes.
- developing and formulating national education policies, plans, projects and guidelines for their implementation.
- developing instructional and information materials to promote inclusive education.

With the financial and technical support from Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and the Government of Uganda, the Department of Special Needs Education, Career Guidance and Counselling in collaboration with UNISE, provide some basic training of teachers in special needs education. The training is in form of short courses organised regionally to target grass root regular primary and secondary school teachers. These courses are intended to enable teachers acquire basic knowledge and skills for meeting the diverse needs of learners in their classes.

Training of Special Needs Education Coordinators (SNECOs) and Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCTs)

SNECOs are regular school teachers who have been identified to coordinate Special Needs Education activities at community levels. CCTs are Centre Coordinating Tutors who are identified from Primary Teachers Colleges to coordinate teacher-training activities at community level.

The Ministry of Education and Sports in collaboration with UNISE has provided training of the SNECOs and CCTs country-wide to enable them acquire basic

knowledge and skills in special needs education. These coordinators are responsible for a cluster of 10-15 schools within a certain area in matters related to special needs education. They work together with schools in providing the following services:

- school based basic training for regular teachers in special needs education.
- promotion of awareness in cluster schools and the neighbouring communities about the varying needs of children in schools.
- guidance to schools and other stakeholders with regard to modification of the teaching materials, methodologies, and environment to suit all learners including learners with special needs.

Number of Teachers Trained by the Special Needs Education Career Guidance and Counselling Department, Ministry of Education and Sports 1st July 1995 -30th June 2003 (Short Courses):

Year	Number of Teachers Trained
1995	92
1996	98
1997	340
1998	751
1999	873
2001-2003	5,644
Total	7,534

Source: Special Needs Education/Educational Assessment and Resource Services Program Completion Report, June 2003.

Linkages

Another development that has boosted the training of teachers for special need education in Uganda are the linkage programmes with the following institutions:

- The University of Oslo-Norway
- The University of Zimbabwe
- The Kenya Institute of Special Education
- Institute of Child Health - London
- The County of Copenhagen in Denmark
- Danish Deaf Association- Denmark

These institutions have provided support in the following areas:

- staff development
- joint research and publications
- instructional materials development including the curriculum and module development
- external assessment of the students
- training in specific areas such as autism, reading difficulties, inclusive education, mobility and orientation, and research in sign language.

Further challenges

As indicated earlier, the existing policies / legislation have facilitated the development of the on-going training in UNISE. However, there exists a gap with regard to the employment and retention of teachers who graduate from the Institute. Although the Constitution advocates for equal rights and opportunities to employment, the employment of teachers for children with special needs in some districts depends on the attitudes within the Local Government Authorities. It should be noted that the decentralised system of Governance in Uganda mandates the Local Government Authorities to recruit required personnel based on the district needs. A strategy for enforcing the policy on the recruitment of teachers with special needs training in every school is necessary. Besides, there is need for a policy that should compel all teachers to undergo special needs education training so that they are able to support all learners in an inclusive setting.

Like many African Countries, a greater percentage of the society in Uganda is known to hold traditional beliefs about disability. Although an effort has been made to sensitise the society, some still believe that disability is as a result of a curse or witchcraft and is contagious. A specific legal framework and continued sensitisation of the society will help to overcome this challenge.

In Uganda, it is common for parents and local authorities to evaluate teachers' performance based on the national examination results. In school, children who perform poorly may be looked down upon, teased by peers and sometimes scolded by teachers. Such children may be blamed by the teachers, who unfortunately do not accept that poor performance may be due to poor teaching and lack of proper guidance. Children who perform poorly often experience low self esteem, lack of motivation to learn, and hence, perform even poorer.

With the realisation that specific learning difficulties in reading, writing and arithmetic can lead to barriers to learning and development, there is now a serious need to review the training of teachers. The training should focus on helping all the teachers to acquire contemporary knowledge and skills on how to teach and support children with difficulties in learning in the above mentioned areas. In Uganda, these aspects, among others, are the major cause of the high rate of school drop-outs.

UNISE is a public institution, which is entitled to receive Government funding in line with Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (2001). Indeed the Institute receives Government funding to cater for employees salaries and running costs. Due to the increase in training programmes and demand as a result of Universal Primary Education, a request has been made to the Government to increase the funding. This is to enable the Institute to cope with the increasing training needs.

Looking to the future

From this presentation, it is clear that Uganda has registered some achievements. However, as we have seen, there have been challenges experienced in initiating and implementing teacher training in special needs education in Uganda. The progress has been made, in our view, because of the following factors:

- *Availability of favourable policies and political goodwill:* This provides a fertile ground for initiating and promoting the training.

- *The training of key professionals (Lecturers) in the field of special needs education:* Credit goes to the Danish and the Norwegian Governments for sponsoring at least 20 Lecturers to pursue special needs education courses abroad. These lecturers are now training teachers.
- *The training approaches:* The variety of training approaches used; full-time, distance education, and short courses have enabled many teachers to access basic knowledge and skills in special needs education.
- *Increased sensitisation:* This has greatly helped to improve the attitudes of the society towards special needs education. More children with special needs are now accessing education, not only in special schools and units but also in regular schools.
- *Institutional linkages:* As a developing country with limited resources, it would have been a dream to realise the current achievements. Collaboration with other institutions has helped in strengthening the training.
- *Representation of persons with disabilities in Parliament:* The current National constitution provides for four representatives of persons with disabilities in Parliament. These Members of Parliament support the training of teachers for special needs education through, among others, advocacy and lobbying.

In Uganda, inclusive education is viewed as a strategy of ensuring that all learners gain access to, and participate in the available educational provisions. All teachers are therefore central in the implementation of this programme. However, as can be seen from the numbers trained so far, more still needs to be done to ensure the success of inclusive education at all levels. For this reason, the Government of Uganda continues to seek support both locally and internationally in order to address the current implementation gaps especially with regard to teacher training and instructional materials / facilities to promote inclusive education.

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