

Inclusive Education in Private Pre-Primary Schools in Lilongwe Urban City, Malawi: A case study

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is to examine the implementation of inclusive education in private pre-schools in the urban setting of Lilongwe city in Malawi. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to explore the implementation of inclusive education based on Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory. In-depth, interviews and an observation checklist were used to collect data from a purposively selected sample of 31 participants. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire from a sample of 25 private preschool teachers, and 6 educational administrators from 31 selected schools. Among the results of the study, include that most private pre-schools do not understand the need for implementation of inclusive education and therefore do not implement inclusive education in the schools at all. Very few schools include students with special needs in their schools denying some children with disabilities to access education. Coupled with a lack of a consistent, and harmonized curriculum, several private pre-schools do not take the initiative to include special needs interventions in their schools. Further, most schools have no suitable infrastructure to enable the implementation of students with special needs in their school environments. Most current pre-primary schools do not have specially designed learning structures but rather use residential homes that have now been turned into schools. While private schools are meant to complement the government's efforts and contribute toward the goals of education in Malawi, most private schools have emphasized the business model, rendering schools to ignore some of the educational outcomes for the nation. Finally, but not least among the factors, another critical common characteristic among private pre-schools is the lack of clear application of policies in place to ensure the implementation of inclusive education.

The study recommends that there is a need to step up efforts to be invested in both human and non-human resource in private preschools to ensure that inclusive education becomes a reality and that there is a propensity to contribute to the goals of education in Malawi. When properly implemented, Inclusive education has myriad benefits to the child and the nation at large. The responsibility to implement inclusive education rests in every bonafide citizen of a nation. It is the responsibility of everyone to ensure that the schools integrate inclusive education into their school activities.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; policy; infrastructure; harmonized curriculum; mainstreaming.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Approximately one billion people currently live with disabilities, out of the total number as highlighted by James [et al. \[1\] \(2018\)](#), one in every ten, is a child, and more than 80 % of the population is believed to live in low-income countries. Moreover, more than 53 million children under the age of 5 have varying special needs with about 95 % living in low-income countries (Le Fanu et al., 2022).

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The ramifications of disability are widespread causing several children to remain home without going to school, depriving them of an opportunity to access education, making disability one of the highest factors affecting negatively the ability of children to access education (Chataika & Hlatywayo, 2022). To mitigate the impacts of the disability of children on personal life and the

wider spectrum, most countries have aligned with sustainable developmental goals that aim at increasing the opportunities of people with disabilities by 2030 together with other frameworks on inclusive education. Goal number 4 of the sustainable development goals highlights the need for inclusive education and equitable quality education for all emphasizing the need not to leave everyone behind in the quest to attain education (Kawatu et al., 2022).

The term disability may be used differently in different settings. Sometimes the term disability is used interchangeably to refer to people with special needs (Azzahra et al., 2022). On the other hand, the term disability is adopted from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Ardington et al., 2021). Article 1 of the UNCRPD highlights that people with disabilities include those with physical, mental, intellectual, or other impairments that may limit full participation in the social setting based on equal access with others. Another important mention of the need for inclusive education is found in Article 24 of the same UNCRPD. While article 24 of the UNCRPD does not specifically refer to the people with disabilities, it does make mention of the 'right to education' and therefore prohibits the discrimination to education. Further, Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) promotes the need for the rights of children with disabilities. It is therefore imperative that duty bearers at all levels take serious consideration in the implementation of inclusive education.

Disability is cited as one of the factors contributing to the disadvantage in the participation of learners with disabilities in schools (Nazarova, 2020). On the other hand, inclusive education has multi-faceted advantages that offer children opportunities in the end when they are included as part of the main education system.

Akbarovna (2022) has asserted that one of the myriad advantages of inclusive education is the promotion of a child's productivity which in turn helps to alleviate poverty. In addition, when a learner with disabilities attends school, household members who normally take turns to look after disabled members of the family, have time to concentrate on other productive activities. In turn, children with disabilities are empowered and therefore there is a decreased opportunity for a future dependency on others when they engage in education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The UN Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) highlights that education has the propensity to enable a safe environment, a healthier, and more thriving environment, and a sound world, at the same time contributing to processes such as social, economic cultural, and international processes. It is therefore notable that an education system should assume the responsibility to facilitate the notion of social justice by ensuring the promotion of equitable and quality education based on the premise of fairness and inclusion referred to as inclusive education. This is also aligned with the demand for social justice that promotes the rights of children to education (Gunn & Bennett, 2022).

2.1 Inclusive Education

The concept of inclusive education has stimulated much debate and interest over the past decade in several nations. Inclusive education must be operationalized at the very lowest level of an education system to bear lasting results at an advanced level of education. Many scholars Akbarovna (2022), Le Fanu (2022), Chirwa (2021a), and Amor (2019) have defined inclusive education as an undertaking in the education system that aims to respond to the varying needs of learners by ensuring the elimination of elements within and outside the education systems, that

exclude or limit the participation of some learners. One of the important elements in the implementation of education is access. Access is therefore implied to refer that all children have the chance to participate in the education process. As highlighted by Madani (2019) education must give the opportunity and chance to children regardless of the characteristics they have to participate in the educational environment. The reality of what constitutes access, participation, and inclusion could look different for different schools, different education levels, and different students even across different systems of education (Le Fanu et al., 2022).

2.2 Exclusion

The direct opposite of inclusion is exclusion. Exclusion is the process that categorizes children into streams that naturally disadvantage others (Cooley et al., 2019). As Dobusch (2021) observed, some direct practices that exclude children in their learning institutions are subtle and do not present themselves visibly. Nevertheless, the ramification that renders inequalities and exclusions for children with special needs are far-reaching as they tend to affect the long-term aspirations of those affected and negatively affect the implementation of inclusive education (Lin et al., 2018).

2.3 Advantages of Inclusive Education

Several research studies have favored the implementation of IE due to its widespread benefits for students (Akbarovna, 2022). There are positive outcomes for learners both academically and socially when they participate in inclusive education. There are also benefits for the school and teachers when implementing inclusive education. Moreover, there are long-term benefits for the students when included in the inclusive setting, especially when engaged from the earliest stages of personal development (Black et al., 2020). Inclusive education exposes learners to diversity at an early stage, and this helps the learners appreciate diversity in life even when they grow up and start to face life on their own (Le Fanu et al., 2022). In other settings, inclusive education has the propensity to promote the employability of learners at a later stage and contributes to the reduction of inequalities both in social and economic setups. Moreover, inclusive education, as advocated by Ainscow (2020), leads to better societies by ensuring that all members of society have a better chance of accessing opportunities in their societies.

2.4 Malawi Context

The concept of inclusive education is not new. Malawi has adopted several frameworks that are meant to promote inclusive education in schools. Several studies have been conducted on inclusive education in schools (Chirwa et al., 2021a, de Souza, 2020a, Chimwaza, 2016, Chitiyo et al., n.d.). However, there is still a dearth of information on the implementation of inclusive education in private pre-schools in Malawi. Similar studies in inclusive education have also concentrated on the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools, secondary schools, and Community Child Based Care Centres (CBCCs) (de Souza, 2020a).

The responsibility to implement inclusive education in pre-schools in Malawi is vested in the Social Welfare Department under the Ministry of Gender Children and, Disability and Social Welfare. This Ministry also works hand in hand with the Ministry of Education and the Department of Disability and elderly affairs, which has the responsibility for the interventions for children with disabilities in Malawi. Over the years, Malawi went through reforms in government policies where early learning and development were validated, and integrated as the core part of the education system (de Souza, 2020a). The nascent early childhood development policy among its proponents promotes the full development of early childhood learning

centersto ensure the full potential development of children (Banks et al., 2022). Further, it recognizes the infrastructure of early development institutions including the availability of resources, and well-trained teachers as critical to the advancement of preschools (Chirwa et al., 2021b).

There are mixed views on the role of preschools in Malawi, with other studies viewing pre-primary education as another phase of learning in the education cycle (Taniguchi, 2022). Some of the national policies propose the need to perceive and view preschool as an important phase in the education of the nation in general (Gelli et al., 2020). According to Dewey(2023),

Education is not just preparation for Life. Education is life in itself

Therefore, preschool education is an important phase that promotes the development of salient potential among children. As such, children with disabilities may be affected greatly if not integrated during this important phase of learning. In the same vein, the standards set in the accompanying policy documents in Malawi emphasize the expectation of ensuring that children, despite their condition or social characteristics (disabled, rich, poor, urban, rural have the right to education(McIntosh, 2023). This implies that all children in Malawi regardless of where they are found or their level of education are expected to achieve an optimal standard of education.

Just like other countries, despite the standards put in place, the World Bank Gelli (2020), reports poor quality of teaching professionals in early learning centers, especially in rural areas. The lack of data on the status of qualifications of teachers in private schools could also be one of the reasons contributing to the decaying status of quality. However, as the operating environment is the same it could also be deduced that the state of affairs is more likely to be the same for Malawi and other nations across the globe.

The implementation of inclusive education in private pre-primary schools is therefore based on the consensus that all learners, regardless of their disability or special need, should access education together with their counterparts without disabilities (Arslan, 2021). According to Berman-Bieler (2023), every child deserves an education no matter who, where, and what. Among the strategies that are used to allow children with disabilities to access, education includes therefore inclusive education.Inclusive education is the kind of education that incorporates learners in the school settings together with children without special needs education rather than allowing learners with disabilities to access education in separate segregated schools(Akbarovna, 2022). As highlighted by Gayelle(2023),

Protecting children's rights including the right to education, is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in the future wellbeing, equality, and prosperity of individuals and society. It is the responsibility that governments, communities, and individuals must take seriously to create a better world for current and future generations.

2.5 The Need for Change

While there are several reforms and changes in the policies and goodwill in the promotion of inclusive education in Malawi and beyond, much of what is supposed to be done to ensure that inclusive education becomes a reality rests in the authority of the school management and owners. The Malawi inclusive policy also clearly highlights the need for the implementation of inclusive education and puts in place the strategies to be used in the years ahead to achieve the

implementation. There is so much that needs to be done to translate policies into actions. So many challenges still stand in the way of the implementation of inclusive education in Malawi. As highlighted by Chimwaza (2016), Malawi is still struggling with most of its interventions in the implementation of education despite calls arising from both local and international avenues to align education with development. It is therefore important to study the implementation of inclusive education in private pre-schools in Malawi.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE BRONFENBRENNER ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

This study applies Bronfenbrenner's theory to study the implementation of inclusive education in private pre-schools. As highlighted by Le Fanu (2022), inclusive education enables learners to be included in the environment in which they belong. Therefore, a relationship already exists between the learner and the environment. The social ecological theory put forward by Bronfenbrenner enables us to look at the relationship that exists between the learner and the environment (Martínez-Andrés et al., 2020). There are two determinants of students learning in the form of the learner and the environment where the learners find themselves. The other elements at play are the relationship and the connection between them, and these form the framework known as the ecological system theory (Uskul & Oishi, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory recognizes that child development is one of the complex systems of intertwined relationships that is influenced by happenings in the surrounding environment, the family, and the school including encompassing culture, laws, and traditions. The theory has some parallels to other theories of Albert Bandura's social learning theory and Lev Vygotsky's social-cultural theory. In all these theories, the environment is considered to have a bearing on the mechanisms involved in the development of a child (Uskul & Oishi, 2020).

The theory suggests that the environments surrounding the child is arranged in structures called microsystems, mesosystems, ecosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems. These systems are said to be interrelated and influence one structure on the child's development.

The interaction in the microsystem is often personal and such a relationship is very crucial in supporting the child's development (Crawford, 2020). A strong fostering relationship with the environment, for example, teachers tend to have positive effects on the child while an indifferent and unaffected environment leads to the production of harmful effects on the child. Through the mesosystem, a child's microsystem is influenced by another environment to influence the child's development. As highlighted by Bradford (2021), Teachers and parents could work hand in hand to influence the child's development. On the other hand, the exosystemic encompasses the formal and informal structures in the social setup, which in themselves do not surround the child but indirectly affect one of the microsystems. Such structures may include schools' external stakeholders, parents' friends, and the media. The macrosystem is the component that looks at how cultural elements have a bearing on the development of the child. These include already established society including a culture where the child is found while developing. Such elements may include social status, wealth ethnicity, and poverty, geographical location. Children living in low-income country has a different environment to those living in developed countries (Widyawan et al., 2020). The final level structure of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. In this final and fifth level, the structure of the theory encompasses all changes that occur in the environment over a child's lifetime that have a bearing on the development of the child. This change includes starting school, having parents divorced, or moving to a new location or a new house.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to examine the implementation of inclusive education in private pre-primary schools in the urban setting of Lilongwe in Malawi. The focus of the research was on the current adaptations and activities on private pre-school environment, and the integration of inclusive education. The study used mixed research methods, capitalizing on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Interviews and observation checklists were used to collect data from a purposively selected sample of 31 participants. Quantitative data was collected using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire from a sample of 25 preschool teachers, and 6 Educational administrators from 31 selected schools while qualitative data was collected through interviews.

The data collected were coded and cleaned, quantitative analyzed using SPSS while qualitative data was analyzed using thematic data analyses and document analysis.

Specifically, the research question for the study is:

1. 4. What inclusive adaptations have been made in private pre-schools to promote inclusive education?

5. FINDINGS

RQ 1 What inclusive adaptations have been made in private pre-schools to promote inclusive education

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Quantitative findings- Use tables

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Table 1: descriptive statistics for the results

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	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	31	2.19	.946
Experience	31	1.87	.718
Are the bathrooms/washrooms appropriate	31	1.58	.886
Is the learning climate-friendly (Inclusiveness)	31	1.35	.755
Does the school use the appropriate Curriculum	31	1.39	.667
Does the school have appropriate Infrastructure for inclusive learning	31	1.39	.761
Does the school have an inclusive Environment	31	1.94	1.209
Does the school have well-qualified	31	2.03	1.016
How much involved in the government	30	1.57	.971
Does the school use government policies in the implementation of inclusive education	31	1.58	.923
Does the school have qualified education professionals to implement inclusive education	31	1.81	1.108

<i>Do the school get support from the government</i>	31	1.94	1.389
<i>Valid N (listwise)</i>	30		

Qualitative findings

Table 2: Codes for the research participants

School	Participant	Code
<i>A</i>	<i>Female teacher</i>	<i>AF 1</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Female teacher</i>	<i>AF 2</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>Male teacher</i>	<i>AM1</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Proprietor</i>	<i>AP1</i>

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The results of the study include the revelation that most private pre-schools do not understand the need for implementation of inclusive education and therefore do not implement inclusive education in the schools at all. Very few schools integrate students with special needs in their schools. Coupled with a lack of a consistent, harmonized curriculum, several private pre-schools cannot take the initiative to include special needs interventions in their schools. Further, most schools have no suitable infrastructures to enable the integration of students with special needs in their school environments. Most schools do not have specially designed school infrastructures but rather use residential homes turned into schools for school operations. While private schools are meant to contribute toward the goals of education in Malawi, most private schools have emphasized the business model rendering schools to ignore some of the educational outcomes for the nation. Finally, another critical common characteristic among the private pre-schools is the lack of clear application of policies in place to ensure the implementation of inclusive education.

Different schools use different curricula including a selection of snippets of the curricula used. One of the proprietors had to say that:

My choice of the curriculum is based on how easily I can implement the curriculum (AP1).

6. DISCUSSIONS

The results from the study reveal that there is more that needs to be done to ensure the implementation of inclusive education in private pre-schools in Malawi. This is consistent with Chirwa (2021b) who highlights that despite some efforts in the implementation of inclusive education in Malawi, barriers still hinder the implementation. A huge gap exists in the implementation of education in private pre-schools. There is a dire need for urgent attention in the school system to allow the implementation of inclusive education. The study looked at several factors that are necessary for the implementation of inclusive education including the school curriculum, involvement of the government, teacher qualification, policy implementation, and general observation by the researcher (Chirwa et al., 2021b).

School Curriculum

Among the results, the study revealed that there is no harmonization of the curriculum in private pre-schools. 5 out of the 31 schools use the Montessori curriculum, 10 use a combination of Montessori and Cambridge and 10 use the local curriculum. The adoption and use of the curriculum is based on the preference of the proprietors. This alone already defeats the goal of education, as 98% of the school proprietors do not qualify for education. The rest of the schools use a combination of what is relevant for them based on the state of the school. This makes schools miss the critical areas necessary for the implementation of inclusive education. The curriculum is located in the microsystem based on Bronfenbrenner's theory. According to Gunio (2021), a curriculum with activities that are child-initiated can have long-term bearing on the child. In addition, Fredriksson (2020) highlights that a curriculum that deliberately integrates children with special needs would allow the school to easily incus children with varying needs to fully participate in the process of teaching and learning. Lack of harmonization of the curricula and use of curriculum based on the preferences of the owner naturally excludes the salient activities necessary for the inclusion of learners with various needs in the process of teaching and learning. One of the teachers highlighted that:

Our school curriculum does not have activities on inclusive education. Much of what we do is aimed at helping children who do not have special needs (AF2).

A curriculum that has an emphasis on children allows children to participate and not just be considered passive recipients of instructional materials (Fredriksson et al., 2020). As highlighted by mrsstrickey (2021), for a curriculum to be effective, it should enable teachers, students, school leaders, and communities around with the ability to deliver quality education, a trait that is conspicuously missing in most private preschools. The lack of a harmonized and appropriate curriculum deprives learners of the core competencies, and standards critical for advancement to the next stage of their lives. As a result, the implementation of inclusive education is extensively affected negatively.

Infrastructures,

Located in the microsystem, infrastructure plays a significant role in the success of inclusive education. From the results of the study, not all 31 schools of schools have school structures that were specifically designed to be used for school purposes. In addition, the structures used did not have specific adaptations to the design to allow the implementation of inclusive education. All 31 schools have omitted the need to adapt the infrastructures to allow for inclusive education (Chirwa et al., 2021b). This is lamentable as there are calls both from within and internationally to support inclusive education (de Souza, 2020b). All 31 schools use residential households that have been turned into learning environments as this is deemed the easy option to start implementing pre-school as a business.

The results of the study found that only 2 schools out of the sampled 31 schools accommodated students with special needs (autism) in their schools. The schools have separate rooms where such learners are given extra lessons to help them participate in the teaching and learning process. While the presence of infrastructure is not the panacea to inclusive education Azzahra (2022) infrastructure is essential in the implementation of inclusive education as it allows students with disabilities to easily integrate. It also gives parents and guardians of the students to allow their children to participate in the teaching and learning process.

Little involvement by the government in the affairs of private schools.

The role of the government in the regulation of private schools falls in the exosystem. Exosystemic encompasses the formal and informal structures in the social setup, which in themselves do not surround the child but indirectly affect one of the microsystems. Such structures may include schools' external stakeholders, parents' friends, and the media. Private schools in Lilongwe operate under an association that only convenes based on planned events to deliberate on the plight of the school. However, the association has no direct mandate and authority to check the practical details of the operations of the schools. This therefore allows private preschools to operate under their terms. The Government of Malawi, which is supposedly to be the overarching institution in the monitoring of the operations of private school, do not supervise the schools. While the school are accountable to the government, the schools had not yet started to be accountable to the government, at least during the study period, and this leaves the schools with their mandate to implement what seems to be the best options for the schools, which is the business.

One teacher commented that:

I have not seen any government official coming to this school since I started teaching 3 years ago at this institution. Sometimes I wonder if the government has any interest in the affairs of the school. However, I am not surprised much since this is a private school (AM1).

There is a need for monitoring and enforcement of regulations for education institutions including preschools to adopt and align their activities with the aspirations of the nations (United Nations Educational & Organization (UNESCO), 2020). Since all 31 private schools run on a business model basis, most do not have policies in place to promote inclusive education thereby defeating the efforts for inclusive education.

Lack of trained teachers to handle children with special needs.

Teachers who are critical in the implementation of inclusive education at different levels from the pre-schools up to high-level fall in the mesosystem. Chitiyo (n.d.) highlights that teachers are a vehicle in the process of teaching and learning and their role cannot be overemphasized. Unfortunately, most private schools operate with unqualified teachers in the teaching and learning process. Unqualified teachers in the teaching process make things worse and do more harm to the learning process. Generally, unqualified teachers do not empathize with learners. They are very likely to neglect sections of learners that have learning difficulties including those with special needs at this requires handling skills from the teachers (Bradford et al., 2021). One of the school owners highlighted that it is not possible to employ graduates to teach in school because such staff would require higher pay and that would in turn the profits realized from the school since the schools operate on the business model. Moreover, most graduates think teaching in preschools is beneath their standards (A. Arslan, 2019).

Policy implementation

Policy issues fall in the macrosystem category of Bronfenbrenner, theory. Policy implementation and adherence is one of the critical areas not being adhered to because of the lack of monitoring by the government in private pre-schools in Malawi. In All 31 schools where data was collected, it was cited that they have not been monitored supervised, or guided by the central government in the implementation of pre-school education. This creates a huge gap among the implementers and therefore leads to most private pre-schools following activities that seem relevant and easy to implement the school. The lack of monitoring by the government therefore leaves a huge gap

in the education policy implementation in private preschools that negatively affects the implementation of inclusive education strategy and the implementation of education in general (Berman-Bieler et al., 2023).

Observations

Observations by the researcher revealed that all 31 private pre-schools where the research was conducted were not ready to fully ready to enrol learners with disabilities. From the infrastructure of the schools to the qualifications of teachers, the type of curricula used, and the type of learning activities, some gaps naturally excluded learners with disabilities. Moreover, the schools did not make extra effort to make salient changes to the surrounding, and infrastructure to accommodate learners with special needs. There were no special pavements to allow children with disabilities to move around freely. In addition, there were no materials readily available in the schools to use as compared to other students. The materials commonly found in the schools were generic and some were not specific for learners, let alone those that can be used by learners with special needs.

More than 90% of private schools cannot afford to employ more teachers with the right qualifications, about 95% of teachers in all 31 schools lacked proper qualifications, let alone special needs qualifications to handle learners with special needs. Teachers entrusted to teach are mostly those with lower qualifications who are in turn paid lowly. While this is advantageous to the school owners, the quality of education is greatly affected. Moreover, the implementation of inclusive education is negatively affected; as such, teachers do not have the requisites to handle learners with special needs.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the study reveals that there is more that needs to be done to make inclusive education a reality at the lowest and earliest education system levels. As the learners attain complex instructions, they soon transition from the pre-schools into the mainstream school system and eventually into society. There is a need for mechanisms to be put in place by the government and all connected stakeholders including the owners of schools to shift from the philosophy of business to providing education holistically to complement the aspirations of the nation. A little adaptation to the activities of the schools can have a lasting impact on the lives of children with special needs in the private preschool.

There is also need for more investment in resources both human and non-human in private pre-primary school to prepare the school to handle learners with disabilities. Preparing will allow the school physical structures to be adapted as well suited for learners with varying needs. In addition, the availability of human resources will preposition the schools properly to engage with learners with disabilities

Further, there is a need for the government to be proactive in the enforcement of the policies on inclusive education. Private schools have been left to operate on an 'autopilot mode'. Almost every corner of the urban setting has a private preschool. The government should be proactive in the registration of private pre-school and further make the effort to inspect each school operating within a certain locality. This will enable the government to check and monitor what each school is doing. The government will also have the mandate to guide the implementation of inclusive education thereby making private pre-schools proactive in the implementation of

inclusive education in their settings. Moreover, the implementation of inclusive education at the earliest stage will help learners to appreciate inclusive education leading to acceptance of inclusive education initiatives at later stages of personal development.

8. CONCLUSION

Inclusive education has myriad benefits when implemented successfully at and earliest stage of development of a child. The responsibility to integrate inclusive education rests in every bonafide citizen of a nation. It is the responsibility of everyone to ensure that the schools integrate inclusive education into their school activities. Parents as well as communities should take responsibility to ensure that their wards with special needs are introduced to the right educational setting at an early age.

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