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Auther(s)	Kyasanku, Charles; Ssebbunga-Masembe, Connie; Kusakabe, Tatsuya; Ozawa, Hiroaki
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Including the Excluded: The Case of Slow Learners
at Buloba Primary School, Uganda

Charles Kyasanku and Connie Ssebbunga-Masembe
(Makerere University)
Tatsuya Kusakabe
(Hiroshima University)
Hiroaki Ozawa
(Naruto University of Education)

Abstract

This article describes a study of Mathematics teachers at Buloba Primary School in Uganda. The purpose was to analyse the teachers' perceptions, essential practices for creating inclusive classroom environments for slow learners, and implementation challenges. This quasi-experimental research included a focus group discussion, an interview with the headteacher, three lesson observations and post-observation focus group discussions. The results indicate that the teachers have mixed perceptions and several practices: peer learning, certain teaching methods, linking teaching to real-world applications, seating environment, and providing a threat -free classroom environment. Highlighted challenges include heavy workloads, limited time, inadequate training, mixed classes of both slow and fast learners, inability to identify slow learners, class size and lack of knowledge. It emphasizes the need to define and develop reference frameworks of teacher competencies and institutionalize in-service teacher education programmes through school-based practices and research.

1. Introduction and Background

Uganda introduced inclusive education (IE) in 1997 by establishing a universal primary education (UPE) policy followed by a universal secondary education (USE) policy in 2007. These policies were instituted to ensure that all learners have access to education. The primary school-going population is increasing by leaps and bounds; however, the infrastructure for education has not grown at the same rate. Therefore, schools must accommodate all categories of learners in mainstream settings, where the government has not taken full responsibility for special children. Attending the local mainstream school is not the best and most equitable option for slow learning children; however, it is the only option in a situation where many teachers were never trained how to teach children with special education needs or how to teach in an inclusive environment (Leonardo Cheshire Disability, 2016).

1.1 Defining a Slow Learner

"Slow learners" was used to refer to students who are intelligent but are classified as handicapped and are not able to cope with traditional academic work. It is used for instructional purposes rather than labelling. As Lescano (1995) cited in Penn (2016) explains, it is important

to distinguish between slow learners and those who have learning disabilities. The former refers to a student who does not learn due to general socio-cultural problems, a frustrating past, language barrier, classroom experiences, inadequate use of strategies, or a lack of interest. The latter refers to students who are diagnosed as "learning disabled" by specialists in child psychology.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

In Uganda, the education system is examination-driven, and as a result, schools are faced with considerable pressure to accomplish the syllabus on time. Teachers give little attention to understanding the learners and their needs, and they mostly focus on achieving the teaching and evaluation tasks. Teacher performance is measured by their ability to accomplish the syllabus on time rather than their ability to ensure effective learning. Consequently, slow learners are at a significant disadvantage. They find it difficult to keep pace with others.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

With the Education for All legislation (1991), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), and the subsequent introduction of UPE (MoES, 1997) the assumption was that all children in Uganda would gain access to all-inclusive education. However, Uganda's National Development Plan (NDP), 2010/11-2014/15 shows that 10% of school-age children have special education needs, which indicates the need for an inclusive learning environment. Unfortunately, the nature of teacher training hardly considers IE especially for slow learners, something that leaves teachers without the core knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to ensure that all children develop strong foundations in basic literacy and numeracy (EFA GMR, 2015).

This is further worsened by the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) and the examination-oriented education system in the country. The PTR in Uganda is reported to be close to 57:1 which is a result of the teacher allocation to districts (TISSA, 2014). Among the close to 120, only 31 have enough teachers, and 27 districts have a PTR lower than 50:1. The remaining districts do not have a sufficient number of teachers, and in extreme cases, the PTR is 70:1 (TISSA, 2014). The examination-oriented curriculum leaves teachers with little attention paid to the needs of slow learners because their majority focus is on achieving teaching tasks on time. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding slow learners in their classrooms and their best practices in including slow learners in their pedagogical practices.

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1 Perceptions of Teachers Regarding Slow Learners

A significant body of the literature reveals that many demographic variables influence teachers' perceptions (Chhabra et. al., 2010; Gaad and Khan, 2007). However, these results are inconclusive and context specific. Research on teacher's perceptions regarding IE (Brandon, 2006; Chhabra et al., 2010) shows that most teachers do not have favourable perceptions regarding including learners with special education needs (SNE). However, many of such studies

did not consider teacher's perceptions of slow learners.

The knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of teachers are crucial to successful inclusion, as teachers are the spearheads of IE (de Boer, et. al., 2011; Crane-Mitchel, & Hedge, 2007). Teachers drive the inclusive agenda and campaign for its survival. Teacher attitudes influence the progression and results of IE (Dapudong, 2014). Few mainstream teachers are positive and confident because they do not have the necessary experience to teach pupils with special educational needs (SEN) (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011). Research reveals that inadequate preparation leads to the reduced confidence and negative attitudes of teachers towards IE (Ahsan, Deppeler & Sharma, 2013; Kim, 2011; Ahsan, et al., 2012). Thus, teacher training in all aspects of IE is critical for increasing teacher confidence and fostering a more positive attitude (Lipsky and Gartner, 1998).

2.2 Essential Practices

According to Murawski and Swanson (2001), co-teaching is a moderately effective procedure for influencing student outcomes and can have a positive impact on pupils' academic achievement. Cooperative teaching can, therefore, support inclusive practices, as it accommodates the needs of diverse learners. Therefore, cooperative learning or peer tutoring has a positive influence on IE for slow learners. According to Robyn et al. (2003), education was a process of living and that schools had a responsibility to capture children's interests, expand and develop their horizons, and assist them in responding to new ideas and influences. Moreover, learning should be an active and dynamic process based on children's expanding curiosity of their world. Learning should be child-centred and responsive to the child's own developing social interests and activities. Thus, schools had a responsibility to build on students' natural interest in their social environment by fostering interpersonal communications and group involvement.

Another important issue that affects IE is classroom space and structure. Manitoba Education (2011) states, "The physical arrangement of the furniture, supplies, and resources in a classroom is a critical factor in promoting positive behaviour." In a well-designed classroom, the teacher can see all the students, and in turn, all the students can see the teacher. The students can also view presentations and displays such as agendas, behavioural expectations, strategy posters, and other information that is posted on the board. Everyone can move about freely; therefore, it is possible that in a well-spaced and structured classroom, high-traffic areas run smoothly without congestion.

Creating a pleasant classroom atmosphere contributes to the ability of slow learners to learn. It is essential that teachers create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom (Ainslie, 1994). Wright (2005) supports this view, and he also claims that there is a close connection between a good classroom atmosphere and proper behaviour management. Such an atmosphere will create an effective learning environment. However, to create an effective environment, it is vital for the teacher to form good relationships with the students. Building this connection is a challenging task in classes with many students and a high student-teacher ratio.

2.3　Challenges of Providing Inclusive Classroom Environments

The IE imperative is clear: all educators must be prepared to meet the educational needs of all students (Burns et al., 2009). There are many challenges to achieving this imperative. First, it is unclear how best to prepare educators to work most efficiently with slow learners. In the United States, inclusive practices have been implemented for decades, but educators consistently report that they feel inadequately prepared to meet the learning needs of diverse students (Burns et al., 2009). In addition, teacher education programmes have not yet produced a sufficient supply of competent new teachers and principals to meet the demands of the more "difficult-to-teach" students in today's schools (National Research Council, 2010) cited in (Deborah & Noami 2011).

Road-based evaluations of teacher education programmes support the conclusion that such programmes are insufficiently addressing the task of preparing future educators to teach all students well (Crowe, 2010). The challenges discussed above are compounded by the rapid growth of new knowledge on effective teaching practices, making it necessary to include even more content in teacher preparation and professional development programmes, and most teacher educators find it impossible to keep abreast of all of the content that is covered (Smith et al., 2011). This problem is rooted not only in initial teacher preparation but also in ongoing professional development.

Another challenge is teachers' "negative attitudes towards such pupils." Dornyei (2001) stresses the importance of teachers who teach slow learners having a positive attitude. By implication, practices such as ability grouping are dangerous because teachers who teach slow learners may be influenced by this knowledge, and this process may send the children on an-ever downward spiral of low achievement and low expectations. In several studies, teacher attitudes regarding educating pupils with SENs have been proposed to be decisive factors in making schools more inclusive (Richel, 2014). Huei (2009) emphasizes that inclusion is beneficial for developing the competencies and skills of both students and teachers alike; however, implementing a programme of inclusion will most likely put teachers under considerable pressure brought about by the required environmental restructuring.

Several studies indicate that teachers frequently and commonly report that they do not have enough time for the application of inclusion (Diebold & Von Eschenbach, 1991). In addition, Dyson (2001) notes that teachers face constant dilemmas including the pace, different learning styles, seating arrangements, and the need to provide individual attention. It is difficult for some teachers to cater for a range of needs in a single class. In places where adequate resource staff is available, successful integration can be jeopardized by poor coordination between resources and classroom teaching or by over-dependence on untrained teacher aides (Jenkinson, 1997).

Large classes are an obstacle to the successful implementation of IE for slow learners. Large classes place additional demands on teachers, and because of this challenge, all students may not receive proper time or attention from the teacher. Baker (2000) argues that the problem is not only the large number of students in the class but also the different ability levels of the students, which is a considerable challenge. She further claims that in mixed ability classes, it is challenging to keep the attention of all the students. Because of the extremely large numbers of

students in classrooms and teachers have a limited amount of time to help the slow learners, students' motivation is bound to be poor, and teachers may become frustrated.

2.4 Significance of the Study

This study could enable teachers to increase their awareness and understanding of slow learners. Furthermore, this study can act as a model for teachers throughout the country, as it highlights efforts that can ensure inclusive classroom environments for slow learners.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design, where data were collected from focus group discussions, interviews and lesson observations. Interviews and focus group discussions asked questions regarding teachers' perceptions on slow learners, essential practices for ensuring inclusive classrooms and challenges of implementation. The teachers' lessons were observed and analysed using a structured lesson template. Data were analysed by identifying similar themes in the recorded and transcribed responses (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

3.1 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

To ensure the internal validity of the instruments, a team of three experts helped to determine whether each item in the questionnaire was congruent with the construct. During data analysis, the average congruence percentage (ACP) was 90%, which was deemed to be acceptable. Further, to reduce selection bias, all students (slow and fast learners) took part in both the teaching and testing sessions.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, teachers provided informed consent. Further, pseudonyms were used for the student participants.

3.3 Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study was delimited to teachers' perceptions and did not include the opinions of the students. The sample of the study included Mathematics teachers from all the grades at Buloba Primary School in Wakiso District.

4. Findings

This section presents the perceptions of teachers regarding IE for slow learners, essential practices, and the challenges of implementing inclusive classroom environments for slow learners.

4.1 Perceptions of Teachers

Teachers have mixed perceptions. Most participants described slow learners as learners that require more time, care and attention. Further, such learners take more time, produce incomplete work, and are silent. The level of knowledge that the teachers possessed regarding slow learners

indicated they had positive attitudes towards slow learners.

The findings further revealed inconsistencies in the classes and the respective number of slow learners. All the classes that were taught by more than one teacher (grades 5 and 7) had different numbers of slow learners. The teachers guessed the numbers of slow learners, which indicated that teacher attitudes towards slow learners were negative since they did not even identify them or plan for such a category of learners during the teaching and learning process. These results align with Brandon (2006) and Chhabra et al. (2010), who claim that most teachers do not have a favourable perception of the inclusion of learners with SEN.

4.2 Essential Practices

Ensuring cooperation and collaboration among the students (peer learning) is crucial to enhance the learning ability of slow learners. In line with this practice, Hess (2001) argues that a teacher should promote cooperation and collaboration and contends that teachers should encourage students to help each other, ask classmates for help, and give each other feedback on their work because this improves the students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning (p.10).

Secondly, the effective use of simple vocabulary when giving directions and instructions, is an important practice to ensure IE for slow learners. Svard (2006) says one of the most important ways to address mixed ability classes is to always provide clear information and instructions and to present it in easy, manageable ways.

Thirdly, the findings revealed the need to provide longer wait time after asking questions to give slow learners time to think. One critical aspect in teaching slow learners should be giving them more time than other learners. In support of this practice, Dornyei (2001) argues that after students have been given clear instructions, it is advisable to give them time to think and discuss the assignment with their workmates and time to ask questions.

Additionally, a threat-free classroom environment contributes to an inclusive classroom for slow learners. Linda (2012) says that creating a classroom that is organized and that is characterized by mutual respect makes easier to teach effectively. When using interactive approaches such as small groups and cooperative learning, it is especially important to create a classroom where students feel free to ask questions and contribute to discussions.

Teachers also need to understand the reasons behind slow learners' weaknesses so they can alter their instruction and provide support. This weakness is corroborated by Manitoba Education (2011), "Gathering data to understand student behaviour allows the teacher to use observation and analysis to identify students' strengths and needs to identify the areas for improved classroom management and to measure progress over time." Indeed, to help slow learners, teachers should know more about them. They should keep this in mind when planning activities.

The findings further revealed that to ensure an ideal inclusive classroom environment for slow learners, the teacher should use activities that add fun to the lesson and motivate pupils to learn. Svard (2006) notes that when explaining something to students, it is essential to show concrete examples and illustrations. Additionally, teachers should connect the lessons with their

experiences by asking them to put themselves in the situation they read about, heard or watched. This type of explanation gives meaning to the task because it applies the lesson to something the child is familiar with. The ability of teachers to use concrete examples and illustrations can significantly improve learning among slow learners.

The ability of teachers to praise and encourage slow learners when they try was yet another important finding. During the post-observation interview, one observer noted, "I remember statements like, "Can you clap for him, Is she correct? What is missing? Can any members of the middle group give us an answer?" Such responses help slow learners feel appreciated and teachers should be models of respect that should teach the students to show respect for one another (Linda, 2012).

Another important practice to ensure IE environments for slow learners is using a variety of techniques to suit slow learners' different learning styles. In the third post-observation interviews, it was discovered that the teacher used different methods of teaching during the entire lesson. Christine (2006) notes that it is important to use a variety of techniques because differentiation can help motivate students. She further argues that differentiation is needed in three areas of teaching: the material, the process, and the product. The material can be differentiated by using articles, short stories, films, radio programmes, plays, songs, poems, etc. The process refers to how the students work with the materials and can be differentiated by using whole class discussions, pair work, group work, etc. The product refers to how students show they have learned, for example, through a test or various kinds of presentations. Thus, there is no one best method.

It was also discovered that the seating arrangement is a crucial factor to be considered for effective inclusive classroom environments for slow learners. It is important because it has the potential to help prevent problem behaviours that decrease student attention and diminish available instructional time (Racheal et al., 2008). Most of the teachers during the focus group discussion agreed to alter seating positions to help slow learners. The results were quite impressive: the baseline score was obtained for a pre-test, where the majority (24 out of 40) of slow learners scored between 0 to 14%, whereas the majority (41 out of 62) of fast learners scored between 43% to 57%. For the post-test 3 results, the majority (30 out of 40) of slow learners scored between 43% to 57%, whereas the majority (45 out of 62) fast learners scored between 71% to 85%.

From the above findings, it was established that by implementing the essential practices for inclusive classroom environments for slow learners, the slow learners' academic performance improved over time. Additionally, it was established that by implementing inclusive practices, even the fast learners' academic performance improved. Further, the more successful teachers were at implementing the fundamental practices for inclusive classrooms, the more teachers developed a positive attitude towards the inclusion of slow learners.

4.3 Challenges of Ensuring Inclusive Classroom Environments

The findings reveal that a large class size affects IE for slow learners. According to one

respondent, "In practice, you cannot monitor students' activity in such a big class…Even when the teacher attempts to cater for slow learners, the fast learners will lose interest and become disruptive…" This finding aligns with Sebastian (2016), who claimed that in a class of more than 60 students, teachers find it very difficult to give the children their individual attention.

The findings reveal that the lack of skills and knowledge in IE is an impediment to IE for slow learners. This conclusion is in line with the EFA GMR (2015), which notes that the situation is further crippled by low levels of training in IE for slow learners during pre-service and in-service preparation, leaving teachers without the core knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to ensure that all children develop strong foundations in basic literacy and numeracy. Further evidence is shown by the substantial number of teachers (6 of 10) that had not received training in IE. In addition, the majority (4 of 6) of teachers that had received training only received training for less than a day (less than 8 hours). Authors, including Penuel, Fisherman, Yamaguchi, and Gallagher (2007), note that a common criticism of professional development activities designed for teachers is that they are too short and offer limited follow-up for teachers once they begin to teach.

Another significant challenge noted by the headteacher, "Teachers have a negative attitude towards slow learners." Nisha (2014) similarly notes that in several studies, the teacher attitudes towards educating pupils with SEN has been proposed to be a decisive factor in making schools more inclusive. This is echoed by one respondent, "The teacher's personality is a key factor in a child's learning. If the teacher is harsh, a child may develop fear and fail to learn." In line with this view, Koutrouba et al., (2006) note that many teachers report a negative attitude because they feel they lack the training needed.

Further, the findings reveal the challenge of inadequate time. According to one respondent, "Society's demand for academic excellence gives a teacher little time to prepare for the slow learners." Sebastian (2016) notes that this challenge stems from the lack of time and resources available to teachers to cater for slow learners.

Another challenge to ensuring inclusive classrooms for slow learners is the inability to identify slow learners. Many of the teachers are unable to assist learners in inclusive schools due to their limited in-service training and supervision for developing a child-friendly class that can accommodate the diversity of the learners. Therefore, the teachers find it difficult to identify slow learning children although various objective tests could give additional insight into children's learning problems.

The findings also reveal that it is difficult to mix slow and fast learners to create an inclusive class because the teachers are faced with unrealistic expectations. One respondent noted, "Mixing slow learners with fast learners is bad because once you do this, slow learners will only copy from fast learners, and the teacher gets the impression that they have learned, which may not be the case." To substantiate this finding, during the classroom observations, one participant noted, "When the time for assignment came, you would see that most slow learners were peeping to copy answers from those they were seated with." It was discovered that by ensuring a positive environment, where students are informed of the advantages of separation, students come to

appreciate the practice, and teachers can make adequate preparations.

5. Conclusions

Teachers have mixed perceptions of slow learners. It was further determined that there are several practices that teachers can engage in to promote an inclusive classroom environment: peer learning, using simple vocabulary in giving instructions and directions, providing longer wait time after asking questions, creating a threat-free classroom environment, and using activities that add fun to the lesson. Finally, in pursuit of inclusive classroom environments for slow learners, several challenges were highlighted: large class size, a lack of skills and knowledge about IE, negative attitude, inadequate time, and the inability to identify slow learners.

6. Recommendations

This study recommends defining and developing reference frameworks for teachers' competencies in IE, which consider that teachers' perceptions towards including slow learners should develop on a continuum from initial teacher education to career-long professional development. Secondly, it recommends developing and institutionalizing in-service teacher education programmes through school-based teacher development practices and research that focus on slow learners. Thirdly, it recommends developing clear policies and guidelines.

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