

IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF A REGULAR SCHOOL IN MAPUTO CITY

BY

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Abstract

Actions towards the implementation of inclusive practices should not only be written in papers, it is crucial that such practices also do reflect in real educational contexts. More importantly, the effective implementation of inclusive practices in regular classrooms must not be a task exclusively given to teachers; it is the responsibility of the whole community members to make every endeavour to support inclusion in education. However, on the one hand, educational leaders must ensure that inclusive policies are disclosed and implemented; on the other hand, teachers require further training in order to broaden their knowledge so that students' needs are fully met and academic development and accomplishments are successfully achieved. Inclusive practices should be designed to promote the active participation of all students, irrespective of their disabilities or other condition that could impose a barrier to their effective learning process. The aim of this study lies upon the need to describe the effects of inclusive practices on the academic performance and achievement of both students with and without disabilities, and how these outcomes contribute to the quality of the Mozambican education system. In this regard, this qualitative study was conducted through a combination of interview and observation data collection methods, whereby the researcher interviewed teachers and observed specific lessons in a Mozambican regular school. The research results contained herein will emphasize the main constraints and challenges faced by educational stakeholders in Mozambique and will highlight the need to conduct further studies in this area in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the appropriate strategies to eliminate teaching and learning barriers in inclusive learning settings.

Keywords: inclusive practices, disability, regular schools, academic achievement.

Introduction

According to Freeman-Green, Williamson & Cornelius (2023); and Rapp & Corral-Granados (2021), inclusion in education implies the combination of children with and without disabilities in regular classrooms, with the intent to fight discrimination and promote quality education for all, regardless of any existing differences. That is to say, educational inclusion entails the existence of an inclusive learning environment which, in its turn, promotes inclusive practices in such a way that students with disabilities, impairments and learning difficulties alongside their classmates without disabilities are welcomed, encouraged and assisted in order to develop skills and abilities that can enable them to achieve success in school as well as in life (Ajuwon, 2008; UNESCO, 1994).

On the one hand, providing quality education for students with varied needs and diverse learning styles is a meaningful attempt to promoting equality and equity, as a consequence of inclusion in education (Luo & Li, 2024; Gause, 2011). On the other hand, due to the severe challenge and complexity of these inclusive learning settings, where students come from different backgrounds and display diverse educational needs, teachers are required to be highly skilled and qualified, in order to successfully meet the needs of all these learners (Nilholm, 2020; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000). Moreover, on the one side, it seems that everyone supports the idea of educational inclusion and, on the other side, it appears that the ones who support inclusion in education are usually not willing to take the lead in this regard and, consequently, inclusive education depicts several gaps and misunderstandings as well as remains an unsolved issue in the world, especially in developing countries.

Therefore, the main aim of this study lies upon the need to describe the effects of inclusive practices on the academic performance and achievement of both students with and without disabilities, and how these outcomes contribute to the quality of the Mozambican education system. Furthermore, this study is highly significant, because it depicts the progress and strides that have already been made so far, through the implementation of inclusive practices within regular classrooms in Mozambique. Moreover, the present study emphasizes the main constraints and challenges faced by stakeholders (teachers, educational leaders, parents, community members, students, amongst others) and, most importantly, it highlights the appropriate strategies to be adopted with a view to successfully overcome barriers and improve the inclusive teaching and learning process.

Research Questions

The research questions designed for this study are described as follows:

- 1) What is the significance of inclusive classrooms to students with diverse needs?
- 2) How do stakeholders effectively implement inclusive practices in Mozambican regular classrooms?
- 3) Does inclusion promote high levels of learning goals?

Methodology

The research design applied throughout this qualitative paper is a case study, which is a method that has to do with the description of human activities in real contexts and it can be carried out at individual, group, institutional and community levels (Gillham, 2000). Furthermore, in relation to the research sample, this study made use of purposeful sample, which plays a significant role in qualitative research, in such a way that it is linked to the objective of the study, taking into consideration the research questions and main purpose, which, therefore, tends to lead the researcher throughout the execution of the study (Coyne, 1997). That is to say, there was a purpose to achieve and a goal to attain and, consequently, purposeful sample was the appropriate and helpful option to select relevant individuals due to the important information they were requested to provide, with a view to cover the main issues raised by the research problem.

In addition, with regards to data collection, this study employed the combination of observation and interview, which according to Riese (2015), interview is a sort of conversation, where the researcher asks questions to participants, with the objective to obtain specific information that s/he deems appropriate, while observation is an attempt to observe a given event with the purpose of collecting truthful data in real time. Before carrying out the interview, the following process was complied with:

1. Planning: Identifying individuals that would be involved in the study (teachers, both men and women);
2. Development of an interview protocol: where the researcher clearly explained the research questions and purpose, duration of each session, tools to be used throughout the interview, amongst others;
3. Collecting data: where interviews were conducted with the participation of six (6) teachers, each one at a time, after having been provided with all the necessary clarification and consent forms had been properly read and signed by such participants (Boyce and Neale, 2006).

With regards to the interview, some steps needed to be followed, with a view to process data, for example: (i) organising data in a database system, by making sure that all the information was saved and kept in a place with easy access for the researcher. For instance, all the documents were saved in different folders and the files were labeled with the surnames of participants; (ii) getting acquainted with data, which involved reading thoroughly all the information available and being familiar with every response that was provided; (iii) classifying, coding and interpreting data, which consisted of structuring the data set into categories such as themes and subthemes, in order to interpret information and obtain the sense of the collected data that would subsequently be the basis of the findings and conclusions (Rowley, 2012).

In this regard, the study involved six (6) primary education teachers, namely three (3) men and three (3) women, from a regular school located in Maputo City, Mozambique, named Fundane Day School (*Externato Fundane*, in Portuguese language). Their participation in the said study implied to attend an interview, in which they were required to answer to three (3) research questions as crucial vehicle for the progress of this study. The interview took no longer than 20 minutes per session, and each teacher was interviewed separately. The study was ethically approved by the Principal of the above-mentioned school, who authorised the execution of the research both at interview and observational levels. Furthermore, it should also be noted that it was carried out a semi structured interview, where, according to Doody and Noonan (2013), the participants, before attempting to provide their answers, were requested to briefly talk about themselves, including name, age, years of experience, subjects that they teach, inter alia. This strategy also enabled participants to feel comfortable and engaged throughout the interview process. Thus, the open-ended questions designed for the interview are described as follows:

1. What is it to be a teacher of students with varied educational needs in regular classrooms?
 - a) What are the main constraints faced and what are the strategies used to overcome barriers?
 - b) What are the main benefits and how do inclusive practices promote high levels of learning goals?

After taking into consideration all the answers provided by the participants and having analysed its relevant meaning, patterns were identified and coded, with a view to address the issues and concerns raised by the research questions and purposes (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Following this thinking, a table was drawn, where significant excerpts of full responses given by the participants were included together with their respective identified themes and subthemes, in the following manner:

Theme: Several Difficulties	Theme: Many Barriers	Theme: Various Remedies	Theme: Diverse Benefits
Codes	Codes	Codes	Codes
it is a challenge; it requires one to be an educator; is a challenge; is to be a leader; it is challenging; is to like the profession and then give oneself to the work; it is very hard;	the lack of attention; students not at the same learning level; the capacity to understand the subject matter; different ages; students are not at the same level as their classmates; some students are not as flexible as their peers; many learning difficulties; the time to work with these students with SEN is longer; Teachers must plan the lesson three or four times more.	provide interactive lessons; pay close attention to students with SEN; extra classes to help students with SEN; get into contact and cooperation with parents; contact the student’s parents; collaboration between parents and teachers; work closely with students with SEN give students daily activities; Parents should increase involvement; be patient and friendly; evolve and improve the practices as teachers; place students with and without disabilities working together; direct students with SEN to extra classes;	it facilitates the attainment of the goals that have been set; motivates students to overcome difficulties; students with SEN will not feel isolated; students will easily learn; we will be creating a good learning environment and society; to see results from all the students; all students learn; students will leave the school with very good accomplishment; students are taught to be thinkers; students with good performance will have a good image within society; we will be creating a democratic society; the existence of critical thinkers; it promotes reflection; developing inclusive and critical thinking spirit; benefits are directed to the teachers, students and society as a whole.

Subtheme: the teacher's role (do's/don'ts)	Subtheme: Circumstances (serious/moderate)	Subtheme: tangible outcomes (positive/negative)	Subtheme: short, medium and long-term effects (impact/consequence)
Codes	Codes	Codes	Codes
<p>teachers need to look at the organization of the student, his/her hygiene;</p> <p>teachers need to find further mechanisms to control students with SEN;</p> <p>the teacher must be attentive with students;</p> <p>it is important to know the individual skills and social characteristics of the student;</p> <p>teachers learn from their interaction with students;</p> <p>Men need to be recognized on earth for having done something good in order to leave a legacy;</p> <p>to be aligned with the directives and policies that the government designs for the education field;</p> <p>teacher must pay close attention to all students, especially to those ones with SEN;</p> <p>teacher must place the student with impairments closer to him/her so that the student can understand the subject matter; teachers must not be mean;</p>	<p>children with special educational needs create difficulties to work in the classroom;</p> <p>students may not understand the topic that teacher presents;</p> <p>there are students with strong and weak abilities;</p> <p>it gets very difficult for students to learn;</p> <p>sometimes students without learning difficulties need to stop, in order to accommodate those students with SEN;</p> <p>some children easily understand and learn, while others do not;</p>	<p>students wish to learn and practice the game that makes part of the lesson;</p> <p>students with SEN are included in a group of students without disabilities;</p> <p>students with SEN learn to be together with students without SEN;</p> <p>when all students learn, the goals are accomplished;</p> <p>things seem to improve gradually;</p> <p>students will continue to develop their reasoning and have success at all levels;</p> <p>from early ages, students can be able to know the advantages to participate in a rule of law;</p> <p>involvement of parents and legal guardians;</p>	<p>Teachers need to look at the organization of the student, his/her hygiene;</p> <p>teachers need to find further mechanisms to control students with SEN;</p> <p>the teacher must be attentive with students;</p> <p>it is important to know the individual skills and social characteristics of the student;</p> <p>teachers learn from their interaction with students;</p> <p>Men need to be recognized on earth for having done something good in order to leave a legacy;</p> <p>to be aligned with the directives and policies that the government designs for the education field;</p> <p>teacher must pay close attention to all students, especially to those ones with SEN;</p> <p>teacher must place the student with impairments closer to him/her so that the student can understand the subject matter;</p> <p>teachers must not be mean;</p>

(Readapted from Maguire and Delahunt, Doing the Analysis, 2017, p. 33510)

On the other hand, an observation was conducted in five (5) different classrooms of the same educational institution, with the presence of students and teachers from grade 1 to 6, respectively, where they were having lessons, on natural environment. Therefore, aspects such as feelings, interactions, attitudes, behaviour, relationships, amongst others, were central elements for the advancement and performance of this study. Following this thinking, Murgan (2015) highlights that observation is a method in which the researcher seeks to observe and investigate a given situation directly, without intervention towards the participants' actions. The author adds that this method involves making

judgment of what is seen. That is to say, whatever is observed in a given setting, whether it is positive or negative, according to the aim of the study, will constitute the assumptions and perceptions of issues or problems through which explanation is sought (Osang, Udoimuk, Etta, *et al.*, 2013).

Thus, after taking into consideration all the learning settings that were subjected to observation and having confronted the data to the complex issues and concerns raised by the research questions and purposes, a table was drawn, where significant portions of information are contained therein in relation to what has been observed from participants (teachers and students) in the classroom, described as follows:

Participants and observation questions	Situations and Descriptions
Students	
How do students interact with each other?	Students with diverse skills and abilities interact and share ideas and experiences; There is a competing spirit; Students correct their peers immediately;
How do students share experiences and feelings?	Students are participative and expose their ideas; Students share their own views, even if they are not correct; Students learn subject matters that strengthen their position in society and consolidate their role as citizens;
How do students behave before their peers with diverse needs?	Students are very attentive and supportive; Students understand and respect individual differences;
What are the major challenges faced by students with and without SEN?	Students without SEN may need to slow their pace in order to accommodate classmates with SEN; Students with SEN may need longer and/or extra sessions to keep the pace;
Do students understand and learn effectively?	students resolve exercises independently; Students learn and understand with appropriate support and assistance (scaffolding); Some students learn faster while others need time and effort; Many students interact and actively participate in the lesson;
Teachers	
How is the learning setting composed (are students segregated or included)?	Students are divided in groups of 2 per desk; boys and girls; students with high and low skills;

	<p>students with and without disabilities;</p> <p>students with ethnic, racial and linguistic differences;</p>
What do teachers do in order to promote cooperative learning?	<p>Students interact with the teacher in a natural and spontaneous way;</p> <p>Students ask direct questions to the teacher, when they do not understand something;</p> <p>teachers give students the task and opportunity to research the subject matter on the internet, on newspaper, news or by consulting their parents</p>
What are the major challenges faced by teachers?	<p>Sometimes teachers lose control of the class;</p> <p>Some teachers require further support and training in disability inclusion;</p>
What are the resources/strategies used by teachers in order to overcome barriers?	<p>teachers incite students to be highly organized;</p> <p>teachers attentively supervise every single exercise book to verify if the exercises were solved;</p> <p>teachers promote an interactive, cooperative and participative classroom;</p> <p>teachers provide educational games for students to uplift their reasoning and learning capability.</p>

Data Analysis

Several participants **suggested** being a teacher of students with varied educational needs as a “**challenge**” (teachers 1 & 3) or “**challenging**” (teacher 5); which may literally mean a difficult activity to be performed. **According to** these professionals, students with special educational needs **tend** to display **many obstacles to learning**, for instance teachers 2 & 3 commented ‘the student with special needs **is not at the same level as the other classmates** without special educational needs’, while teacher 4 reported that ‘some children **easily understand and learn**, while **others do not**’, and teacher 1 stated ‘these children, somehow, **create difficulties** to work in the classroom’. However, despite all these constraints, teachers shared some helpful strategies that they **deem appropriate to overcome barriers**, such as being **attentive**: ‘it is important to **pay close attention** to these students’ (teacher 3), and further **support**: ‘students with weaknesses and difficulties are subject to **extra classes**’ (teacher 6), or **curriculum modifications**: ‘we also need to **evolve and improve** our **practices** as teachers’ (teacher 5), and **parent involvement**: ‘**parents must be involved** daily, so that these difficulties are **surpassed**’ (teachers 2 & 5).

There was also **some suggestion** that inclusive practices **tended** to have significant **effects** on **learning goals** for all students regardless of **differences**, for example in terms of promoting **inclusion**: ‘students will **understand** that individuals with **disabilities** must **not be isolated**’ (teacher 3), and **motivation** ‘this **motivates** students to **overcome difficulties** and provides benefits to both students and teachers’ (teacher 2), or **critical thinking**: “the teacher is contributing to the existence of **critical thinkers** who make **use of their minds**’ (teachers 5 & 6); and **further suggestions** with regards to the **benefits** of inclusive practices **pointed to** the growth of the institution ‘parents will **recommend** the school to **other parents**’ (teacher 5), and the creation of a **better world** for everyone: ‘we are **contributing** to the existence of a **democratic society**’ (teacher 6).

In short, because in qualitative research we are focused on feelings, beliefs, thoughts, behaviour and individual accounts and contributions, inter alia, then **it might be correct to understand** that teachers and school leaders from Fundane Day School demonstrate **commitment** in providing students with the **necessary skills** to face **societal problems**. Moreover, they **seem** to **recognize** the significance of **educational inclusion** and adopt **inclusive practices** in the classroom, as well as they **tend** to support the **implementation** of activities that promote **diversity**. (Readapted from the example of a systematic thematic analysis process, in the perspective of Naeem, Ozuem, Howell & Ranfagni, 2023)

The above words in bold and underlined indicate probability of results, while the other words exclusively in bold represent the findings.

Discussion

Generally speaking, when we talk about inclusion, we broadly refer to respect for the human rights and adoption of practices that enable the active participation of all, irrespective of differences, with a view to fight discrimination and exclusion and, therefore, promote integration and inclusion. It is in this framework that educational inclusion was established, whose purpose is to include every single individual in the same learning environment, with the objective to incite learners to learn and develop abilities, rather than being dissociated from others and lack the necessary skills to face societal issues (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman and Chris Earle, 2006).

In this regard, like most countries, Mozambique reinforced its commitment to promote educational inclusion, particularly to provide education for all, regardless of disabilities, social, cultural, economic, ethnic and linguistic differences (UNESCO, 1994). Following this thinking the study conducted in a Mozambican regular school, named Fundane Day School (*Externato Fundane* in Portuguese language), emphasised the right to which everyone is entitled, especially with regards to quality education and it also highlighted the need of having school leaders and teachers who are able to develop and implement inclusive practices with the purpose to promote a safe and welcoming learning setting for all students, irrespective of their conditions. That is to say, quality education must be provided to all students, and efforts are being widely made with the intention to adopt inclusive practices to accommodate students with varied educational needs and, therefore, mitigate barriers and achieve relevant results (Brown, 2016). In addition, it should be noted that the lack of quality education to all students is a denial for their development and success at all levels and it might compromise and endanger their future.

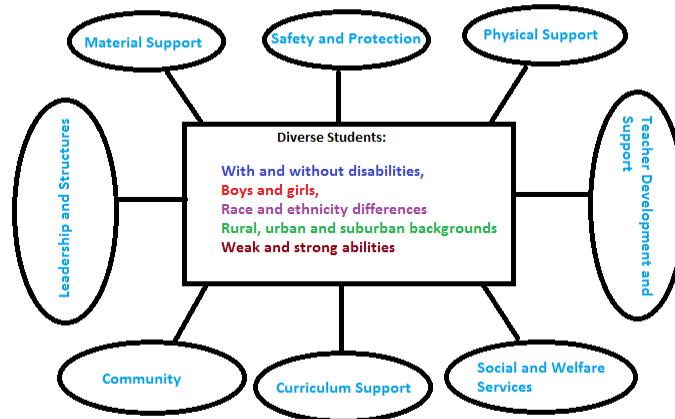
Nevertheless, it is common ground that the activity performed by teachers is one of the hardest tasks in the world, because it implies many responsibilities, such as knowledge, dynamism, professionalism, competence and management (Vislie, 2003). However, in the teaching and learning process, there are also many other aspects that require proper consideration. For example, in regard to special educational needs, many teachers in developing countries have lack or none experience to work with students with diverse needs. Also, many school leaders and local government do not take immediate action towards the adoption and implementation of inclusive practices in schools. By reason of that, both teachers, students and the community get frustrated as it becomes harder to achieve successful goals, since there is no cooperation between stakeholders (school leaders, teachers, parents, community members and more). However, according to the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) (2015), when the said stakeholders join efforts to improve the educational setting and community as a whole, relevant outcomes are more likely to be achieved with high levels of positive effects.

Recommendations

Inclusive learning settings are strongly significant to the academic development of students with varied educational needs. However, it is extremely important that school boards in cooperation with Departments of Education create conditions to modify curricula taking into consideration the students' reality and context, and giving them a plurality of opportunities to demonstrate their progress. In order to mitigate challenges faced by teachers of students with diverse needs, it is important to develop strategies to support teacher training, in a combined initiative between public and private institutions. For that effect, the non-governmental organisations also have a strong role in supporting teacher training to foster development in the education sector. It is also important to organise events in which students have the opportunity to learn the subject matter at home (flipped classroom), with their parents or legal guardians, and do their homework as well as solve exercises at school, with their teachers and classmates.

School leaders should develop policies and rules to implement the existence of two teachers per classroom. That is, one teacher (main teacher) would be solely focused on giving the lesson, while the other teacher (assistant teacher) would be responsible to assist students (scaffolding) and follow their development and achievements. There is also an enormous necessity of creating conditions for the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools in schools, with a view to give accessibility to learners with disabilities and help them reach their maximum potential. With a view to allow inclusive practices in education, it is crucial to create settings in which stakeholders (school leaders, teachers, parents, activists, students, community members, amongst others) interact, share experiences, learn and put into practice their knowledge, by creating opportunities for exchange of thoughts and views towards the way human beings understand the world and work together to make it a better place for everyone. This can be achieved with resort to joint efforts between educational leaders, teachers, local municipality, social activists, parents of children with and without disabilities, inter alia.

Local government in association with school leaders should create opportunities for recruitment of more professionals with disabilities and other conditions (role models), with a view to boost the confidence of students with special educational needs. Lastly and, most importantly, in order to improve the inclusive teaching and learning process and, therefore, stimulate the progress of the Mozambican educational system, educational leaders should create conditions and make every effort to implement the proposal presented in the following diagram:



(Readapted from the SADC Policy Framework on Care and Support for Teaching and Learning, 2015, p. 10)
(http://www.cstlsadc.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/SADC-CSTL-Policy-Framework_English.pdf)

Conclusion

Inclusive practices have long-term effects on students' academic achievement and accomplishment, if they are given multiple opportunities to learn, regardless of their individual learning differences. However, there is also a high need to empower teachers, by providing them further training and availability of resources, with the intent to successfully achieve learning goals. Moreover, Parents, legal guardians and community members should be more and more involved in the teaching and learning process, in order to lever the performance and confidence of students. Furthermore, successful individuals with special educational needs should be present at learning settings, whenever possible, with a view to motivate and inspire students with similar or related conditions. In addition, issues such as disability inclusion, human rights, religious affairs, women empowerment, amongst others, are important aspects that should be taught to students during their early educational stages, with a view to promote and incite the acceptance of differences. Most importantly, when we talk about inclusion in education, we must ensure that no one is left behind.

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