

## Perceptions of Learners without Observable Disabilities about Learning in an Inclusive Classroom

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**ABSTRACT** This paper presents the findings of the study based on the perceptions of learners without observable disabilities about learning in an inclusive classroom. The insights into learners' perceptions were obtained through triangulating data from questionnaires and authors' field notes. The data indicates that learners are generally very positive about learning in inclusive classrooms, and that their academic achievement is not hampered by the presence, in their classrooms, of learners who need support. Learners with observable disabilities also benefit from learning with their peers. The results reveal that learners believe that teachers work hard to enforce interaction among learners as well as helping them achieve academically, but it is difficult for them to accommodate diversity, which points to further training needs for teachers and support personnel so that all learners get equally benefitted. There are also not enough resources, like workstations in classrooms, teaching materials, rails and ramps to accommodate availability to learners with special needs.

### INTRODUCTION

After decades of effort to create inclusive education, the time for it to manifest at scale may finally be at hand (Sailor and McCart 2014). Thomas (2013: 473) states that "for inclusive education to be at the core of education-as it should be-it has to be a truly inclusive education, not one that is narrowly defined. It can be so, and there has certainly been a progressively broadening compass to the idea of inclusive education. The term 'inclusive education' now refers to the education of all children, not just those with disabilities".

Learner perceptions form the centre of any policy formulation and inclusive education is no exception. Some observers about inclusion in Lesotho are of the view that the implementation lacked depth and breadth given that there were more than 1000 primary schools around the country at the time (Johnstone and Chapman 2009). In 1991, the Special Education Unit was formed in order to help identify and accommodate learners with special educational needs. The introduction in 2000 of Free and Compulsory Primary Education ensured a greater number of learners with all kinds of special educational needs in regular schools (Muzvidziwa and Seotsanyana 2002). This is, as it stands referred to as integration. Inclusive Education (IE) is understood as a philosophy supporting and celebrating diversity in its broadest sense

(Kugelmass 2004). DNE (1997) further reiterates that, inclusive education entails a learning environment that promotes the full, personal, academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of race, class, gender, disability, religion, culture, sexual preference, learning styles and language. Beckett (2008) and Forlin (2010), on the other hand, states that inclusive education should be viewed as being founded upon a moral position (Alekhina 2014), which values and respects every individual and which welcomes diversity as a rich learning resource. IE is a system of education that functions from the human rights perspective (•iljak 2013), where every individual has an equal right to education and educational support where and when needed. The broad philosophy of education has an implication for schools or the way schools are run. Schools have to become inclusive so that all learners can have access to education.

Inclusion studies mainly focus on the needs of learners with observable disabilities, without acknowledging those without observable disabilities. In inclusive literature, stress is also put on teacher training and community participation, for successful inclusion (Nind et al. 2003: 2). Learners without observable disabilities are, however, expected to be tolerant, accepting and understanding with learners with observable disabilities or special needs. The key to the success of inclusive education does not only lie in making conditions conducive for learners with special

needs, teachers' training or parents' involvement, but in taking into account the perceptions of learners without observable disabilities. As mentioned earlier, research on inclusive education mainly focuses on the accommodation of learners with special educational needs or with observable disabilities in mainstream education. The requirement is that regular schools need to change and adapt in order to accommodate learners with special needs. Changing and adapting can take some time. Even though, some studies show that learners without observable disabilities do not generally hold any negative feelings towards those learners with observable disabilities, inclusion could prove otherwise. Learners with observable disabilities are considered to be outsiders and working at improving relations among all learners can be time consuming. Furthermore, Martin (2014) and Sailor and McCart (2014) indicate that the reason inclusion has been such a hard sell, particularly for students with extensive support needs, is that general educators and sometimes parents have not seen the value of it, given the required departure from traditional teaching practices. From this discussion, Lehohla and Hlalele (2012) suggested further research focusing on the voices of learners without observable disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The paper presents such voices. It addresses the question:

*What are the perceptions of learners without observable disabilities about learning in inclusive classrooms?*

When reading on IE, one may think that it is about making conditions conducive for learners with special needs or disabilities in mainstream schools. This view is also held by (Nind et al. 2003: 3) in stating '*so many books about inclusive education focus on disabled pupils and pupils with learning difficulties*'. The concentration on learners with disabilities has an effect of side lining those learners without observable disabilities, those to whom inclusion happens. They (learners without observable disabilities) are also going to be integrated and it is wise that their views about inclusion are heard so that practice can be improved.

### **Defining Learners without Observable Disabilities**

There are many definitions of disability from the perspectives of different individuals. One of

the definitions of disability springs from the functional limitations of individuals, such as blindness, deafness or other changes in bodily structures. The second definition is legal or administrative and originates from the distribution of welfare benefits to disabled people. The final definition is subjective, which means a person conceives of her/himself as disabled (Gronvik 2009). Learners without observable disabilities are therefore those learners who have not been identified as having any disabilities or who do not outwardly show any signs of a disability. These learners have not been professionally identified as having a special need or a disability, thus, they do not have an observable disability or a special need. Learners without observable disabilities may form negative or positive perceptions of inclusion depending on what they know or what they do not know of the process. The fact that IE was only introduced in primary schools and not followed up in high schools in Lesotho poses a problem. Learners with special educational needs are accepted into high schools, but with little continuing support, except in those schools that already accept learners with certain disabilities. Not much is known about the transition of learners from primary schools to high schools, because there is a scarcity of research on inclusive secondary classrooms compared to inclusive elementary classrooms (Mastropieri and Scruggs 2001).

In Lesotho, as in South Africa, internal and external examinations measure the success of schools (Engelbrecht and Green 2007: 32). Reliance on internal as well as external examinations means that gaps in student skills are more pronounced in secondary schools which often employ 'teacher-centred' strategies for learning. There are wide-ranging demands on time, particularly for students with disabilities given the need for learning various important skills (Kozik et al. 2009). Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001) also attest that in secondary schools, there is pressure on high-stakes testing, content knowledge and an increasing expectation of independent study skills. Another complication is that of the pace of content presentation that is required in order to cover the required content within an academic year. The fact that content presentation has to be paced according to the demands of the curriculum, learners with special needs may be left out or those without observable disabilities might be short-handed in an effort to

accommodate diversity. Learners with special needs/disabilities often require a relaxed pace, which means that teachers have to relax their pace of content presentation. The pressure of internal and external examinations does, however, not allow for this in Lesotho and teachers have to accommodate all learners. This fact of having to accommodate learner diversity may be perceived in different ways by learners without observable disabilities.

### **Perceptions about Learning in an Inclusive Classroom: A Literature Review**

Learners without observable disabilities are at times, expected to be peer modellers to those learners with disabilities. They have to help those with disabilities with their school work by becoming peer tutors or buddy readers (Hines 2008). In a study carried out about perceptions of learners about inclusive instruction, it was found that some learners accepted teachers' use of curricular adaptations for classmates exhibiting learning deficits, but other learners opposed accommodations citing fairness, grading, need for uniformity of curriculum (Fulk and Smith 1995). Since quality education is measured by the school results at the end of the year, learning in inclusive classrooms for some learners may appear time-wasting and therefore of no benefit at the end of the year. By the same token, some learners without observable disabilities may find it helpful that the teacher assigns more work or more time to finish tasks. This may be to the advantage of all learners and not only those with disabilities/special needs. The next section discusses perceptions about various aspects of an inclusive classroom.

#### ***Perceptions about Inclusive Teachers***

Teachers in schools that accommodate learners with disabilities are normally protective of such learners. Johnstone and Chapman (2009) found out that teachers expressed a caring response and a protective attitude toward students with disabilities, often taking on a role of the students' guardian who wanted to shield the students from harm. The harm in this sense may be learners without observable disabilities and their attitudes towards people with disabilities. Learners without disabilities may view teachers in this role negatively or positively. Their (teach-

ers') protective attitude may hinder interaction with the peers or enforce it. Teachers who protect learners with disabilities may be viewed as unfair by some learners as they may be viewed as giving preferential treatment to disabled learners, sometimes at the expense of those without observable disabilities. The teachers' protectiveness may be viewed in another light, where the teacher will instead teach learners ways of treating others with disabilities. The teacher may also teach learners about a disability or different disabilities and what they each entail.

#### ***Perceptions about Academic Difference***

Learners with disabilities are not necessarily deficient socially or academically. They do indeed need some assistance from the teacher as well as the other students. Terpstra and Tamura (2007) also state that children with disabilities attending regular schools often need more support than other children in order to participate in different school activities. They may need assistance in getting into their groups or handling certain objects that are used in class. For instance, a learner with a physical challenge may need assistance in handling some laboratory equipment, but this does not imply that he is academically deficient. When learners without observable disabilities start seeing those with disabilities as needing help, then their perceptions of them may be affected negatively or positively. Learners without observable disabilities may perceive themselves as academically superior to those with disabilities if they always need to help or are asked to help with their school work. On the other hand, learners without observable disabilities may welcome a chance to help others. They may view the need for help of learners with disabilities as positive as it may also help them learn and better understand the content.

#### ***Perceptions about Disability***

In some communities, people with a disability mostly stay away from the public due to the shame and mockery. Disability is viewed as a personal tragedy or a misfortune (Nind et al. 2004: 151). These views in a society may influence the way children without observable disabilities view their peers with a disability. In some non-disabled people, disability is not caused by im-

pairment or a function of the individual, but the oppression of people with impairments in a disabling society. This non-tragic view of disability is, however, not about 'the problem', but about disability as a positive personal and collective identity, and disabled people as leading fulfilled and satisfying lives (Nind et al. 2004: 151). This is a very advanced and educated way of looking at a disability which is not seen in many communities. Looking at disability in this manner attests to the fact that there is 'disablism' in society which is defined as 'discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour' arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others (Beckett 2008; Melnik 2013; Ryan 2014). An individual is not seen as the problem, but the people around such an individual. The problem is people not seeing beyond the impairment.

#### *Perceptions about Social Interaction*

Schools are social spaces and one of the greatest assets of this social space that can enhance learning is having lasting and meaningful relationships with peers. Friendships have major implications for positive emotional and academic development and protect against the negative impact of general peer rejection. Friends also promote engagement in school. The social skills defects evident in many children with learning disabilities may, however, lead typically achieving students to avoid forming friendships with them or exclude them in certain educational and social activities (Estell et al. 2009). In inclusive settings, learners with special needs have an opportunity to have appropriate peer modelling and what it takes to be part of a team with people without disabilities. On the other hand students without identified special needs/disabilities learn to deal more effectively with people who may have different abilities, backgrounds, interests or experiences (Hoskins 1996: 26). An inclusive school and especially, classroom, is supposed to benefit all children by fostering acceptance and friendship. Acceptance and friendships formed in the classrooms can help build an inclusive society when learners also interact positively outside the school. For young adults in high schools, having a friend is one of the most important aspects of schooling. The importance of having friends is reinforced by (Nind et al. 2004: 214) that having friends and being part of a group

for most pupils, is the most significant aspect of school. Soodak (2003) states that inclusive school communities focus on social as well as academic outcomes for children. Friendships matter to children, their parents and their teachers, because they provide children with the opportunity to develop important skills and attitudes, and perhaps most important, they enhance quality of life for children and their families. Friendships serve a wide array of purposes that include social and academic enhancement and they improve lives in families and thus, the wider community. Friendships between learners with and without disabilities are sometimes fraught with difficulties. Wong (2006) clearly points out that learners without observable disabilities have revealed a willingness to help their disabled classmates, but they were not given opportunities or provided with the appropriate structures that would allow them to relate to the students with disabilities. Lack of adult facilitation may result in peer rejection.

#### *Perceptions about Peer Rejection*

Learners without observable disabilities are sometimes willing to form friendships with learners with disabilities, but the other end of the spectrum is that learners with disabilities are rejected by peers. In a study by Rosenbaum (1986, cited in Estell et al. 2009), it was shown and found out that children actively reject others who are too dissimilar from themselves. Although students with severe and multiple disabilities share many similarities with other children their age in terms of interests and desires, the lack of typical communication skills and the need for certain adaptations may pose initial barriers to the development of friendships. Students may need to understand about their classmates' specific strengths and needs in order to feel more comfortable in their interactions (Downing 2008: 218). Peers with disabilities are actively rejected by those without observable disabilities, because they are different, but the underlying reason is that they do know about their peers' particular disability. According to Wong (2006), qualitative data indicated that children felt uncomfortable in relation to peers with disabilities if they were not given adequate information about the nature of the disabilities. When learners do not know about a disability or disabilities, they do not know how to react

around an individual, because they do not have any idea about the needs of that person. They do not know whether a peer would need help and they do not know how to go about talking about the peer's disability without appearing insensitive. This can cause rejection. Some learners with disabilities are rejected by peers if an interaction with them is seen as threatening the social status and self-image of their non-disabled peers. Then there would be a high incidence of non-acceptance (Wong 2006). Self-image and peer acceptance are very important at adolescence, and if someone is perceived as interacting with the wrong crowd, then they will be ostracised by the peer group. This can be detrimental to the social development of a learner. Some learners with a limited knowledge of disability may highly disapprove of their friends associating with other learners with disabilities. Some learners with disabilities lose reciprocal friendships and have higher social rejection despite being in an inclusive setting. They are rejected both for play and scholastic activities (Frederickson and Furnham 2004). This normally happens when typically achieving students hold and maintain negative self-fulfilling prophecies of students with special needs (Estell et al. 2008). These prophecies could be that disabilities are contagious or that disabled people are useless and are always in need of help. These are harmful ideas to forming relationships with learners with special needs. Many parents with children with disabilities / special educational needs feel that being in inclusive classrooms will give their children an opportunity for contacts and interactions with typical peers (Koster et al. 2009). Studies report that learners with disabilities experience higher levels of loneliness than their peers (Lackaye and Margalit 2008), are less accepted and generally have a social status lower than that of their classmates (Koster et al. 2009). Learners with observable disabilities are also less popular, have fewer reciprocal friends and they are less often part of a subgroup of peers (Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). The improvement of self-image is important, but the rejection of peers can be harmful in this respect, regarding development of self-image.

### *Perceptions about Peer Acceptance*

Learners without observable disabilities are mostly seen as willing to form friendships with

learners with disabilities. Some of the reasons they gave for being friends with disabled students with disabilities were altruistic (Wong 2006). These learners feel that it is their responsibility to form friendships. The feeling of letting those learners with disabilities down, weighs heavily on the learners without observable disabilities and they feel the need to approach and form friendships. Such friendships are based not on the willingness to be friends, but to be of assistance. If support is, however, the only reason why friendships are formed, then they might not flourish. When relations are dominated by the assumption of need and care, the peers behave not as equals, but more as guides and helpers (De Schauwer et al. 2008). The formation of friendships based on the need for care and support, contributes to learners without disabilities viewing those with disabilities as weak. The formation of friendships is supposed to contribute to mutual benefits and not one sided benefits to learners with disabilities. Learners without observable disabilities need to see themselves as equals and not helpers. To view themselves as equals, they need to act as equals. Learning about disabilities should help them realise that disabled learners are in need of friendships and not guardianship.

## METHODOLOGY

The study sought to get acquainted with the dynamics of learning in an inclusive classroom from the perspective of those learners without observable disabilities. This study was therefore an exploratory one. De Vos et al. (2005: 106) maintain that in an exploratory study, the authors aim to become conversant with basic facts and to create a general picture of conditions.

### **Data Collection**

In order to inform the study, the authors undertook empirical data collection from the identified participants. This is very important since this is considered by many authors as the beginning of the actual research. Data collection is a means by which the authors drew inferences and conclusions for his/her study (Kumar 2005: 24). In this research, the authors utilised two methods of data collection, namely questionnaires and observation.

### *Triangulation*

In order that the authors get the full picture or representation of the perceptions of learners, more than one method was used. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods or perspectives for the collection and interpretation of data about a phenomenon, in order to obtain an accurate representation of reality (Polit and Hungler 1999). The use of more than one method gives a full picture and two or more methods complement one another.

### *Participants*

In an effort to inform the study, the authors had to go out and seek respondents who are information-rich and available to participate in the research study. In this study, the information-rich participants are the learners without observable disabilities. The ideal situation is for the authors to ask all people of interest. Due to limitations of time, money and availability and access, the authors had to however, limit the number of participants (Cohen et al. 2000:92). The total number of people targeted by the authors to inform the study is the population. Kumar (2005: 165) defines population as the people to question in order to find answers to research questions. Due to limitations aforementioned, the authors were forced to use part of the total population which is the sample. De Vos et al. (2005: 194) stretch the definition of population as the totality of persons, events, organisation units, case records or other sampling units with which the research problem is concerned. A sample consists of individuals selected from a larger group of persons (MacMillan and Schumacher 1989: 161). Cohen et al. (2000: 92) defines a sample as a smaller group or subset of the total population that is representative of the total population (however defined) under study. The study does not use the opinions of all learners without observable disabilities due to their large numbers, but only a few of those learners are selected. The authors selected two high schools that fit the description of inclusive schools in Lesotho, which are those schools which admit learners with special educational needs/disabilities in regular schools. Black (1993: 49) states that in a purposive study, units of analysis are selected on the basis of traits required in the study. Purposive sampling is selecting informa-

tion-rich cases for in-depth study when one wants to understand something about those cases without needing or desiring to generalise all such cases. Purposive sampling is done to increase the utility of information obtained from small samples. It requires that information be obtained about variables among the subunits before the sample is chosen (MacMillan and Schumacher 1989: 182). Maree (2007: 178) points out that a purposive sample is used in special cases where the sampling is done with a specific purpose in mind. So in order for the authors to choose a purposive sample she made sure that she knew the variables of the particular units of analysis in order to choose that sample accurately. The authors ensured that the sample had the traits required in the study. Learners chosen to participate in this study have not been identified and therefore classified as disabled or with special needs in their particular schools. They are not receiving any assistance afforded learners with disabilities or special needs. For the purposes of obtaining accurate responses, the authors selected learners without observable disabilities in classes with peers with observable disabilities. There are five grades in all, starting from Form A-E (years 8-12 of learning). Forms A-C, are secondary school classes while Forms D and E are high school classes.

### *A Summary of Qualitative Results*

Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organising the data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among categories. Hypotheses are not generated a priori and thus the relevant variables for data collection are not predetermined. The data is not grouped according to predetermined categories. Rather, what becomes important to analyse, emerges from the data itself, out of the process of inductive reasoning. The authors in the study used the constant comparative method to analyse data which is designed to identify themes and patterns in qualitative data (Maykut and Morehouse 1994: 126-127). The authors sorted data into themes and patterns that share similar characteristics, which is called coding. The authors then reduced categories of data after familiarising herself with the data, to make data manageable (Rakotsoane and Rakotsoane 2007: 28-29). In order to analyse massive data and to ensure that all material that belongs to one cate-

gory is physically assembled in one place, the following steps should be followed (McMillan and Schumacher 2001: 482):

*'Data consolidation, which is the process of reading, thinking, trying to get interim topics, changing them when others are more suitably placed, checking them until every piece of data and meaningful information is categorised under various topics and even later re-editing the topics and data until they are suitably placed'*. This is likely to be time-consuming to the authors, but it is necessary. Data are coded and phrases listed in groupings under tentative topics that seem to fit together. Data will then be displayed in an organised visual representation that will allow the authors to draw conclusions. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to offer any comments or suggestions based on the nature of the questionnaire and their experiences. The paragraph below summarises comments and suggestions from the participants.

Most of the respondents to the questionnaire pointed out that there was a need to assist learners with observable disabilities and also not to discriminate against them in the classroom. Learners also pointed out that they should also be encouraged to help their peers with observable disabilities and teachers should also make an effort to help those learners. Learners without observable disabilities also posited that learners with observable disabilities should be treated equally to those without observable disabilities. Learners without observable disabilities also argued that more equipment and extra lessons were needed especially for those learners with observable disabilities. There should also be more staff and facilities allocated to learners with observable disabilities. Learners were also of the view that all learners should make an effort to be friendly with one another so that they all got along. Making friends with learners with observable disabilities would help them adjust well in school and make them feel accepted. Most of the learners without observable disabilities were of the view that learners with observable disabilities could help 'normal' people and that they were capable of learning and also had potential. To learners without observable disabilities, being disabled did not make one incapable of learning. On the issue of doctors, physiotherapist and other specialists, most learners indicated that these professionals did not come to their school often, but it was impor-

tant that they came. Most learners felt that all learners needed those professionals for their well-being. Very few learners maintained that learners with observable disabilities should be taught in their own school so that they got all the attention they needed. Learners felt that if learners with observable disabilities continued to be taught with them, they would not get to pass well, since they needed more assistance.

### **Observations**

The section below provides an analysis of themes emerging from the observations.

#### ***Seating Arrangements***

Learners sat together irrespective of their disability. In the school with learners with physical disabilities, there were no adapted seats. They sat in their wheelchairs and used desk tops to write. In the school with learners with visual disabilities, those learners sat mostly in the front, but with their peers without observable disabilities. The lack of adapted seats in the first school might impede on the effective learning of learners with observable disabilities, since they might not be comfortable sitting in a wheelchair and using conventional desks designed for someone without a disability. The classrooms in both schools appeared cramped with desks to accommodate more than 40 learners in each class.

#### ***Communication***

Learners communicated with one another very well in the classroom. Those learners with observable disabilities seemed very keen and willing to work with those with observable disabilities. In the school with learners with physical disabilities, learners without observable disabilities helped push those in wheelchairs when they had to go to the toilet. This showed that there was co-operation among learners in the school.

#### ***Interaction Outside the Classroom***

Learners with physical disabilities were never alone and there was always someone pushing the wheelchairs to and from toilets and classrooms and wherever those learners had to be. Those learners without observable disabilities appeared very protective of those with observable disabilities.

### ***Group Work***

Groups were formed with both learners with and without observable disabilities. Learners without observable disabilities always tried to assist those with observable disabilities with their class work. This helping spirit and co-operation led to higher levels of performance, both academically and socially.

### ***Teaching Methods***

In the school with learners with physical disabilities, teachers did not change their methods. In the school with visually challenged learners, learners with visual disabilities would be given prepared material that did not require the use of vision. For instance, mathematical formulae would have been printed in Braille in advance.

### ***Time Allocated Assisting Both Learners***

No exceptions were made for learners with and without observable disabilities. Teachers in both the schools paid attention to the needs of all learners equally and in both cases learners who were slow were assisted duly.

### ***Role of Teacher Assistants***

In the school with physically disabled learners, there were no assistants for those learners. There were just regular teachers. In the school with the visually impaired, there were teacher assistants, responsible for the reproduction of Braille materials to be used by learners in the classroom.

### ***Workstations***

There were no workstations in the classrooms in both schools. In the school with visually challenged learners, there was the centre with computers with software suitable for people with visual challenges.

### ***Built Environment***

In both schools, especially the one with learners in wheelchairs, there were no ramps and those learners really needed the assistance of their classmates to and from the classrooms. In the school with learners with visual challenges, there were stairs and steep places leading to classrooms and there were no side handles.

## **RESULTS**

The findings of the study based on the perceptions of learners without observable disabilities about learning in inclusive classroom will be summarised and complemented by the literature study.

### **Learners Seem to Have No Problem Sitting Next to Their Peers with Observable Disabilities**

Although many learners stated that they did not decide whom they sat next to in class, many of them preferred sitting next to their peers with observable disabilities. When learners got along in the classroom, this was likely to help improve the practice of inclusion. Mixing the seating of learners in the classroom encouraged social acceptance, collaboration and the spirit of oneness among the learner population outside the classroom as well (Tepstra and Tamura 2007). This information is consistent with what the literature study revealed that it was important to pair the disabled learners with their non-disabled peers in class activities in order to enforce socialisation (Vaughn et al. 2007: 18). It was important that learners accepted being in the same class and sitting close together as this could help learners without observable disabilities to understand learners with observable disabilities. The acceptance of others was consistent with the principles of the ecosystemic perspective addressing the different levels of functioning within the whole social context. Acceptance in the classroom will be advocated and practiced in the whole school and the society.

### **Learners with Observable Disabilities are reported to be Benefiting from Learning in an Inclusive Classroom**

The presence of learners with observable disabilities clearly did not detract from the learning of those learners with observable disabilities. This was indicated by the evidence obtained from the empirical study. Although, most learners were in agreement that learners with observable disabilities always needed extra assistance with their school work, they also maintained that those learners did not take too much of the teachers' time to an extent that those without observ-



able disabilities suffered. Learners also maintained that it was not necessary that learners with observable disabilities be taught in their own classrooms or schools. Most of the learners also argued that learners with observable disabilities were people like the rest of us and that they could teach 'normal' people, because they were capable and had potential. This was consistent with information obtained from the literature study showing that learners with and without observable disabilities benefit by learning with their peers and that if they have to attend school far away, this might have an adverse effect on their social contacts in their own neighbourhoods (Ruijs and Peetsma 2009).

#### **There is a Need for More Facilities and Equipment to Support Learners with Observable Disabilities**

There were divided views among the learners on the availability of specialised computers and chairs, but most learners maintained that there were resource rooms for learners with observable disabilities. Learners also, however, argued that learners with observable disabilities were not given an opportunity to take oral or tape-recorded tests. The authors' observation discovered that there were no special chairs for learners with physical disabilities, but learners with visual challenges had their own computer centre with appropriate computer software. Most learners pledged more equipment and facilities to try helping learners with observable disabilities fulfil their potential. Urwick and Elliott (2010) attest that Lesotho as a developing nation suffers gross inadequacies of facilities and special learning materials for learners with special educational needs. A quoted reference in the literature study confirmed that the prospect of the education system being geared up in terms of facilities to cater for every kind of disability as an integral part of its provision was something of a utopian ideal.

#### **There is a Perception That Learners with Observable Perform Well Academically despite Their Disabilities**

Most learners were of the view that learners with observable disabilities did not perform any worse than learners without observable disabilities. This performance could be indicative of

the fact that all learners, regardless of their disabilities or abilities, could learn in the same schools and succeed. Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) contend that learners with special educational needs achieve better in inclusive settings than in non-inclusive settings.

#### **The Presence of Learners with Observable Disabilities is Not Perceived as an Impediment to Learning in an Inclusive Classroom**

Most of the learners contended that they preferred being in study groups with their peers with observable disabilities because it did not detract from their learning. Learners willingly offered assistance to those learners who struggled, be it those with observable or without observable disabilities. It was also not expected of them either to help learners with observable disabilities when they struggled with school work. Learners also strongly argued that their academic performance was not hampered by assisting learners with observable disabilities. The fact that learning was not hampered is reinforced by Tepstra and Tamura (2007) in asserting that learners with observable disabilities are not deficient socially or academically. This is positive for IE in that learners realised that they were not only responsible for their own learning anymore, but for those of others as well. When learners appreciated others different from them, they could teach people in their communities how to care for others, especially those with observable disabilities. The evidence shows that learners with observable disabilities benefited from learning as much as those without observable disabilities. Separating learners robbed them of valuable lessons they could learn from one another as ecologically situated beings.

#### **Learners Find It Easy to Interact Socially**

The results indicated that all learners had firm friendships and those without observable disabilities were comfortable in the presence of those with observable disabilities. Learners were also friendly, because they spent enough time together, which enabled them to know one another well enough to establish lasting relationships. This forging of relations among learners of differing abilities, negates studies that indicate that learners without observable disabili-

ties actively reject their peers with observable disabilities since they do not spend a considerable amount of time with them (Estell et al. 2009; Wong 2006). Friendships are important for the self-worth of individuals and especially individuals with observable disabilities. Friendships are also important in that they allow learners to work together and thus increase the academic performance of all learners and also protect against the negative impact of general peer rejection. Friendships help learners adjust and gain confidence in their interactions with peers and other people.

#### **Learners Hold a View That They Were Not Adequately Prepared for Inclusion**

Most of the learners feel that teachers were not putting enough effort to teach them about disabled learners and their particular disabilities at the beginning of the year. It was important that learners knew and understood their classmates' specific strengths and needs in order to feel more comfortable in their interaction (Downing 2008: 218). Learners needed to be properly prepared, since inclusion meant they would take on more responsibility, not only for their learning but that of their peers as well (Malak 2014). There were learners who believed that the little orientation teachers gave helped forge proper relations.

#### **Teachers Work with All Learners and Actively Encourage Cooperation amongst Them**

Although, most of the learners strongly agreed that teachers were reluctant to assist learners who struggled with school work, many learners disagreed that teachers only preferred working with learners without observable disabilities. Teachers also worked very hard to ensure that all learners sat together in the classroom so that they got along. Teachers were faced with large classes and a syllabus that needed to be completed by the end of the year (Urwick and Elliott 2010), which could explain the reluctance to make more time for learners who struggled. It was, however, clear that teachers tried their best to teach and encourage co-operation. A case in point is that they thoughtfully intervened and actively facilitated the acceptance of learners with disabilities in the general education classroom (Eriksson et al. 2007).

#### **Schools Had Support Teachers Whilst Paraprofessional Services Were Lacking**

It was clear from the information obtained that there were support services, especially support teachers who were present to assist learners academically. Psychologists, social workers or physiotherapists did not visit schools. This was consistent with data obtained from the literature study that these specialists deal with huge caseloads and therefore cannot attend to all learners. This could also be explained by the fact that Lesotho, like any developing country, is not yet equipped with resources and facilities required to meet the needs of inclusion (Pillay and Terlizzi 2009; Dmitrieva and Nartova-Bochaver 2014). Another explanation could be that these paraprofessionals were only seen through referral to their offices from learners' schools and homes. Lack of support services could result in a breakdown of learning for learners with special needs and thus a breakdown in education as a whole. The education system would have a backlog of learners left behind resulting in a lot of pressure for teachers and school administrators.

#### **Learners are Assessed in the Same Manner**

It was clear that learners, especially those with observable disabilities, were not given more time for tests and did not take alternative examinations to writing, like oral and tape-recorded tests. A concession made for learners with observable disabilities was being offered to take their tests in different classrooms to avoid disturbance. The contents of their tests were, however, similarly. Learners with observable disabilities should however be afforded an opportunity for assessment concessions.

#### **The Built Environment Seems not to be Conducive for Learners with Observable Physical Disabilities**

The observations revealed that the built environment was not suited to the needs of learners with physical disabilities. There were no ramps for learners who were physically challenged or handle bars on the sides of the stairs for learners with visual challenges. Accessibility is important in that it determines the readiness of schools for inclusion.

## DISCUSSION

### **Learners without Observable Disabilities Believe Learners with Observable Disabilities are Ordinary and Deserve to be Taught in Regular Schools**

The literature study postulated that inclusive learning environments can have both negative and positive impacts on learners with observable disabilities. Learners without observable disabilities can help their peers in adjusting to the larger social world and improve their social status by providing an opportunity for positive interaction. On the other hand, since learners with special educational needs need a greater amount of time to perform school and social activities; this may make them prone to peer rejection. The empirical study clearly affirmed that the perceptions of learners without observable disabilities about their peers with observable disabilities were anything but positive. Learners without observable disabilities perceived their peers as normal despite their difficulties. They believed that learners with observable disabilities were capable, efficient and had the potential to impart knowledge to 'normal' people. Learners with observable disabilities were always with peers without observable disabilities in and outside the classroom, which was indicative of acceptance, co-operation and understanding among the learner population. Learners without observable disabilities were friends with learners with observable disabilities and showed a greater level of comfort and acceptance.

### **Learners Also Showed a Preference to be Friends with Learners with Observable Disabilities which was Positive for Inclusion**

The empirical study also revealed that even though learners got along, there was not much orientation at the beginning of the year. This lack of orientation could open false channels of information which lead to learners with observable disabilities being alienated. Based on the positive and negative picture painted above, it was apparent that learners without observable disabilities were accepting, understanding as well as protective of their peers with observable disabilities. Schools have to thoughtfully integrate the teaching of tolerance of difference in the

lessons at the beginning of the year and throughout the year. The experience of learners showed that they had a potential to advance the ideals of inclusion. As a result, teachers should take every opportunity to teach learners about disability and disabled people and their needs. The government of Lesotho must also have a clear policy on inclusion which should guide the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to formulate guidelines for schools on inclusion.

### **Learners Believe Their Learning and that of Their Peers is Enhanced Though More Can be done for Peers with Observable Disabilities**

The literature study posited that learners with observable disabilities in inclusive classroom always need more assistance and that could take much of the teachers' time, and detract from learning of learners without observable disabilities. The empirical study also confirmed that learners believed that learners with observable disabilities always needed assistance, but did not take up too much of the teachers' time. The curriculum in inclusive schools has to be single and accommodate as well as address the needs of all learners. Assessment has to be varied in order to be fair for all learners. The empirical study revealed that learners without observable disabilities preferred being in the same class and sitting next to their peers with observable disabilities. The study also revealed that learners without observable disabilities formed study groups with their disabled peers and this enhanced their learning and that they were willing to assist their peers who struggled and that helping actually enhanced their learning and that of their peers. Learners also believed that learners with observable disabilities were capable of imparting knowledge. Learners were also of the view that learners with observable disabilities performed very well academically, which tied in with the literature study, indicating that being disabled does not mean that learners are academically deficient. Learners also showed that they were taught the same subjects and they were assessed equally with colleagues with observable disabilities. The empirical study also revealed that learners without observable disabilities strongly argued that there were not enough resources and facilities for their peers with observable disabilities, nor were they

afforded assessment concessions. Learners also pledged more facilities and equipment for their peers since what was available was not perceived to help enhance their peers' learning. It can be argued from the data above that the presence of learners with observable disabilities did not detract from learning and that all learners benefited from learning together. It was, however, clear that schools were not fully accommodating, especially for learners with observable disabilities. Making available adapted desks, ramps and rails should be top priority for schools that purport to be inclusive. The curriculum has not changed to accommodate the different learning styles, abilities and paces of learners. The government should make available financial resources to assist schools achieve inclusion. Most importantly, the government has to put in place measures to adapt the curriculum and assessment standards which are still based on ability, content mastery and ranking order of academic success. The different levels of school functioning should be tapped into efficient and affective teaching and learning.

**Teachers are perceived to Work Very Hard for All Learners but More Support Personnel is needed for Collaborative Work**

It emerged from the literature review that teachers today are faced with a lot of diversity in their classrooms and that most teachers, having only trained as regular teachers; do not feel confident in their abilities to teach learners with special educational needs. As a result, teachers may resist changes as they will increase the complexity of their work. Teachers have large classes and a set curriculum with a stipulated time limit in Lesotho, so this makes the accommodation of diversity in the classroom complex. Teachers therefore need support for themselves as well as for the learners.. The views of the learners, however, were that teachers really worked hard to reach all learners and encouraged togetherness and ensured that all learners benefited from education. Teachers' dedication to ensuring that learners got along was important in advancing IE. The empirical study also showed that there were support teachers, but learners pledged for more in order to assist learners with special needs. Physiotherapists, social workers and those in the helping professions did not come to schools, but some learners had

also reported doctors coming to their schools. The authors also observed eye specialists' presence in the school with visually challenged learners. On the basis of the information above, teachers seem to be working hard to make inclusion a reality, but it is apparent that they need further training and support. The Ministry of Education has to ensure that teachers are trained in basic special needs education. More teachers trained in special needs have to be used to train mainstream teachers in handling learners with special needs. People in the helping professions have not been brought on board and that requires the MOET and Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MOHSW) working together. The collaborative working relations are ecologically and systematically sound in that more can be brought to the table for the benefit of all learners.

**CONCLUSION**

The government has to put in place a clear policy on inclusion in order to ensure that the provision of inclusive education is uniform, unambiguous and effective. Widespread education has to be undertaken by the government to educate communities, organisations, learners and other stakeholders of what inclusion entails and envisions. The government has to ensure that it seeks the views of all stakeholders, especially learners without observable disabilities, so that their views will help inform policy on successful implementation of inclusive education. The practice of inclusion can be improved by providing learners with education on how to handle disabled people in school throughout the year with learning materials, drama, television, newspaper and radio programmes. Participation of learners in matters that concern them, like inclusion, has to be encouraged. Teachers have to receive intensive training in order to help them accommodate diversity. They have to be trained in new teaching methods, assessment methods, identifying, assessment and intervention of learners with special needs, and collaborative team teaching. Teachers in special schools can be encouraged to assist teachers in schools that are moving towards inclusion in matters pertaining to the handling of learners with special needs. More teachers have to be trained so that the large numbers of learners are accommodated to reduce the density in classrooms. Curriculum and assessment have to be overhauled to accommo-

date all learners. Changing and adapting them will ensure access for all learners. Collaboration between ministries has to be encouraged and legislated so that learners are assisted in schools without being pulled out to see professionals at their offices. This will ensure that learners do not lose learning time. Resources like specialised teaching materials, resource classrooms where learners can regroup, adapted desks, ramps and rails should be made available to schools so that learners benefit from education.

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