Challenging Notions of Inclusion in the African Context, for Sustainable Inclusive Education Policy and Practice

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Introduction

Alex Perry (2015), in his book entitled *The Rift: A New Africa Breaks Free* suggests that 'Africa is nearing the end of an epic quest for freedom that will revolutionize perceptions of it and change the world'. It is this statement upon which this paper is based, in the belief that Perry is right. Perceptions of Africa, in its quest for freedom, will change; and it will offer something others will want to emulate, specifically in terms of ideas of 'inclusion' and how inclusive education can be achieved. This article sets out to contextualize the move towards inclusive education in Africa and how this has been affected by understandings and models drawn from the North. The paper argues that where these models and practices have been implemented without adaption to the local context, it has often led to unsustainable development in view of local constraints and the maintenance of separate systems which segregate learners. The paper interrogates international notions of inclusion in relation to local understanding of inclusion based on local value systems.

A common definition of inclusive education, or inclusion in education, appears to be related specifically to education for children with special needs and disabilities (SEND) (Pather, 2007), although more recent definitions shift thinking to school reform and social justice for *all* learners (for example, Muthukrishna, 2008; Slee, 2019). The move towards inclusive education was prompted by discussions in Salamanca in 1994. Mel Ainscow (2005) talks about the importance of the Salamanca Statement and the framework for Action. He, together with Professor Tony Booth, produced the Inclusive Education Index (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) which has been translated into many different languages and has become quite influential in education jurisdictions around the world. Two particularly interesting observations coming out of the Salamanca Statement are:

- Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs.
- Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

If we look at the history of inclusive education, we have to acknowledge Alan Dyson (2008) and Brahm Norwich's (2002) suggestion that part of the problem is that Salamanca dealt in absolutes. It doesn't mention inclusive education, only regular schools and special educational needs. As a result, it becomes a space for all and everything. Several scholars give an alternative view of the development of special education. Mike Oliver (1990), for example, gave us the politics of disablement; and Sally Thomlinson (1982) authored *A Sociology of Special Education*. While acknowledging that, at the time of the development of special education, it was a successful attempt to make sure that children with disabilities who were not seen in education had access to participate in education, they begin to challenge special education, encouraging us to look more at barriers which result in the construction of special needs and disability.

One can see the shifts in thinking as outlined by Peter Clough and Jenny Corbett in 2000 in their book *Theories of Inclusive Education*. The focus developed from a psycho-medical emphasis in the 1950s to a sociological approach in the 1960s, to a focus on curricular approaches in the 1970s, a focus on school improvement strategies in the 1980s, to disability studies in the 1990s and, more recently, to a focus on school reform led by inclusive values. Theories, policies and practice in the North have historically focused on how to support the education of children with SEND in specialized settings or in mainstream schools with specialized support. These models have been transported wholly to the South which have led to the maintenance of segregated systems which include special schools and special classes in mainstream schools. The focus appears to have remained on psycho-medical approaches to supporting children with SEND. This is problematic in the African context in view of limited resources, both material and professional. Furthermore, in view of the move towards decolonization and approaches to ensure emancipation and inclusion, socially and politically, segregation appears contradictory to this move. In response to this, theories on inclusive education, which situate it within the local contraints, is about social justice as outlined by Professor Muthukrishna (2008). It is about focusing on the local concepts of Ubuntu and putting these values into practice as proposed by Pather and Slee (2019), Okeke (2014), Phasha (2017), and others. Narratives from different countries in Africa are included in these texts.

Inclusive education in Africa

So what does inclusive education mean currently in Africa and why is this so? Back in 1998, Professor Joseph Kisanji suggested that 'the move towards inclusive education in relation to people with disabilities is a Western realization of the problems brought about by 'bundling PWDs up' in asylums and later in special schools, a system which was transported wholesale to countries of the South'. (Kisanji, 1998, p.55). It resonates with arguments put forward by international and comparative education critiques by Phillips and Schweisfurth (2008), and Crossely and Watson (2008) and others on how information is shared or rather transported from North to South without deeper reflection on

appropriateness or sustainability for local contexts. These sentiments are echoed by others writing about inclusive education in the South. Mithu Alur (2001) from India says, 'Colonialism may officially have come to an end but a new era of neo-colonialism has taken over. This has been engendered not only by Western 'experts' but by sectors of Indian society too'. One legacy of colonialism is a deeply entrenched belief that 'West knows best'. This is supported by Gadour (2019) from Libya who suggests that 'models of practice in inclusive education have been imported from the West, namely the UK and the USA, mostly by postgraduates studying in foreign contexts. Hegemony (control, domination) lies in the West!'. As stated earlier, models of inclusive education from the North which have focused on segregation of children with SEND into specialized institutions or mainstream institutions with specialized support, appear to dominate current thinking, policy, and practice in Africa. Many of these models have been imported by students studying in the North and returning to take up positions in Ministries of Education, so influencing policy development.

So what is happening currently is entrenched in a long history of segregation which was started by different institutions, established by missionaries and other philanthropic organizations from the North, for children with disabilities – specifically the deaf, blind, physically impaired and intellectually challenged. Countries in Africa tend to want to follow what the 'developed' countries are doing. Countries in Africa believe these countries hold the knowledge about how best to support children with specific disabilities – 'the West knows best'. This practice is also resonant in Asia and Middle East, often brought in by consultants and through international funding agendas by foreign agencies. The emphasis in inclusive education also remains primarily on disability rather than addressing a range of other needs and marginalized groups in the system. Inclusive education should focus on ensuring access and quality education for *all* learners by addressing barriers at schools. It should be about school reform.

The fight for rights and justice for people with disabilities is continually challenged by a view of disability as a specialized medical issue because of colonial and postcolonial influence. As stated earlier, models which focus on segregation and specialized support have been transported wholly to African countries without acknowledgment of local values, or adaption to the local context. It is further challenged by 'national and international elites using practices of violence and discourses that disavow diversity to ensure control over resources and people to politically and economically enrich themselves'. (Berghs, 2017, p.6).

The emphasis is on special schools and specialist knowledge and a move towards specialist teachers, teaching assistants or itinerants or, as in Seychelles, SENCOs in mainstream settings, resembling the highly-structured and highly-funded systems in the West, for example the UK. According to a 2010 review by McConkey and Bradley, special schools are high-cost options, which frankly low-income countries cannot afford. Special schools tend to be in urban areas and serve more affluent families who can afford the fees, when

the majority of children with disabilities live in rural areas. The expertise of specialist teachers based in special schools is often not shared with teachers in mainstream schools. The curriculum emphasis in these schools is primarily vocational which results in large numbers ending up in vocational centres, menial employment or straight back home.

A review of research and accounts by others acknowledges a host of issues facing inclusive education in Africa and other developing contexts. These experiences were through involvement in projects in Africa (Swaziland, Uganda, Kenya, Grenada and Seychelles), an EU funded ACP project from 2008-2012, and through work in other countries such as Ethiopia, The Gambia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Palestine, Nepal and Cambodia. What is discussed here may resonate with the context in Seychelles.

Challenges

In some contexts, schools with special classes, which have separate education for children with disabilities, are called 'inclusive schools'; this remains questionable. These learners are in separate classes for children with hearing impairment, or for those with intellectual impairment. They do not mix with the other children during class or during recess. A separate class for children with hearing impairment and intellectual impairment, for example, has been observed in a mainstream school in Ethiopia, and a school for children with autism.

Challenges found in Africa, including from research by Jenny Kilindo, Jeanine Fatma Biba, and Jina Andimignon, captured in the Digest of Research by Professor Deutschmann and others (Deutschmann et al., 2022) point to:

- A lack of teacher training, knowledge and skills. According to the Global Monitoring report 2016, more than half of pre-primary and one quarter of secondary-school teachers in sub-Saharan Africa are not trained anyway. Often there is just an introductory course on how to teach and support children in the different categories of disability, often in large classes. This is often missing in most undergraduate teacher-training programmes at college and university level, coupled with issues on inclusive pedagogy and diversity and how to accommodate a diversity of learning styles in the classroom.
- Lack of physical accessibility. Schools do not adhere to the principles of universal design when being built, many are old. They do not have ramps or modified toilets for children in wheelchairs.
- Lack of resources and materials. There is a general shortage of textbooks, as well as a shortage of adapted materials for children with disabilities; for example, brailled materials; also a lack of awareness of materials such as PECs and Makaton for those with language and communication difficulties.

- Some children remain in class without assistive devices to aid hearing and vision. Observations on a project in Ethiopia revealed a large number of children with hearing and vision impairment who remained unassessed and without hearing aids and eyeglasses.
- There are generally no support staff available, particularly in mainstream schools. For example, there are no sign-language interpreters – many countries have no central pool of resources and interpreters are sought from the local community and provide support without renumeration. Sign language is not a recognized language in most countries and so there is little sign-language training. Most sign-language interpreters are located in special schools for the deaf and are mainly in urban areas. The support of speech and occupational therapists are generally sought from local clinics, but only if children are assessed and the need is recognized, which is often not the case, particularly in rural areas.
- Despite a strong political will in response to international declarations, there is a general lack of government support, clear policy directives and guidelines. This is a key challenge. It is difficult for a system to respond if there is no clear direction or support. Often the focus on disability and special needs learners is an add on, if there at all. It takes up little space on the strategic agenda and, as a result, necessary funds are not allocated. It is often left to international partners, local and international NGOs and parent organizations to support developments on the ground.
- Parental involvement is generally weak. Parents have no links with the school, do not attend meetings or consult with teachers on their child's progress and how they can be supported at home. Parents also believe that children with disabilities will not benefit from school and so keep their children at home. Several initiatives focus on parent and community awareness raising, to improve enrolment in local schools.
- The curriculum often remains inflexible and focused primarily on an academic stream, with inflexible targets and standards, which do not cater for a diversity of learning needs. As a result, learners underperform, fail or simply drop out.
- Often long distances and undulating terrains in rural areas, and the lack of transport, prevents access to school.

Positives

On the positive side, there are pockets of good practice. Local efforts towards including all children, including those with disabilities and special needs, have to be acknowledged.

Teacher training

There are several initiatives run by national and international agencies, for example Save the Children, UNICEF, Handicap International, which run short courses for teachers on how to support children with disabilities and develop inclusive practice. A project in

Ethiopia funded by the Finnish government included training of teachers and school administrators on inclusive education. However, there is a general lack of coordination between these efforts, particularly from the government.

Physical accessibility

Schools were observed being proactive in addressing this barrier. The principal of a school in rural South Africa did not wait for the Department of Education; he took it upon himself to get donations of cement from a local cement company and then elicited the help of fathers to come in and build ramps at each classroom door. It wasn't perfect but good enough for students in wheelchairs to access classrooms. Another school in Ethiopia did the same. Another had the help of Save The Children working in the community. Again, there are several organizations working in the field who support the development of school infrastructure, to enable accessibility, but these are few and far between and again, efforts are not coordinated.

Resources and materials

In Mongolia, a local school for the blind supported local mainstream schools in brailling materials. This practice is replicated in South Africa. Schools in Ethiopia successfully copied worksheets onto A3 for children with low vision. The photocopiers were supplied by the project funded by the Finnish government. Montessori kits were also provided by a local organization – Addis Development Vision (ADV).

Assessment and assistive devices

With the project funds in Ethiopia and through the support of local hospitals, clinics and other organizations, such as Girbit Hospital and Adaptive Technology Center for the Blind (ATCB), assessments were carried out and hearing aids, eyeglasses, canes, slates and styluses were supplied.

Transport

A scheme run by an older student at a secondary school in rural South Africa suggested that transport challenges can be overcome with support. He offered a lift to two students in wheelchairs with his pick up and they paid him monthly from their disability grant.

From such observations, it is clear that several efforts can be built on. Some of these positives have been reported in chapters in a recent publication, *Second International Handbook of Urban Education* (Pather, 2018).

- For example, the increased numbers of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. This is a positive. The focus, however, needs to be on is what is happening in those classrooms; on the quality of the teaching and learning.
- There is improved access in many quarters where there has been community and parental awareness on disability and the possibilities for educating CWDs.
- There is strong political will with the development of policies such as:

- the Special Education Policy with an inclusive education focus (Kenya, Ethiopia).
- An Inclusive Education and Training Policy in South Africa and an Education and Training-Sector Policy (Swaziland) where schools have been established as models of inclusion.
- The establishment of Resource Centres (South Africa, Ethiopia).
- An Inclusive Education Policy in Seychelles is a positive step.
- Digital Literacy Programme (Kenya)

- The reinstatement of pregnant female children back into school (Zanzibar)
- Improving access for female children with disabilities (Uganda)
- Non-formal education programmes for the poor, for street children, for homeless children and for child labourers (Kenya)

Inclusion

Now let us look at the values underpinning the inclusive education movement across the world – notions and philosophies of 'inclusion'. The fundamental philosophy underpinning inclusive education is 'inclusion'. What does inclusion mean? In an international perspective, a review carried out by Peter Clough and Jenny Corbett in 2000, suggests that inclusive education is not a single movement. 'It is made up of many strong currents of belief, many different local struggles and myriad of practice'. It fundamentally presupposes democracy and implies equal relationships. It is underpinned by a rights-based framework and is an antithesis of exclusion.

However, many, like Croll and Moss (2000), suggest inclusion is a 'moral high ground'. They suggest its unachievable for reasons suggested by Gooding that inclusionists are explicitly expansionist, urging the stretching of boundaries of membership so as to include those who were previously excluded. However, every inclusion implies an exclusion (there can be no 'inside' without an 'outside'); so inclusionist appeals are implicitly consenting to a closed community. Herein lies the contradiction.

However, what does it mean in an African context? These arguments are presented by Pather and Slee (2019), with narratives from Libya, Rwanda, Zanzibar, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Swaziland, Ethiopia and South Africa.

When we look at inclusion and inclusive education in the African context, Chinedu Okeke (2014) and others' propositions are acknowledged as a way to move forward. These propositions point to inclusion of all children in mainstream schools with relevant teacher education to ensure that the necessary support in classrooms is offered. As Kisanji (1998) suggests, provision should be made for a relevant, locally developed 'curriculum'. The basic thinking is that inclusion in schools will lead to young people becoming responsible citizens in an inclusive society, challenging discrimination of individuals on the basis of (dis)ability, gender, language, race, and so on. This is key argument in this paper. The

quest for freedom from discrimination and exclusion, as a continent, instead of looking elsewhere, we need to reflect on a set of Afrocentric theories proposed by Chinedu Okeke and her colleagues. This is what sets us apart.

The first is Africanization which 'reflects a call to all people who call themselves African, but also to all institutions responsible for the training of the mind, to the need for the African intellectuals to begin theoretically changing our world through a reflection of ourselves' (Okeke et al., 2014, p.10). This suggests critical, emancipatory teacher training focusing on what we have, what we think about inclusion, and how to act accordingly. What this means is that local people need to find local solutions, not simply to wait for the Ministry of Education to offer support. Ministries of Education appear to borrow models from the North without interrogating their sustainability in the local context. It also means that people working in government develop this critical thinking, reflecting on what is happening and finding local solutions.

The second is Ubuntu – a theoretical ideology that resonates with the humanistic spirit that clearly defines the ethos of the African peoples. It is about:

- Valuing humanness – respect for human dignity, celebrating diversity, justice and fairness;
- Interdependence and dependence – solidarity, collective co-operation, 'I am because you are', 'it takes a village to raise a child', what is fair and just;
- Spirit of interconnectedness and social cohesion – social harmony, interpersonal relations, shared moral discourse, friendliness' consensus building, solidarity, open forms of communication;
- Spirit of compassion, hospitality and sharing – deep caring, understanding of one another' supportiveness according to needs, sharing of material goods, knowledge, skills and human capital.

We need to tap into this spirit. This is what will drive finding local solutions and tapping into already available resources rather than looking elsewhere. It is also about networking and collaborating with others within the community; parents, other organizations, other departments like Health, Welfare, Transport, to find solutions. It isn't all about the money! But when it is about the money, a humanistic spirit will ensure that there is just sharing and fairness.

The third is African indigenous knowledge which is about a lived world; a form of reasoning that informs and sustains people who make their homes in a local area, enabling people to get on with their lives in a particular geographical community. Communities in rural South Africa, Ethiopia, Mongolia, India and Nepal reflect this kind of existence which Kisanji (1998) talks about.

The key barrier and strength in African communities is therefore attitude! This spirit of Ubuntu in action can be observed in South Africa, where children with disabilities are included by default. Teachers have no choice but to respond, putting their values into action. The attitude is 'everyone is welcome'.

Through encounters with training teachers in countries in Africa, through the EU-funded ACP project, as well as through work in other developing countries in Asia and the Middle East, local participants suggested that inclusion to them meant:

- Equality
- Equal opportunity
- To be valued and respected
- To belong
- Good self-esteem
- Full participation
- Without discrimination
- To be involved
- To be appreciated
- Given a fair chance

When asked what the local terms were which captured this concept, they suggested:

- *Ubuntu* (Zulu, South Africa)
- *Samaharonka* (Khmer, Cambodia)
- *Ushirikishwaji* (Swahili, Kenya)
- *Kuba yincenye ngalokugcwele* (Siswati, Swaziland)

Joseph Kisanji (1998) has suggested that customary education in rural Africa contradicts Western notions of inclusion. He suggested that customary education in intact rural communities of sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by elements of inclusiveness. This includes the provision of a relevant, locally developed 'curriculum' and the preparation of young people to become responsible citizens in their interdependent community structures. He pointed out that more recent attempts to formalize the process of inclusion, with the emphasis on special educational needs, have often ended in failure. Here he was talking about the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs. His narrative sums up what he was suggesting:

> *I grew up partially sighted and underwent this kind of education before and during the period of my Western-type schooling. It was great fun herding cattle in the bush, making snares for small animals, identifying plants and animals, practising wrestling and complex dances, swimming, gathering wild fruits, cooking, milking, naming and counting our herds: hearing, visually, physically and intellectually impaired young people in the community I grew up*

with underwent this kind of education. Children with severe and profound physical and intellectual impairments were involved to the best of their abilities

(Kisanji, 1998, p.59)

These sentiments reconcile well with the spirit of *ubuntu* or 'inclusion' in the African context.

How then do we translate these notions of 'inclusion' into inclusive education? Tony Booth, suggests it is simply about 'putting these values into action'. It involves the establishment of educational institutions and systems within which all children – regardless of ability, impairment, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin – can be equally valued, treated with respect, provided with equal opportunities and, in a word, included. It calls for rethinking of the 'habitus' according to Bourdieu, 1992 and the creation of 'learning identities' (Clegg and McNulty, 2005). It is about minimizing barriers to learning and participation (Index for Inclusion, 2011).

Recommendations

Proposals going forward in developing sustainable and appropriate inclusive education policy and practice in Africa are as follows:

Firstly, there is a need to strengthen definitions of 'inclusive education'. It has to be underpinned by a local understanding of 'inclusion', built on the spirit of *ubuntu*. It has to be about **all** learners, including CWD and special needs, but not just about them.

Secondly, in terms of policy development, there has to be clear policy with a clear definition of inclusive education which is about an overall inclusive system for all learners and not just about children with disabilities and special needs. It has to identify and outline barriers within local schools which may limit or restrict access and participation. It has to include clear conceptual and operational strategies to address these barriers. It has to include a clear implementation plan, with timeframes and a monitoring and evaluation strategy.

Third, the policy model has to focus on inclusion in mainstream schools in local areas, to include access and quality education for learners in their local communities. One of the components can be the conversion of schools into resource centres or similar community-based models to address funding constraints and encourage networking and partnerships amongst schools in a local area.

There is a need to strengthen partnerships with Health, Social Welfare and Transport departments, to come up with local solutions relating to assessment of need, access and support both in the schools and at home. Partnerships with Higher Education institutions

are important to facilitate the development of teacher training programmes, which include components on inclusive policy, practice and pedagogy to support the needs of all learners, including children with disabilities and special needs. Partnerships need to be strengthened with local and international NGOs and community organizations to support development of accessible school infrastructure, supply of resources, materials and assistive devices. Stronger relationships need to be encouraged with parent groups.

The fundamental question moving forward is how do we address a notion of 'inclusion' described by *ubuntu*, in practice; to 'put values into action' (Booth, 2010). Pather (2007) suggests that we need to demystify the term 'inclusion'. This term has become too complex and 'unknown' like all the associated terms such as 'disability', 'special needs' (Pather, 2007). We need to address the 'unknown' around the diverse needs of children including those with disabilities and special needs, to alleviate teachers' fears. The common question asked by teachers is: 'How can I successfully include **all** children, including those with disabilities and special needs in large class sizes?' For too long this information is shrouded in mystery, held in the hands of specialist educators trained in special needs and in the hands of medical professionals. Frankly, this information when related to how learners learn and how we can support such learning, is far from complex and needs to sit within discussions of general pedagogy and classroom practice, where it belongs. Disability is seen as 'abnormal' when it is very much a part of human diversity, and should be accepted as such. How do we get teachers to make the paradigm shift? We simply tap into existing discourses of inclusion, those held within local communities, which people have grown up with. Where does all this greed and competition come from? This can be seen in the most rural communities with nothing; communities that embrace diversity and offer support to anyone and everyone in that community. Perhaps we need to be looking at such places instead of crystal balls from a foreign culture.

In conclusion, in order to achieve sustainable and inclusive education for the African continent, liberation, creativity and social consciousness, which are inhibited by colonialism, neocolonialism and missionary work, are necessary in achieving the vision of renaissance in Africa. Secondly, education is central to the development of social consciousness where learners are socialized into various moral and political values and this requires Africans to pragmatically seek solutions to national and continental problems (Njoroge, 2004). Third, we need to employ the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) as a way forward; of recognizing and strengthening the capabilities of people in their natural context to achieve development and ultimate freedom. Finally, Africans have struggled for *ubuntu*, a shared collective humanness and social ethics against oppression to maintain group cohesion (Berghs, 2017) and the struggle continues.

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