

# Mainstreaming and Inclusion: Challenges Faced by Swazi Parents of School Children with Special Education Needs in Primary Schools

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**ABSTRACT** This study employed the survey research design to find out the challenges faced by parents of children with special education needs (SENs). Participants comprised 99 parents whose children attended primary schools in Nhlanguano area of Swaziland. Data obtained through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview instruments were analysed using frequencies and percentages. Result showed that parents encountered challenges when assisting in the education of their children with SENs at school. Result also indicated that participants were not adequately prepared for their roles with their children with SENs in mainstream classrooms. Moreover, participants differed in their perceptions on the implementation of inclusive education in Swaziland primary schools. Following these findings, the study concluded that lack of training on their expected roles in educational decisions impacted the home and school experiences of parents who took part in the study. Some recommendations have been suggested by the authors.

## INTRODUCTION

Existing studies show that parents of children with special education and other needs are confronted with numerous challenges in dealing with their roles as caregivers to their children (Armstrong et al. 2010; Leyser and Kirk 2011; Nkambule 2011; Pather and Nxumalo 2013). Research also show that such challenges appear to have implications in more ways than one, on the quality of care-giving the affected parents can offer to their children (Bender 2008; Leyser and Kirk 2011; Tshabalala 2011; Ministry of Education Singapore 2012; Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013). Extensive literature search suggest plethora of literature on two aspects of parenting and children with SENs. First, there is plethora of literature on the teacher experiences of children with SENs (Landsberg 2005; Lee et al. 2006; Lewis and Doorlag 2006; Dimitrios et al. 2008; Marope 2010). Second, much of materials on SENs appear to concentrate on the issue of parental perspectives on the inclusion of their children with SENs (Marope 2010; Cherishe 2011; Nxumalo and Lukhele 2012); this is also a research subject that has attracted much academ-

ic interest (see Engelbrecht et al. 2005; Yssel et al. 2007; Mudzakir 2011; Afolabi et al. 2013; Pather and Nxumalo 2013).

Despite growing interest in SENs, our knowledge about what may be happening to the parents themselves of such children remains very scanty. No empirical studies were found where parents of children with SENs were asked to express the challenges they may face nor on what training may they require that will help them cope with such challenges that confront them in their roles as care-givers. The purpose of this study therefore was to find out the challenges faced by parents of children with SENs and to generate empirical evidence to help strengthen policy issues regarding parental involvement in the education of their children with SENs.

## The Concepts of Inclusion and Mainstreaming

The concepts of inclusion and mainstreaming have been used in the past as if both concepts mean the same thing. According to Ajo-dhia-Andrews (2007), there is a vital philosophical difference between the two concepts at the epistemological level. Whereas mainstreaming affirms that the child with SENs must work to meet all existing classroom teaching and learning standards, on the other hand, the inclusive philosophy emphasize the imperativeness of adjusting all existing standards to accommodate

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the child with SENs. The two concepts are different from one another because while the mainstreaming is teaching learning standard-centred, the principles of inclusion emphasize the active participation of every child (Ajodhia-Andrews 2007). The philosophical argument for inclusion therefore is that it appears to provide integrated social learning opportunities for all children with SENs. Inclusive education recognizes that SENs can arise from social, psychological, economic, cultural as well as physical factors, hence the term 'special needs' rather than 'children with disabilities'. Moreover, it also recognizes that any child can experience difficulties at any time during school years; therefore, the school must continually review itself to meet the needs of all learners. The concept of inclusive education in Swaziland according to Nxumalo and Lukhele (2012) recognises that every learner is unique and should be treated equitably by the teachers and the system.

### **The Context of the Study-Swaziland**

In Swaziland, the policy of inclusion refers to an approach that includes and meets the needs of all learners regardless of their gender, state of health, capacity to learn, level of achievement, disability, stage of development, financial or any other circumstance (Ministry of Education and Training 2008; Nxumalo and Lukhele 2012; Pather and Nxumalo 2013). The Government of Swaziland embraced international declarations that supported Education for All (EFA), and the rights of the child had since been clearly articulated in national policies. In addition to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland, other policy documents that specify government's desire to achieve inclusive education include: Smart Programme on Economic Empowerment (SPEED); Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Programmes; National Development Strategy (NDS); the National Policy Statement on Education; and the Draft Inclusive Education Policy (Ministry of Education and Training 2008; 2011; Nkambule 2011; Nxumalo and Lukhele 2012; Pather and Nxumalo 2013). It could be argued that although Swaziland has made tremendous progress in addressing the issues of children with SENs, however, it would appear that not much attention has been given to issues concerning the parents of such children. Currently, there appears not to be much effort in

terms of policy on how to integrate parents into the educational activities of their children. For instance, whereas studies have shown that teachers in Swaziland have been trained on how to work with children with SENs (Marope 2010; Ministry of Education and Training 2011; Zimba 2011), no available literature exists in support of similar training for the parents, in spite of their strategic role as major stakeholders in the educational processes of such children. Not providing parents with adequate training and other supports may exacerbate the challenges that such parents already face as care-givers.

Studies have shown that parental involvement in the education of their children with SENs was lacking in Swaziland (Ministry of Education 2011; Nkambule 2011; OSISA 2012). However, in spite of the increasing roles and challenges confronting parents in this regard, no exiting literature appears to support any corresponding efforts towards alleviating the situation. This study was therefore motivated by the need to investigate if parents were facing any challenges that impacted on their abilities to involve themselves in the education of their children with SENs.

### **Psychosocial Development Theory**

The psychosocial development theory offers a basic framework in the present study because it tends to integrate personal, emotional and social development rather than focusing on one aspect of human growth and thus it was called psychosocial development (Frosh and Baraitser 2008). The psychosocial theory was developed by Erick Erickson in 1968 (Eggen and Kauchack 1999; Frosh and Baraitser 2008). Erickson's underlying assumption was that as people grow they are forced to become aware of, and interact with a widening social community leading to the development of a healthy personality. Erickson believes that successful resolution of each crisis strengthen the self-concept while the failure to negotiate one or more of the psychosocial crises results in emotional stress. Snowman and Biechler (2000) as well as Brown and Lowis (2002) concur that crises occur when people feel compelled to adjust to the normal guidelines and expectations that society has for them, but are not altogether certain that they are prepared to fully carry out these demands.

The parents of children with SENs are expected to participate in educational decisions

on behalf of their children, yet they are being frustrated by not having the ideal child they expected. Within the context of psychosocial theory, when the negatives outweigh the positives for any given stage, difficulties in development and adjustment will arise. The challenges of stages not successfully completed may be expected to reappear in future as problems (Frosh and Baraitser 2008). In applying Erickson's theory, the researchers had gained some insight into the personality of parents who took part in the study and how they could be nurtured and strengthened. Such application also allowed the researchers to examine several aspects of the training and psychosocial needs of parents of children with special needs.

### **Children with Special Education Needs**

A child is considered to have special education needs (SENs) if he/she: i) has been diagnosed with a disability; ii) shows greater difficulty in learning relative to the majority of his/her peers of the same age; and, iii) requires different or additional resources in the absence of which no substantial progress would be achieved (UNESCO 2001; Nxumalo 2010; Tshabalala 2011; Ministry of Education Singapore 2012). A child with SENs would commonly struggle to learn or to adapt socially. For instance, participating in school related activities such as reading and writing, communicating and socialising with peers, and behaving in school appropriate manners in the presence of others would certainly be laborious tasks for such individual. In addition, such children may present challenges with hearing and or seeing what peers would normally see or hear in class or at school (Whitbread et al. 2007; Nkambule 2011; Ministry of Education Singapore 2012; Pather and Nxumalo 2013; Swart and Pettipher 2013). They may also present difficulties with mobility around the school as other peers would normally do (Turnbull et al. 2010; McKenzie and Loebenstein 2011; Ngcobo and Muthukrishna 2011; Ministry of Education Singapore 2012). Some of the disabilities commonly seen among school children include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disability (ID), visual impairment, cerebral palsy and learning disabilities (Agbenyega and Deku 2011; Lai and Vadeboncoeur 2011; Ministry of Education Singapore 2012; Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013).

Generally, children with SENs may present a variety of different disabilities, health and mental health conditions that require special intervention, services, or support. Parenting a child with SENs can be particularly challenging (Ngcobo and Muthukrishna 2011; Ministry of Education Singapore 2012; Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013). Many parents experience a range of emotions as they try to understand their child's SENs. Some of these emotions include anxiety, grief, anger, fear, guilt, surprise, as well as relief, acceptance and hope (Brown and Lowis 2002; Frosh and Baraitser 2008). In their distress, some parents may be confused about the diagnosis, and may not know how to help their child. To have a child with SENs can be a devastating blow to the parents (Wang 2009; Tshabalala 2011). Parents undergo stress as a result of not having the ideal child they expected. This appears to be the case for every affected parent regardless of his/her educational background or socio-economic level. Blackburn et al. (2009) point out that some parents overcome the condition of their children quite easily while others, need a great deal of support. Santrock (2006) argues that parenting consists of a number of interpersonal skills and emotional demand, yet, there is little in the way of formal education for this task.

Notwithstanding this apparent lack of formal knowledge, many parents are however expected to participate in the development of their children's Individualised Educational Programme (IEP). In an interview with teachers and principals of schools, Dlamini et al. (2010) found that parents were not cooperating with the schools in terms of constructing Individualized Education Programme and that they have neglected their responsibilities and left everything to the school. As a result, the principals who took part in Dlamini et al. (2010) study recommended that children with SENs be first enrolled at a specialised school and later to be admitted into the mainstream schools after they had been groomed. Similarly, an earlier study in Uganda have also shown that many parents of children with learning disabilities do not take an active role in the education of their children and that have led to their limited access to basic education and training (Njuki et al. 2008; McKenzie and Loebenstein 2011; Swart and Pettipher 2013). However, studies by Mestry and Grobler (2007), Felix et al. (2008), and Makgopa and Mokhele

(2013) have also noted that this lack of parental involvement is not a lack of interest, but rather problems of poverty, single-parenthood, non-English literacy, lack of training and not sure where and how to get involved, the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and cultural and socioeconomic isolation that severely impact some parents' ability to get involved in their children's education. But in the absence of empirical data neither on the challenges parents face nor on what training they may require that will help them cope with the numerous issues relating to their children's SENs, the need then arose for the present study.

### **Parents' Active Involvement in Inclusive Education**

For the purpose of clarity, the context of parental involvement has been used in this paper to describe a situation in which parents are perceived as active partners in the process of educating their children with SENs. Makgopa and Mokhele (2013: 220) perceive parental involvement as "a combination of supporting student academic achievement and participating in school-initiated functions". It further refers to parental support in the totality of a child's schooling as it occurs in the child's two very important contexts: the home and the school (Lai and Vadeboncoeur 2012). Studies support the view that parents have a major role in the development of successful inclusion policy and programmes (Leyser and Kirk 2011). In their study of parents' experiences of their rights in the implementation of inclusive education, Engelbrecht et al. (2005) note that parental involvement was a major driver in the development of inclusive education worldwide. They equally note that particularly in South Africa, parental involvement paved the way for parents to be involved in the decision-making processes regarding the placement of their children with disabilities in schools of their choice. Zimba (2011) notes that parental involvement is very central in making a school to be inclusive whereas the lack of active involvement of parents will obviously impact on teaching and learning activities in the affected school.

Studies have shown that active parental involvement in inclusive education may face three types of barriers (Ajodhia-Andrews 2007; Katz et al. 2007). According to Katz et al. (2007) these

barriers may be of a physical and practical nature. Barriers may also be of a social nature; stigma attached to parents and children with SENs may also pose a very devastating barrier to affected parents. Research has shown that parental involvement in inclusive education in Swaziland is lacking (Nxumalo and Lukhele 2012; OSISA 2012; Pather and Nxumalo 2013). Traditionally, parents have been excluded from educational involvement and decision making by a number of factors (Dlamini et al. 2010; Nkambule 2011; Zimba 2011) while these factors appear to impact the successful creation of an effective parent-school partnership. According to Zimba (2011: 70), "parental involvement was lacking because of poverty. Most of the parents appear to spend their time looking for means to make ends meet rather than being involved in school activities". It could be argued that without parental involvement in the issue of inclusive education, the vision of the government to fulfil international conventions on children with disability would be in vain.

A number of strategies may be used to improve active involvement of parents in the education of their children with SENs (Ajodhia-Andrews 2007; Cherishe 2011; Musengi and Cherishe 2012). For instance, findings from Ajodhia-Andrews' (2007) study suggest that the mounting of parent support group and parent training were two effective strategies favoured by those policy makers, teachers and parents who took part in the study. In particular, the study notes that "a majority of teachers affirmed the need for parental training and support for those with children with special needs" (Ajodhia-Andrews 2007: 46). Similarly, Katz et al. (2007) study suggest parenting and family support services, effective and mandatory training programmes for parents of children with SENs, consultation, and community development approaches as some of the effective strategies to help get parents involved in inclusion. In a comparative study of parents in South Africa and the United States, Yssel et al. (2007) argue that a move towards inclusion that will guarantee effective active involvement of parents is such, in which the school must learn to listen to the voices and perspectives of parents. According to Yssel et al. (2007: 357) "moreover, schools that are committed to effective partnerships must make an effort to hear what parents want for their children" (Yssel et al. 2007: 357). It is thus obvious

that when parents feel they are being treated as equal partners by the school, they are attracted more closely to the school in a manner that will enable to school to start appreciating their needs, concerns and challenges.

### Research Questions

The main research question the study sought to address was: what were the challenges faced by parents of children with special education needs? The following sub-research questions were formulated to guide the study: i) what challenges do parents of children with SENs encounter at home, school and in the community?, ii) which training lessons and workshops do parents of children with SENs receive towards inclusive education; iii) how do parents of children with SENs cope with the nature of their children's disabilities?, and, iv) how do parents of children with special needs view the implementation of inclusive education in Swaziland?

### METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed the survey research design to find out the challenges faced by parents of children with SENs following the qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Creswell (2009) advocates for the mixed methods approach arguing that all methods have limitations and by using the mixed methods approach, biases in any single method will be neutralized. The target population of the study were parents of children with SENs. Children who were identified with SENs in different schools were used to identify their parents through their various admission books that contained information about the names of the pupils' parents or guardians and their physical addresses. Of the 41 primary schools in Nhlanguano area, 29 were identified with children having SENs; the number of these children from each school ranged from 1 to 15 each, and each child had his/her own parent. In total the number of these children was 99 which was equivalent to the number of parents identified in those schools. All the 99 (80 females and 19 males) parents of children with SENs took part in the study because the respondents were believed to be informative about the phenomena under study.

Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires that were formatted on a-1 to 5 point Likert scale was used for data collection. While working parents completed the questionnaires

at their work places and were collected later after completion, parents who were not able to read and write were interviewed in their natural settings. Through the use semi-structured form of interviewing, the researchers were able to look at the way the responses were given, the tone used, facial expression, hesitation, and gestures. To establish reliability, the instruments were pilot-tested with 9 (5 males and 4 females) parents of children with SENs in Hlatikulu area, 20 kilometres away from Nhlanguano area. To ensure instrument reliability, the researchers used Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The reliability of the instrument was obtained at a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .85. This instrument was deemed reliable because the acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability .70 and above (De Vos et al. 2005). Particularly, findings from the pilot indicated that the items on the questionnaire instrument were clearly worded because there were few queries and the instruments were seen as giving a satisfactory validity.

Data for the actual study were obtained by the researchers. Calls were made to the participating schools for permission from the principals to visit their schools and explain the researchers' mission. In schools where there were no telephones, the researchers had to visit the schools principals. On arrival, principals were asked to call the children who were earlier identified with SENs through whom the participating parents were identified. This approach enabled the researchers to obtain the addresses of various participating parents in the study. Questionnaires together with the covering letters were then administered by hand to working parents at their places of work and collected later on the agreed dates after completion. For parents who could not complete the questionnaire, appointments were made with such parents for face to face interviews on different dates and days. The interviews were all conducted in the respondent's natural settings as already noted. Data analyses took the form of a mixed method approach. The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews was presented descriptively. Data obtained from questionnaire was quantified using frequencies and percentages and then presented in tables.

### Ethical Considerations

The researchers were aware of the ethical implications both for the participants and for the researchers throughout the process of the

research. As a result, all elements of the research were fully disclosed both by letter, which was attached to the questionnaires, and verbally during the interview processes. The purpose of the research and what will happen to the material collected were fully explained to the participants. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity should any information obtained were to be published. As a result, pseudonyms have been used where names have been mentioned in this article. Participants were meant to complete the consent forms while those who could not write only offered their verbal consent to the researchers. In addition, those participants who were interviewed did not say their names and did not permit the use of any form of tape-recording equipment.

## RESULTS

Results of the study show that the majority of parents who completed the questionnaire items indicated that they had challenges with their children at home and that they were equally failing to cope. Participants also noted with bitterness the way their children were treated at school. They said that they were not satisfied with the way teachers and so called normal children treated children with SENs. Participants indicated that the teachers did not accept these children. Questionnaire data also revealed teachers' complaints regarding the amount of time required to look after these children. Participants recommended that the government should build special schools nearby because their children did not benefit from the mainstream classroom. Nonetheless, majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with the manner their children were treated in the community. However, parents who indicated challenges they faced in the community revealed that their children were being abused sexually and were stigmatized by other children of the same area. The summaries of findings from the questionnaire instrument on research question are listed in Tables 1, 2, 3.

Interview data also confirmed that participants had great challenges which were sometimes difficult to express. Interview data revealed that two parents were confronted with challenges of accommodating their children while attending to their duties. It was also found that parents had the challenge of providing basic needs for their children, and one of the parents had the

**Table 1: Summary of parents who have/have not challenges at home**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Parents who have challenges at home	34	58.6
Parents who do not have challenges at home	22	38
No responses	2	3.4
Total	58	100

**Table 2: Summary of parents who have/not have challenges at school**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Parents who have challenges at school	44	75.9
Parents who do not have challenges at school	10	17.2
No responses	3	5.2
Neutral	1	1.7
Total	58	100

**Table 3: Summary of parents who have/have not challenges in the community**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Parents who have challenges in the community	7	12.1
Parents who do not have challenges in the community	50	86.2
No response	1	1.7
Total	58	100

challenge of transport. Participants whose children had visual impairment, expressed the feeling of insecurity as they constantly feared that their children might eat something poisonous, get lost in the area or even be abused because at times they left them alone at home while attending to family duties.

In response to this question, forty-eight (83%) of those who completed the questionnaire revealed that no training was given to them, while ten (17%) confirmed that they received some form of training. Those who received training lessons indicated that the training was on sign language. However, when participants were asked about the relevance of their training to their needs, eight of them noted that there was no relevance. Well three of the participants claimed to have blind children, five claimed to have children with intellectual disabilities. Only two of the ten participants indicated satisfaction with the workshop. The responses of the

forty- eight parents to the ‘why’ question who did not have any training lessons has been presented in Table 4. It would appear as shown from Table 4 that participants (with a highest percentage 50%) revealed that there was a belief that only teachers need training not parents. Therefore it can be concluded that most parents do not partner with educators because they lack knowledge and that may equally account to why they were experiencing challenges at school.

On the other hand, the interview data revealed that no training had been given to the participants. *Aunt Susan* said that they only knew of community nurses and community policemen who used to be called for training, not parents of children with special needs. In an interview, Mr Mamba had this to say: “*who are we to get training, we are not the learned people, and learned people talk the same language.*”

The respondents were given statements which they had to rate on a Likert Scale from 5 to 1 as follows: **SA**-Strongly Agree, **A**- Agree, **NS**-Not Sure, **D**- Disagree, and **SD**-Strongly Disagree. Responses from the participants on whether parents have the understanding of the nature of their children’s disability in Table 5 reflects that a majority (51.7%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement, 31% were not sure, 13.9% agreed, 3.4% strongly disagreed, and none strongly agreed. Participants revealed through the interview data that they forced themselves to cope because they could not change the situation. The three parents whose children were visually impaired revealed how they supported their children by taking them to church and by taking them along when shopping. Notwithstanding, it would seem no formal coping strategies were in place for these parents.

It was also found that parents gradually cope with the SENs of their children as Table 6 shows that a majority (51.7%) agreed with the statement, 31% were not sure, 13.9% disagreed,

**Table 4: Parents’ responses to the ‘why’ question**

Question	Responses	Frequency	(%)
Why you were not trained?	No one is interested in us	6	10.3
	Parents are not trained only teachers	29	50
	Educators do not go to rural areas	10	17
	Are there workshops for parents?	2	4
	No workshop was ever organized in this area.	10	17
	No response	1	1.7
Total		58	100

**Table 5: Parents’ understanding of the nature of disability**

Likert scale	Frequency	%
SA	0	0
A	8	13.9
NS	18	31
D	30	51.7
SD	2	3.4
Total	58	100

1.7% strongly agreed, and another 1.7% strongly disagreed.

**Table 6: Parents gradually cope with their children’s special needs**

Likert scale	Frequency	%
SA	1	1.7
A	30	51.7
NS	18	31
D	8	13.9
SD	1	1.7
Total	58	100

On whether with training parents will understand how to raise children with special needs, the Table 7 indicates that a majority 68.9% strongly agreed with the statement, 18.9% agreed, 7% disagreed, 5.2% were not sure, and none strongly disagreed.

**Table 7: Parents understand how to raise children with special needs**

Likert scale	Frequency	%
SA	40	68.9
A	11	18.9
NS	3	5.2
D	4	7
SD	0	0
Total	58	100

On whether in a family of two children, a normal child and a child with SENs, the parent

would be neglecting the one with SENs if she/he does not go an extra mile in meeting his/her needs, Table 8 depicts that a majority of 53.4% agreed with the statement, while 20.7% were not sure, 17.2% strongly agreed, 7% strongly disagreed, and 1.7% disagreed.

**Table 8: Neglecting the one with special needs**

<i>Likert scale</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
SA	10	17.2
A	31	53.4
NS	12	20.7
D	1	1.7
SD	4	7
Total	58	100

On whether parents had lower academic expectations of children with SENs than they had for non-disabled children, Table 9 shows that a majority 34.5% disagreed with the statement, 32.7% strongly disagreed, 25.9% agreed, 5.2% were not sure, and 1.7% strongly agreed.

**Table 9: Lower academic expectations from children with special needs**

<i>Likert scale</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
SA	1	1.7
A	15	25.9
NS	3	5.2
D	20	34.5
SD	19	32.7
Total	58	100

On whether parents have knowledge and understanding of making important decisions about the education of children with special needs, Table 10 reflects that a majority of 60.3% strongly disagreed with statement, 17.2% disagreed, and another 17.2% were not sure, 3.4% strongly agreed, and 1.7% agreed.

It was found that 29 participants claimed that the rights of human were being respected and

**Table 10: Parents' knowledge and understanding in making educational decisions**

<i>Likert scale</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
SA	2	3.4
A	1	2
NS	10	17.2
D	10	17.2
SD	35	60.3
Total	58	100

inclusive education had come as a relief to them. The participants were happy because their children with SENs were being admitted in nearby schools rather than taking them to far away special schools as was earlier the case. However, participants showed mixed feeling about the curriculum, which put more emphasis on academic achievement rather providing the children with the opportunity to acquire practical skills. Participants indicated that there was a need to help teachers develop more patience to cope with, and attend to their children with special needs. Participants also thought that inclusive education was forcefully implemented, although it still offered their children some hope.

The ten parents interviewed, discarded the implementation of inclusive education claiming that children with SENs will never benefit from it. *Sister Maggie* argued that “*transport will ever remain a problem not unless the schools will have boarding facilities*”. A glaring comment on the issues was made by *Mr Mamba*. He wondered who was going to prepare the child for school and attend to school meetings. *Mr Mamba* claimed that in other countries parents of children with SENs were also teachers. When asked to elaborate on that, he simply claimed that he was aware that “*parents of children with SENs tell teachers how their children should be taught*”. Interview data suggests that parents were willing to learn how they can partner with educators to reduce conflicts between schools and parents.

## DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to find out the challenges faced by parents of children with special education needs (SENs), which impacted their ability to perform their duties as major stakeholders in their children's education in mainstream classrooms. The following themes have emerged from data obtained and analysed from the instruments.

### Challenges Encountered by Parents of Children with SENs

Data from the questionnaires suggest that indeed parents of children with SENs encountered challenges at home, at school and in the community. The percentage of participants who encountered challenges was very high as com-

pared to those who had none. At home, data indicated that parents needed to take a little more time with their children, yet they had other duties to perform. These revelations were in line with an earlier finding by Bender (2008) and Giffing (2009) who noted that there is an additional expense, time and energy to care for the child with a special need.

It was found out that the majority of parents were not satisfied with the way teachers and normal children treated the children with SENs. In a study by Giffing (2009) about the perceptions of agriculture teachers towards including students with disabilities, the participants described teachers as lacking patience to cope and attend to children with special needs. One may expect challenges of either transport or feeding to be the major challenge at school but the study has indicated prejudice on the part of the teachers. This could make parents to be nervous to meet educators particularly when their child needs special attention. For this reason, we advocate for the training of these parents so that they could be open to educators and work hand-in-hand with them for the benefit of their children.

Bender (2008) had earlier discovered that due to prejudice from teachers, parents may become passively resistant to suggestions made by them (the teachers). It is worth noting that schools and parents vary, some parents have an excellent relationship with their child's school, and subsequently are closely involved. Others, for many different reasons, do not. The interview and questionnaire data indicated that parents expressed happy feelings about the treatment they got from the community, though others expressed bitterness as they noted that their children were stigmatised and abused. However, with the percentage of 86.2% to 12.1% it can be said that the parents encountered minor challenges in the community, although no challenge in this context can be minor. Both Nxumalo and Lukhele (2012); Pather and Nxumalo (2013) in their recent studies also noted the tension that exists between the teachers and parents.

#### **Training Lessons Given to Parents of Children with SENs towards the Introduction of Inclusive Education**

It was noted that majority of parents did not get any training towards inclusive education.

Those who managed to attend indicated that the lessons were irrelevant to their needs. With forty-eight (83%) of participants confirming that no training was being given this implied that there is a serious need to train parents. Armstrong et al. (2010); and UNESCO (2010) confirmed that parents of children with SENs have many problems requiring attention. These authors appear to suggest a training policy to be put in place by schools for parents. It could be concluded that parents in Nhlngano area of Swaziland appeared to work with teachers without any understanding or clear knowledge and definition of their roles. It is therefore imperative for educators in particular, and parents to come up with some guides on the expectations from each other, in order to establish effectiveness of their relationship.

#### **Skills Parents of Children with SENs have Compared to Their Expected Duties**

Questionnaire data has revealed that parents gradually cope with the special needs of their children. The high scores on the Likert scale appeared to suggest an indication that parents were able to cope with their children's special needs and low scale scores meant that parents were unable to cope with the special needs of their children. *Sister Maggie had this to say: "with prayer I am able to hold my head high and move on with my life and that of my daughter."* An interesting finding was that parents whose children were identified by teachers as having intellectual disabilities were not able to cope with the situation. They were ashamed to tell even the researchers that their children had intellectual disabilities. The parents' attitudes seemed to convey that little is seriously wrong with the children. It would appear the parents who refused to take part in this study may have had this attitude as such parents also allowed limited involvement of other professionals in the family dynamics.

#### **Parents' Perceptions towards the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Schools**

Responses to research question four meant that participating parents viewed inclusive education differently. This diversity in parents' perceptions in this regard, may imply that the im-

plementation of inclusive education is met with differing views and attitudes. It would be recalled that 50% of the participants thought that inclusive education was 'good', while 29.3% noted that the implementation was 'bad' news for their children and families. Those who thought that inclusive education was good argued that the policy had come as a relief since their children were admitted in neighbourhood schools. These observations were however, in line with what Turnbull et al. (2010) and Giffing (2009) said when they advocated for inclusive education.

However, the parents showed mixed feelings about the curriculum for its 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This revelation suggests that there is urgent need for existing curriculum to be modified to meet the diverse needs of their children. Taken into account the concern of the participants with visually impaired children that their children might get lost in the busy shuffle of school life, questions will be raised on the level of preparedness by schools for mainstream learning. Finally, it would equally seem that the queries from participants of children with multiple disabilities regarding whether their children might receive effective help in school appear to necessitate a new research that will aim to investigate implementation of the policy of inclusive education with a focus on special needs.

### CONCLUSION

Parents of children with special needs have challenges in meeting their expected role in educational decisions as have been demonstrated in this study. In spite of the overwhelming nature of these challenges, majority of parents appeared ill-prepared for their roles of providing their children's special needs. The results on training lessons also showed that parents were not prepared for the inclusion of their children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. These findings should alert stakeholders in education sector to devise a wide range of programmes aimed at meeting the parents' needs. Having a child with special needs is a stressor event. The degree of stress that the event generates is a need for care. The greater the continued need for care and attention, the greater is the stress and the chance of a negative outcome.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Given various findings of this study, the researchers recommend the following findings:

- ♦ That urgent measure should be put in place by both schools and the government to assist parents who may be challenged by their children's SENs in order to alleviate the situation.
- ♦ As one cannot change the disability of a child and the inclusive education is here to stay, it becomes imperative that training programmes be provided to all parents faced with such situation.
- ♦ Government must come up with policy to support parents of children with SENs. Such policy must target the needs of parents.
- ♦ Schools may also assist parents through the establishment of parents workshops where both parents and teachers will have the opportunity to share ideas.
- ♦ Given the sample size used in the study, the authors would recommend for an enlarged study that may use a larger sample size to warrant generalisation.
- ♦ More so, it is recommended that a comparative study be undertaken covering all the other regions of Swaziland namely Manzini, Hhohho, and Lubombo, in order to generalise the findings to all parents in the country.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The authors would like to draw the attention of readers to some of the limitations that were encountered in the course of data collection. In carrying out this study, the researchers had few setbacks worthy of acknowledgement. They include the following:

- ♦ First, because data collection started in the second week of March we experienced delays in visiting the participants due to continuous rainfall that led to unfavourable road conditions.
- ♦ Second, it is important to state here that matters bordering on disabilities were quite sensitive to many parents and attempt to obtain some specific information triggered some defensiveness in some parents resulting to the fact that some of the participants refused to be interviewed even though confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

- ♦ The size of the study sample was also a source of limitation that we thought should be acknowledged in this section. This limitation meant that the generalisability of the findings of the study must be carried out with caution.

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