

TOWARDS AN ACHIEVEMENT OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN THE KINGDOM OF ESWATINI: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF HHOHHO REGION

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ABSTRACT: *The Kingdom of Eswatini is a signatory to the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Since the adoption of inclusive education, inclusive school library and information services form part of the promotion of equal access to information by all students in the Kingdom of Eswatini. This study investigated the country's preparedness for the implementation of inclusive school library and information services as one of the educational means in strengthening inclusive education. The study explored and analysed several inclusive school library and information services best practices including having legislations in place, accessibility, human and non-human resources and equipment, in preparation to implement inclusive school library and information services in the Hhohho Region. Challenges and opportunities towards implementation were determined. Data was collected using telephone interviews, questionnaires and observations, which were analysed using content and thematic analysis techniques. The findings of the study revealed that while the Government was prepared to implement the inclusive library and information services programme, there are still several barriers that need to be addressed. These include amongst others: limited human and non-human resources, and shortage of facilities and equipment. This study adds value to the literature on preparedness for best practices and challenges of implementing inclusive school libraries.*

KEYWORDS: *inclusive education, inclusive school library and information services, access to information, preparedness, Special Educational Needs (SEN) and disabilities.*

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Most countries the world over have realised the importance of inclusive practices, hence, conventions and declarations are being signed to reinforce the key principles of inclusive education. In the same vein, the Kingdom of Eswatini signed legally binding instruments that address the rights of persons with disabilities to inclusive education including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article nine of the convention discusses accessibility in order "to enable persons with disabilities to live independently..." UNCRPD (2006, 8). Moreover, the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled (2013, 5), in Article 4 emphasis on "national copyright laws for a limitation or exception to the right of reproduction, the right of distribution, and the right of making available to the public as provided by the WIPO Copyright Treaty (WCT), to facilitate the availability of works in accessible format copies for beneficiary persons" "has a clear humanitarian and social development dimension and its main goal is to create a set of mandatory limitations and exceptions for the benefit of the blind, visually impaired, and otherwise print disabled (VIPs)"(2013) is the first copyright treaty to include a clear human rights perspective. The Marrakesh Treaty demonstrates that copyright systems are an important part of the solution to the challenge of improving access to books and other printed works for persons with print disabilities. Furthermore, Goal no. 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes opportunities for all, countries need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning.

Inclusive school library and information services play a fundamental role in promoting and sustaining inclusive education UNCRPD (2006); UNICEF (2013). They promote the mainstreaming of learners with various forms of disabilities to access relevant information in different formats to enhance their respective learning abilities. Various forms of inclusive learning and information enabling facilities and equipment are being introduced in ordinary schools as means of catering for all students UNESCO (2012); Messiou (2012); Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, and Guang-xue (2013). It is thus the role of inclusive school libraries to highly promote inclusion and contribute to the personal growth of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, and to fostering acceptance and understanding of these students by their non-disabled peers Murray (1999).

The Kingdom of Eswatini is one of the African countries that signed an agreement with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to carry out awareness-raising activities and to meet with policy makers to ensure that libraries are recognised as key partners in supporting the United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development during the International Advocacy Programme (IAP). A study by Chaputala and Mapulanga (2017) which was conducted in Malawi, revealed that governments have realised the challenges that people with disabilities face and the Malawi National Assembly passed the Disability Act (2012), one of the enacted laws that guarantee equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Similarly, the Kingdom of Eswatini, has taken a further step in promoting the new educational agenda, inclusive education in various ways, some of which include: the legislation and development of the National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018, National Disability Policy 2013 and the National Disability Act of 2019, as well as the establishment of inclusive model schools in the four regions of the country National Education and Training Sector Policy (2018).

The country is committed to inclusion and has realised the importance of equal access to information. Although there are barriers such as limited human and non-human resources, facilities and equipment, there are organisations that have partnered with the government and they play a crucial role in initiating and implementing inclusive public libraries. These include the American Embassy and the eSwatini Revenue Authority (ESRA). The American Embassy established a first of its kind Disability Corner in the Mbabane Public Library, eSwatini National Library Service headquarters, and another one in the Nhlangano Public Library. The American Embassy provided facilities and equipment such as Screen Reading Software; Computer Software and Hardware; OCR (Scan and Read) Software and Hardware; Braille Embosser; Braille Translation Software; Braille Paper; Screen Magnification Software to promote accessibility to information for visually impaired people. ESRA on the other hand, established a disability corner in Manzini Public Library. These organisations trained library staff in the best practices of inclusive public libraries and provided the necessary facilities and equipment. The plan is to transform school library and information services for them to be inclusive.

An inclusive school library and information service is defined as a primary or high school library that: (a) allows students with special educational needs to interact and use school library services with non-Special Educational Needs (SEN) classmates; (b) meets the individual needs of all students, including students with SEN; (c) is physically accessible; and (d) provides services tailored to the specific needs of all students Canter, Voytecki, Zambone, and Jones (2011); United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2008); UNESCO (1994). This study therefore examined conditions in which the conventional school library can help achieve an inclusive educational goal Coskun, Tosun, and Macaroglu (2009).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Inclusion needs to be initiated at school level. The Ministry of Education and Training has put in place inclusive education policies. The Hhohho region in the Kingdom of Eswatini has a total of 232 schools (both primary and high schools) but according to the Kingdom of Eswatini, Ministry of Education and Training Annual Education Census (AEC) (2017), there are only 89 schools with school libraries. Due to the signed legally binding instruments that address the rights of persons with disabilities to inclusive education, all the schools in the country should implement Inclusive Education (IE). However, there are nine (9) models of

inclusive education scattered in the four regions of the country. The Hhohho region has two model schools for inclusive education, but Mbasheni Primary School in the North of the region together with two Mbasheni receiving schools are selected schools for this study to explore the preparedness of implementation of best practices of inclusive school library and information services and to determine challenges and opportunities of the programme. Moreover, even though inclusive public libraries have been implemented, schools seem to be left behind.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to:

- explore selected schools' preparedness to implement inclusive school library and information services;
- determine challenges towards the implementation of inclusive school library and information services;
- determine the opportunities of implementation of inclusive library and information services; and
- suggest strategies that can facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive school library and information services in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

- What is the school doing to make the library and information services inclusive and as the means for preparedness for implementation of best practices of inclusive school library and information services?
- What are the challenges faced by schools while working towards implementing of inclusive school library and information services?
- What are the opportunities of implementation of inclusive library and information services?
- What possible strategies can be adopted to facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive school library and information services?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is an eye opener on how best schools need to do as a means of being prepared to implement inclusive school library and information services successfully in terms of accessibility, facilities, human and non-human resources and equipment. Moreover, the study adds value in literature on best practices for preparedness, challenges and opportunities for an inclusive school library and information services. This study helps to enforce existing policies that were designed to uplift the standard of disabled persons. Inclusive library and information services can play a pivotal role in education and knowledge.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

There were several limitations for this study, which include the unavailability of time and inadequate financial resources which hampered the breadth of the research. Furthermore, the study did not cover the input of the students using the inclusive school libraries, which can be recommended for future researches. The research was also focused on one geographical region and several factors may prevent the results from being adequately used to generalise for the entire country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Preparedness for implementation of best practices of inclusive school library and information services is determined by several indicators including accessibility of the physical library building and resources Mapulanga and Chaputula (2017). Bodaghi and Zainab (2013, 4), as cited in Mapulanga and Chaputula (2017) mention that “the right to access facilities, information sources and services without any hindrance is one of the fundamental rights a society should protect, especially for people with disabilities” . According to Nassimbeni and De Jager (2014), and Majinge and Stilwell (2013), as cited in Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017) providing assistive technologies as well as reading materials to people with disabilities are best practices for inclusive library. Murray (1999) indicates that it is vital that the environment be welcoming and physically accessible. Moreover, enabling people with disabilities to easily access information sources and information resources such as talk books, Braille and large print is important.

Research studies conducted elsewhere, for example one of which was conducted by Epp (2006), as cited by Chaputula and Mapulanga (2016), notes that equipment for people with disabilities is expensive. It has been realised that challenges towards the implementation of an inclusive school library and information services include the fact that there are very few library materials that are transcribed into accessible formats Phukubje and Mpho (2016). Moreover, there is lack of equipment like talking books and Braille Embosser to assist the disabled students.

Opportunities include utilising the legislations including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which has made progress in terms of access to information and physical accessibility. Countries globally have indeed created an inclusive environment. In the United States of America, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that was made law in 1990, made a significant progress in the physical accessibility of buildings. According to a study conducted by Mapulanga and Chaputula (2017) in Malawi, the Disability Act (2012) was adopted in Malawi, while in the Kingdom of Eswatini, the National Disability Act, 2019 was adopted and this has made an impact on issues of persons living with disabilities.

The use of technology can be one strategy that can be effectively used to accomplish an inclusive school library and information services. According to Epp (2006), as cited by Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017), access to information resources for all can be made possible through the use of assistive tools and technologies. Commonly used technological devices include Braille books, talking books, playback machines, audiotapes and screen readers.

METHODOLOGY

Due to shortage of time and lack of resources, this study used a qualitative method and took a small sample population which was ethnologic in nature Alemu, Stevens, Ross, and Chandler (2015); Creswell (2009). The study targeted government schools within the Hhohho region. The region has a total of 232 schools and only 89 schools have a school library and information services. A purposive sampling technique was used in the study. Three schools were selected. The study focused on personnel that were in charge of the school library and information services in the selected schools as well as the Regional Educational Officer, as these were deemed as key informants of the study. The sample size was four (4) participants who included one education policy maker and, the Inspector of schools who is based in the Hhohho Region. The education policy maker was picked up because he has an idea on what the policy entails about the inclusive school library and information services and knows what is really happening in these schools. The other three (3) participants were picked from the three schools of which one was a model primary school and the other two were from ordinary high schools who have the potential to receive students from the model school. Data was collected through telephone interviews, questionnaire as well as observation. Data analysis was done using the content analysis technique. The rigorousness of the study was maintained using the criteria given

by Guba and Lincoln (1985) which involves the application of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability respectively Choongwa (2018); Ponelis (2015).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings and discussions of the study focused on the following: current state of preparedness for implementation of best practices of inclusive school library and information services; the challenges towards the implementation of an inclusive school library and information services; the opportunities of implementation of an inclusive library and information services; possible strategies that can be adopted to facilitate the effective implementation of an inclusive school library and information services

Preparedness to implement inclusive school library and information services

The study established that the status or level of preparedness for the implementation of best practices for an inclusive school library and information services in the three (3) investigated schools are at the early stages of implementation. However, the model school, Mbhasheni Primary School, has made some progress as compared to the ordinary schools with regards to the preparedness indicators including accessibility, human and non-human resources, equipment and facilities.

The model school was provided with some library facilities set that promoted the inclusivity of the students in using the facilities.

Table 1: Preparedness for the implementation of inclusive school library services

| Preparedness | Responses | | |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | School A (Primary) | School B (High) | School C (High) |
| Accessibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reachable distance - Physically accessible, ramps provided - Enough and suitable furniture and space for all students - Not enough furniture and space for mobility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Absence of user friendly physical accessibility means, no ramps - Not enough furniture and space for mobility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Absence of user friendly physical accessibility means, no ramps - Not enough furniture and space for mobility |
| Human and non-human Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No professional Librarian - provided brailled material, high-tech gadgets that enable visual impaired learners access information using them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No professional Librarian - Absences of reading Braille material | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No professional Librarian - Absence of reading Braille material |

| | | | |
|------------|--|---|---|
| Equipment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None of the following: Screen Reading Software; Computer Software & Hardware; Braille Embosser; Braille Translation Software; Screen Magnification Software - Available - Braille Note touch and Prodigy connect 12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None of the following: Screen Reading Software; Computer Software & Hardware; Braille Embosser; Braille Translation Software; Screen Magnification Software | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None of the following: Screen Reading Software; Computer Software & Hardware; Braille Embosser; Braille Translation Software; Screen Magnification Software |
| Facilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No Computers, No Internet - Assistive technologies not provided | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No Computers, No Internet - Assistive technologies not provided | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No Computers, No Internet - Assistive technologies not provided |

Challenges towards the implementation of inclusive school libraries

Limited resources were the most common form of challenges of an inclusive school library and information services in the selected schools. A respondent from one of the participating schools indicated that; *“Lack of resources to develop and meet the needs of the students/ users is one of the greatest challenge”*. Another participant mentioned that; *“The challenge may be that the school library does not have internet for more research and to develop student’s reading skills and communicating skills”*.

From the administrative perspective, the Ministry of Education and Training indicated that although the programme was still at its pilot stage, technical and administrative challenges were faced such as limited capacity for the library staff and non-human resources. The following responses specified some of the current challenges faced as it was stated that:

“There may be a number of challenges and opportunities that may be cited these may include capacity building for teachers in identifying LSEN that may need differentiated information access”

The respondents indicated that due to the high expectations of the programme in Eswatini, the needed resources were one of the main challenges that could either delay the entire programme or to some degree compromise its standards. These resources could be considered in the form of both humans such as trained library personnel as well as the provision of all the necessary facilities that would strengthen the implementation of the programme.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LIBRARIES

One of the participants from the Ministry of Education and Training indicated that one of the opportunities for implementing inclusive school library practices is taking advantage of the adopted IE programme and utilising the available trained personnel on inclusive education. Moreover, the respondent mentioned that there are policies in place such as the National Education and Training Sector Policy (2018) and the National Disability Act (2019) that could be effectively utilised.

Furthermore, the policy maker stated that inclusive school library and information services had the capacity of:

“...offering information to users of the facility in all forms i.e. audio; signed; Brailed and Large printed material enabling people and learners or students to access information in their comfort zone of language choice and font preference. The facility could also provide information through high-tech gadgets like braille Note Touch and Prodigy Connect 12, laptops and desk pads.”

The volunteers who assisted in setting up the school library and information services in the ordinary schools had substantial experience in setting up school libraries, which could be an opportunity to other schools to make use of volunteers. One respondent from one of the benefiting schools stated that; *“...the school library was improved by a well-trained American Volunteer but now the teacher librarian is just an English teacher.”*

With regards to community engagement and development of the library, one respondent from participating schools indicated that, there was support from various sectors that brought about the development of the library through various means such as technical support from the Eswatini National Library Service, volunteers work and donations from FUNDZA respectively. Schools could take advantage of these engagements to develop an inclusive school library and information services.

Possible strategies that can facilitate the establishment and development of inclusive school libraries

Possible strategies to establish school libraries include:

- School needs to adopt technology and utilise technological devices including Braille books, talking books, playback machines, audiotapes and screen readers;
- Schools could take advantage of the legislations that are in place like the National Education and Training Sector Policy (2018) and acquire resources;
- Advocacy for inclusive libraries, involvement of parents and communities;
- Sensitize stakeholders and organisations about the importance of an inclusive school library and information services, and request for support like what happened with public libraries;
- Attract volunteers to assist schools with their skills and resources that can develop inclusive libraries;
- Stakeholders like the Eswatini National Library Service need to reach out to school libraries and provide technical support on the establishment and development of inclusive school libraries.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the study was to determine if the Kingdom of Eswatini, particularly the Hhohho Region is really making strides and if it is prepared to implement inclusive school library and information services with regards to best practices. The study revealed that there was much support for an inclusive school library and information services in the model school. The community and other stakeholders, such as the government and non-governmental organisations were supportive as well. However, other schools which provided inclusive library services did not enjoy as much benefits from the government as the model school. But they received support from volunteers and the Eswatini National Library Service and FUNDZA. Challenges ranged from lack of necessary facilities and resources such as accessible buildings and relevant computer gadgets and software. The study further indicates that there is a glimmer of hope in the sense that through extensive training and awareness building for both teachers and the communities, they are likely to work hand in hand towards ensuring that all children in the near future stand to benefit from an inclusive library and information services regardless of their condition.

In the light of the above findings and conclusions, the study proffers the following recommendations:

- Training of specialised personnel is a necessity as there can never be improvement if the libraries are managed by personnel who lack an in-depth understanding of inclusivity and library skills.
- Creating awareness could help change the attitude of the communities, politicians as well as teachers and students who will end up adjusting the way they perceive issues related to disability. A change of mind-set will yield positive results in terms of inviting the much needed support from these stakeholders just like the organisations that supported the public libraries.
- There is a need to enforce existing policies that were designed to uplift the standard of disabled persons. Education and knowledge, which can be enhanced through inclusive libraries, can play an important role in improving the lives of these people so that their contribution in society can be recognised.

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