

The development of early childhood education within an inclusive educational framework in Namibia

A. N. Naanda, Department of Educational Psychology, Stellenbosch University
P. Engelbrecht, Educational Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom campus
South Africa

ABSTRACT

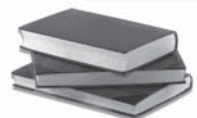
Using quantitative methods in research, this article describes the provision of early childhood education in Namibia within the context of inclusive education for all and lifelong learning. Research has shown that participation in early childhood education significantly contributes to a child's success in later learning. However, the results of the research outlined in this article reveal that although efforts are in place to address early childhood education in Namibia, many children do not benefit from early childhood education, let alone quality services due to a number of factors such as poverty, HIV and AIDS and other special needs. This article formulates recommendations for developing an inclusive early childhood education approach for Namibia.

Introduction

Equity and equality in an inclusive educational approach to education do not simply mean access to education for all children or having children being taught in the same classroom settings without considering their individual and diverse needs. The same applies to inclusive education. Inclusive education does not only refer to the narrow concept of integrating children with disabilities or those with other special needs into regular schools and classrooms or providing access to education to the excluded groups (Engelbrecht, 2004; Guijarro, 2000; Savolainen & Alasuutari, 2000; Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff, Pettipher & Oswald, 2004). It also calls for the participation of all in society to contribute to the effective learning of all children in a given education setting as well as for equal opportunities to be provided at the appropriate level of development to children with disabilities, children with intellectual challenges, gifted children, children from poor households, children affected and infected by HIV and AIDS, street and working children, children from migrant and minority groups and child war victims (Engelbrecht, 1999; Muthukrishna, 2000; Muthukrishna, 2002; UNESCO, 2000).

The notion of making education as inclusive as possible has been internationally recognized and has prominently featured in many meetings, conventions and declarations such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, the World Conference on Education of 1990 and the Salamanca Statement of Framework for Action which was adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 and the World Conference on Education held in 2000 in Dakar. In line with these international policies, national educational policies and strategies have also been put in place to specifically address the issue of young children and their access to education.

Education in Namibia, including early childhood development and education (ECD), is characterized by gross inequalities in the allocation of both human and financial resources to schools for the previously disadvantaged groups due to the Apartheid system before Namibia gained her independence in 1990. The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, in particular Articles 15 and 20, make



specific reference to the rights of children to protection and education. In the same vein, the National Early Childhood Development Policy of 1996 stresses the right of children to ECD programmes of good quality. The Policy was developed with the specific aim to define the:

- Parameters of early childhood development, which should include having a common and acceptable definition of early childhood development, the importance of the early years, in which the child's learning is viewed to meaningfully contribute to community development in the long term, reductions in social and economic inequalities and gender inequalities as well as the fact that early childhood development can reduce costs and improve the efficiency of primary school;
- Position of early childhood education programmes in relation to national development priorities. The government of the Republic of Namibia signed the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989 and initiated the National Programme of Action for the Children of Namibia in 1991, which recognises the important role of early childhood development programmes in contributing to the holistic development of the child;
- Respective roles of the Government, churches, NGOs and the private sector with regard to coordination, funding of ECD centres as well as the provisions of quality services through the training of ECD educators, curriculum development, implementation and monitoring, guidelines for establishing ECD centres and the training of community members and parents and parents in the provision of early childhood development.

It considers all aspects related to the healthy development of the child and places emphasis on the importance of child health including nutrition, the provision of safe water and basic sanitation, community health education and training as well as immunization against childhood diseases and renewed support for general mental health care for children (1996). The Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) 2005-2020 highlights a new approach to learning, one that places focus on measurable learning outcomes for all children rather than merely having access to education and schooling. ETSIP is premised on the realization that Namibia cannot count on a weak education and training system to facilitate the attainment of its development goals, but would need an education system that is characterized by professionalism and an equitable distribution of resources. On the other hand, *Vision 2030* visualises a Namibia that is a **knowledge-based economy** and an **information society** by the year 2030. All these strategies and policies have certain financial and human resource implications on early childhood education. While the Namibia Government has made efforts over the years to increase budgetary allocations to education, resource allocations for early childhood education have, however, remained a disproportionately small fraction of what is contributed to the overall formal education budget. Despite some improvements made in the field of ECD since Namibia's independence in 1990, the sub-sector is still faced with a number of challenges such as the gaps in the ECD policy in terms of a coherent coordination strategy between the relevant ministries and lack of data on the factors contributing to children not benefiting from ECD in Namibia, the smaller population of the 32% of the children who benefit according to the 2001 Population and Housing Census, available funding that is very limited and does not meet the needs of all communities as well as the poor quality provision of services and lack of career prospects for ECD caregivers. The 2001 Population Census for example revealed that only 32% of children between the ages of 3 and 6 years old benefited from some sort of early childhood education. The challenge



in Namibia therefore remains to develop early childhood education in order to benefit all children including children with special needs in education (Republic of Namibia, 2005). Children with special needs are those children in an education setting who need additional support services because they experience challenges in learning compared to the majority of children of their age in the same educational setting. These children could include children who are victims of war, or affected by environmental degradation and change, children who are victims of violence and abuse, street and working children, children who are brought up outside of their own families, children with disabilities, girls in situations where their education is perceived as inferior to that of boys, children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS or other chronic illnesses, children from oppressed groups subject to racism, xenophobia and other forms of oppression and children whose home language is different from the language of instruction, gifted children or children who are at risk because of various forms of economic and social deprivation or those children who face barriers to education and learning because of lack of parental recognition and involvement (Engelbrecht, 2004; Howell, 2000; Muthukrishna, 2002).

Although access to education has been stressed in many of these national policies, provision of early childhood education has mainly been the responsibility of communities and the private sector, and has therefore, been limited to parents and families who can afford to send their children to early childhood education. Children with disabilities and other special needs have not been benefiting from ECD. The 2001 Namibia Population and Housing Census revealed that out of a total Namibian population of 1 818 275 population, there are 85 567 disabled people in Namibia representing 4.7% of the male population and 4.7% of the female population. There was, however, no segregated data on the actual number of children with disabilities, thus calling for a need for more research to be undertaken in order to establish the actual number of children with disabilities and the nature of these disabilities. The Education and Training Sector Ministries in their 4th Joint Annual Review Report, (2005), stated that the education of learners with disabilities has been limited due to lack of teacher training and facilities for special class usage or inclusion of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms as well as negative attitudes towards learners/persons with disabilities by both members from the education sectors and community members at large. The implementation of the concept of inclusive education in schools including ECD centers therefore still remains a matter to be addressed.

This article examines the current provision of early childhood education in Namibia with a specific focus on the needs of learners faced with barriers to early childhood education in order to provide guidelines for the development of an inclusive approach in early childhood education for Namibia.

Research Methodology

Method

In order to survey the current situation in Namibia, a questionnaire was developed on the basis of a literature review as well as on drawing from examples of previously designed questionnaires on inclusive education. It consists of four main sections. The 1st section mainly focuses on the biographical information of the early childhood education centres, region, type of the centre, gender, age and qualifications of educators; section 2 looks at the physical environment of the centre while section 3 and 4 consider the challenges faced by early childhood educators regarding special needs education and the curriculum and policies in



place at such centres.

The initial draft of the questionnaire went through several rounds of reviews, comments and feedback before its finalization and was piloted on a group of educators representing the ECD sector in order to avoid any misinterpretation of the data as well as any ambiguity and to ensure both internal and external validity and reliability of the results. It should be noted that the questionnaires allowed for the standardization and uniformity of both the questions asked and for ease of comparing and contrasting the respondents' replies.

The Population

One advantage of using quantitative research is the fact that the researcher has the opportunity to undertake the study on a larger sample size that is determined in advance and is representative of the total population. In this case, early childhood educators from all the 13 education regions across Namibia were selected. The participants were selected independently with the support of the then Ministry of Women Affairs and Gender Equality which assisted with the distribution of the questionnaires. A systematic sampling method was used in distributing the questionnaire to each 3rd educator within a centre thus providing each educator with an equal opportunity of being selected. Purposive sampling was applied in selecting Heads of the ECD centre in order to provide the researcher with critical information pertaining to their level of qualification, experience and knowledge of the national policy on early childhood education as well as the curriculum in place at the respective centres. An explanation sheet on the purpose of the questionnaire and assuring participants of their confidentiality was provided.

Procedure

A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed of which 493 were returned, representing a 76.0 % response rate thus making it a representative sample. Namibia has about 3000 registered early childhood education centres according to the information received from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare. More questionnaires, totaling 67.1% of the responses were received from rural areas with 32, 3% from urban areas, with only 0, 6% non responses. The Oshikoto and Kavango Regions had the majority of respondents, 11.2% and 10.6%, respectively (Figure 1). Of the total participants, 87.2% were women, 5. 7% men and 7, 1% was no responses as illustrated. The majority of ECD centres are community centres, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using a data analysis package *Statistica V6* from a Centre for Statistical Consultation at a South African University. Findings were analysed using a chi-square test according to independent variables– age, gender, qualifications and experience and dependent variables - knowledge about the policies and curriculum in place, qualifications and funding mechanisms.

Research Results

The research results are presented according to the following findings: (a) institutions providing early childhood education in Namibia, (b) gender, qualifications and experience of early childhood educators, (c) available environmental resources at early childhood development centres (d) barriers to learning and development at early childhood education centres, (e) knowledge about the early childhood education policy and curriculum and (f) support provided

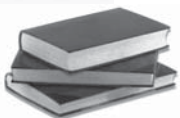


FIGURE 1 RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO REGION

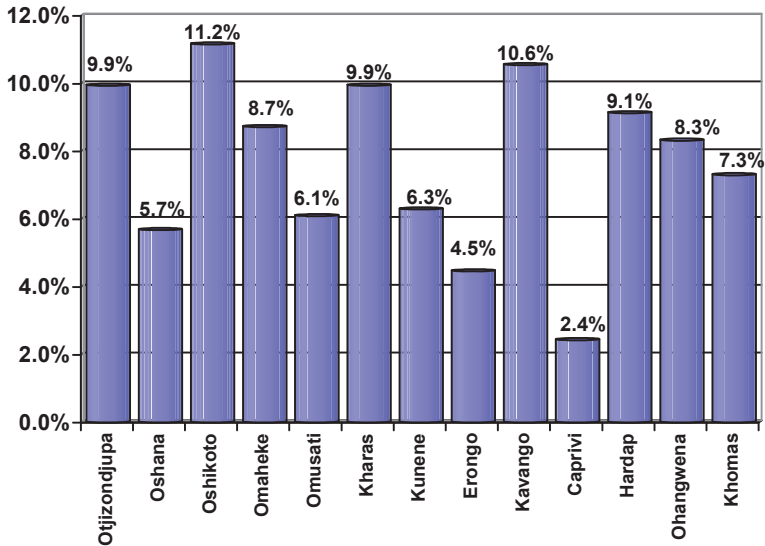
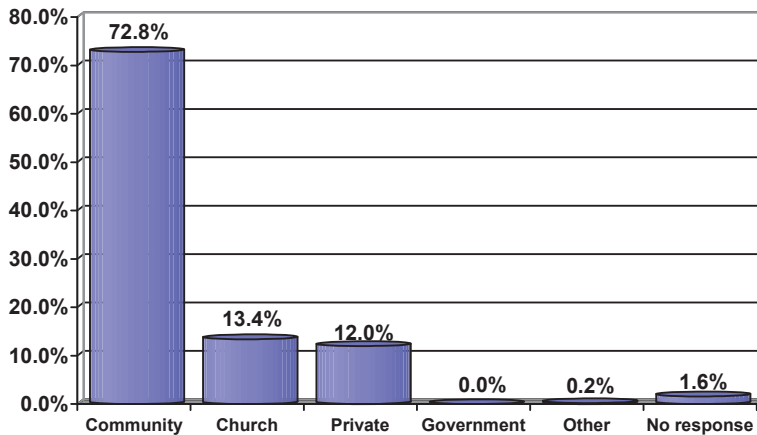
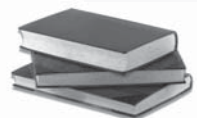


FIGURE 2 CENTRES PROVIDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



• Institutions providing ECD in Namibia

The findings revealed that early childhood education in Namibia is primarily the responsibility of communities, which make up 72, 8% of the institutions providing early childhood education compared to 13, 8% by churches and 12, and 0% which are privately run. Respondents revealed that there was no government institution proving ECD in Namibia.



• Gender, age, qualifications and experience of early childhood educators

Women make up the majority of early childhood educators in Namibia representing 87,7% of the total respondents compared to 5,7% male educators. The majority of early childhood educators fall in the age category between 26 – 35 years (37,9%) followed by the age group 36 – 45 years (32,0%) (Table 2). Many educators teach without the necessary qualification. The majority of the educators, representing 70,0% of the total respondents, have less than a Grade 12 qualification (Table 3), compared to 0,4% with a degree and a diploma. The majority of the early childhood educators have between 1 – 5 years of teaching experience (51,1%) followed by those that have a teaching experience of between 6 – 10 years. Only 9,7% of the respondents revealed that they have between 11 – 15 years of teaching experience compared to 4,1% over 20 years of teaching experience.

The majority of the educators representing 70,0% of the respondents had less than a Grade 12 qualification with 21,5% having a Grade 12 qualification. Only 5,9% of the respondents had a diploma in teaching and 0,4% had a degree in teaching. Those that had one to five years of teaching experience made up the majority of the ECD educators in Namibia, according to the respondents (Table 1).

TABLE 1 TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Number of years	N	%
1 to 5 years	252	51.1
6 to 10 years	133	27.0
11 to 15 years	48	9.7
16 to 20 years	17	3.4
21 years and older	20	4.1
No response	23	4.7
Total	493	100.0

TABLE 2 QUALIFICATIONS OF ECD PROVIDERS

QUALIFICATIONS	N	%
Less than Grade 12	345	70.0
Grade 12	106	21,5
Diploma	29	5,9
Degree and Diploma	2	0,4
No response	11	2,2
Total	493	100.0

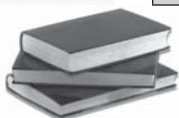


TABLE 3 AGE GROUP OF ECD PROVIDERS

AGE GROUP	N	%
18 – 25 years	69	14,0
26 -35 years	187	37,9
36 – 45 years	158	32,0
46 -55 years	49	9,9
56 -60 years	29	5,9
No response	1	0,2
Total	493	100.0

• Available environmental resources at early childhood education centres

Poor physical infrastructures, especially in rural areas were identified as a major barrier. Many ECD centres in rural areas do not have adequate teaching facilities such as space, play centres, ramps for children with physical disabilities, water and toilet facilities and comfortable furniture. While 91 % of respondents from the Omusati region revealed that their toilets were pit toilets, 67 % of the respondents from Oshana region revealed the same compared to only 4% of the respondents from the Khomas region.

There were also glaring disparities in the responses concerning the supply of safe water between rural and urban early childhood education centres. While 97% of the respondents from the urban centres revealed that they have safe water supply at their ECD centres, only 57% of respondents from rural areas indicated that their water was safe. The same findings also apply to comfortable furniture. While 65% of the respondents from the rural centres revealed that their centres do not have comfortable furniture, almost a same percentage (64%) of the respondents from the urban ECD centres indicated that their centres have comfortable furniture. The majority of ECD centres in Namibia are not fitted with ramps for children with physical disabilities. The Caprivi and Oshana regions had all the respondents (100%) who revealed that their centres did not have ramps for children with physical disabilities while 98% of the respondents from the Ohangwena region and 97% from the Khomas regions, respectively, confirmed that their centres did not have ramps for children with physical disabilities

• Barriers to learning and development at early childhood education centres

The results revealed that early childhood education centres are faced with a number of barriers. According to the respondents, specific physical and health related challenges that were **occasionally** encountered at the ECD centers included poor vision, lack of hearing, limited speech and HIV and AIDS related problems. Other educational challenges which were also **often** experienced were



identified as learning difficulties, withdrawal and emotional behaviours.

Poverty seems to be one of the major barriers to participation in ECD in Namibia. The Kavango region for example indicated an average of 5 boys and an average of 4 girls per respondent who had dropped out of ECD centres due to the socio-economic circumstances of their families. The data was statistically insignificant with regard to the number of children with physical disabilities at the centres.

• Curriculum in place at the centre

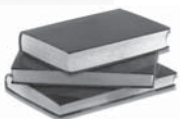
The data revealed glaring disparities with regard to ECD educators' knowledge about the National Policy on Early Childhood Development. Over 70% of respondents from the Oshana (71%), Omusati (72%) and Erongo (73%) were not aware of the National Policy and over 50% of respondents from Karas (55%), Kunene (53%) and Kavango (52%) were equally not aware of the National Policy. However, an overwhelming 92% of the respondents from the Caprivi region and 71% from the Ohangwena region and 63% of the respondents from the Khomas region, confirmed their knowledge of the ECD Policy. This represents 53% of the respondents from the rural areas that are unaware of the National ECD Policy compared to 63% of respondents from urban areas that are aware of the existence of such a policy. While respondents were not aware of the National ECD Policy, the data revealed that there were also variations with regard to knowledge about the existence of any policies at the regional level addressing ECD. Concerning the development of centre specific policies on ECD, respondents in the age group 36 – 45 years (57%) and 56 – 60 years (79%), seemed to be more aware of specific policies at the ECD centres addressing the development of children compared to the age groups 18 – 25 (30%), 26 – 35 years (40%) and 46 – 55 years (41%).

• Adaptation of the curriculum for children with disabilities

The majority of the respondents in all the regions, with the exception of the Ohangwena region revealed that the ECD curriculum in their centres did not make provision for children with disabilities who can have a variety of special educational needs. The Oshana had a representation of 92% respondents who indicated that no such provisions were made followed by respondents from the Kavango region (89%) and Omaheke region (82%). However, the majority of respondents (82%) in the Ohangwena region revealed that their curriculum made provisions for an inclusive approach to ECD. According to the data, early childhood educators have no objections to teach children with disabilities in the same classroom settings with their peers without disabilities. The same findings were also revealed with regard to the statement that teaching children with disabilities in the same classroom settings avoid stereotypes. All the respondents from the Caprivi region (100%) followed by 98% of respondents from Omaheke and Ohangwena regions indicated that teaching children in the same classroom settings help to avoid stereotypes.

• Support provided to ECD centres

The data clearly indicated that ECD centres benefit financially from parents and communities other than from the government. All the respondents (100%) with the exception of Otjozondjupa, Omaheke, Karas and Hardap regions, indicated that their centres did not receive any financial contribution from the Ministry



responsible for child welfare or that responsible for education. However, regarding parental and community contribution to ECD, it was clear that they play a major role in financially supporting ECD programmes in Namibia. The Caprivi (100%), Oshikoto (93%), Oshana (86%) and Karas (80%) regions had a significant number of respondents who indicated that parents and communities financially contributed to ECD. A significant number of the respondents also indicated that the private sector extended very limited financial support to early childhood education in Namibia. All respondents (100%) from Kavango and Caprivi region, respectively, indicated that they received no financial support from the private sector for ECD compared to 98% from the Oshikoto region and 94% from the Khomas and Kunene regions. The same sentiments were also shared with regard to financial support by churches. Whereas 100% of the respondents from the Oshana and Oshana regions indicated that they did not receive any financial support for their centres from churches, 95% of the respondents from the Oshikoto and 96% from the Otjozondjupa and Kavango regions also revealed the same.

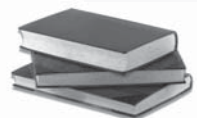
When asked if they received technical support, a significant number of the respondents revealed that they did not receive technical support from the ministry responsible for the welfare of children or that responsible for education. For example, 100% of the respondents from the Caprivi region indicated that they received no technical support from any of the two Ministries compared to 97% and 94% respondents from the Khomas region, respectively, who also indicated the same.

Concerning the provision of material support from the ministries responsible for the welfare of children and that of education a significant number of the respondents revealed that they benefited materially from the ministry responsible for the welfare of children instead of that of education. For example, while 90% of the respondents from the Kavango region indicated that they benefited materially from the ministry responsible for the welfare of children, an equally significant number of respondents (96%) from the same region revealed that they did not benefit materially from the ministry responsible for education. The same applies to the Khomas region, 75% of the respondents in that region indicated that they received material support from the ministry responsible for the welfare of children compared to 97% of respondents from the same region who indicated the opposite with regard to the ministry responsible for education. While parents and communities provided financial support to the ECD centres, they did not extend the same support technically or materially. The private sector did also not materially contribute to ECD in Namibia. The Khomas region had 44% of the respondents who indicated that the private sector contributed materially to early childhood education, whereas all the other regions had significant numbers of the respondents who indicated the opposite, ranging from 100% in the Caprivi region to 98% in the Kavango region. This represents 87% of the female respondents and 82% of the male respondents, respectively, who revealed that their centres received no material support from the private sector.

Discussion

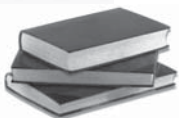
Despite efforts to provide quality early childhood education in Namibia, it is evident that a number of gaps and challenges remain in the implementation of an inclusive early childhood education approach in Namibia.

The findings reveal that the majority of ECD centres are found in rural areas



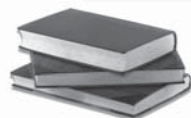
in Namibia, where the greater part of these centres are run by community members. However, an effective inclusive early childhood education requires the collaboration and partnerships between the government and other stakeholders, not only in terms of financial support of ECD programmes but also in terms of the implementation of the national policies and strategies already in place. The importance of the government's commitment to the development of effective policies in early childhood education, which should focus on a systems approach in which the participation of all critical stakeholders such as parents, communities and NGOs are recognized as important partners has been emphasized in Evans, Myers and Ilfeld, 2000; UNESCO, 2000, the participation of a number of various role players such as mental health specialists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists to participate in the implementation of an inclusive curriculum. While government focus has so far been on the expansion of general education, there is now a need to refocus resources in order to allocate resources to childhood education in order to provide support for all children, including those with disabilities. Namibia's aspirations to become a learning nation and a knowledge-base economy would not be effectively realized if the government does not make more efforts to address the early childhood sector and to put more resources, both human and financial in order to improve the quality of ECD. The government should, therefore, take over some of the responsibilities of the communities, especially with regard to the provision of adequate infrastructure, training of ECD educators and in setting standards in early childhood education. A review of the literature (Evans, 1998) confirms that if limited resources are allocated to children with special needs this can result in many of these children not benefiting from early childhood education and ultimately becoming excluded from basic education.

National policies have a very important impact on the implementation of inclusive education (Lieber, Hanson, Beckman, Odom, Sandall, Schwartz, Horn & Wolery, 2000). The majority of ECD educators, especially those from the rural areas, in Namibia are not aware of the National Early Childhood Development Policy of 1996, which is currently being revised. The Policy has identified critical areas that are geared towards addressing the developmental aspects of the young child. In addition, it also addresses the issue of coordination, in-service and pre-service education and calls on the Ministry of Education to develop ECD curriculum guidelines which reflect local needs, setting up an accreditation system for the recognition of different levels of training and competencies within the ECD field, and creating mechanisms for the certification of NGOs training organizations involved in ECD according to national guidelines. It also calls on the Ministry of Education to put in place quality control measures by regularly monitoring and supervising the implementation of ECD programmes from the national to the community level. However, if the majority of the ECD educators are not aware of the existence of such a policy, let alone its contents, the implementation of the policy will remain a challenge. The majority of the educators are equally not aware of any specific policies at their respective centers that address the special needs of children. This confirms that having a policy in place does not necessarily guarantee its implementation. The findings that the ECD educators were not aware of the existence of the National ECD Policy, reveals that communities were neither involved in its developments nor sensitized to its existence, which has some negative implications for its effective implementation. It is clear that policy development requires the involvement of all stakeholders, especially those that will have a direct involvement in its implementation. The revised early childhood



education policy should be finalized and disseminated to all the relevant stakeholders, especially to those who should have ownership of such a policy, and national and regional workshops should be held to sensitize the stakeholders to its content. Proper mechanisms should also be put in place to ensure the effective monitoring of the policy implementation at both national and community level. Educational facilities and the general environment of any early childhood education centre are critical factors in assuring whether an ECD centre facilitates or is a barrier to inclusive education. While the majority of ECD centers in urban areas benefit from proper and adequate ECD facilities, rural centres are faced with a lack of proper infrastructure such as proper toilet facilities, while good sanitation is one of the preconditions for promoting effective school health as an integral component of any inclusive education curriculum. It is very important for early childhood education programmes to have a clear health component that addresses all aspects of health, including hygiene and sanitation where the child is introduced to these aspects. An inclusive education curriculum should enhance the health of the children by addressing health related issues and increasing the children's knowledge about the relationship between health, personal hygiene and sanitation (Evans, Myers & Ilfeld, 2000). Another barrier facing children with physical disabilities ECD in Namibia is the fact that access for these children has not been considered in ECD centres in Namibia. The results revealed that the majority of the ECD centres in the country are not fitted with ramps or suitable toilets and washrooms for children with physical disabilities thus hindering their participation in ECD programmes. The lack of easy access to educational institutions, in this case early childhood education centers, is an unintentional barrier to education and participation, which should be addressed by constructing or adapting buildings and structures around schools in order to facilitate access for people with disabilities (Pivik, McComas & Laflame, 2002). ECD centres should be made accessible and user-friendly for all children, teachers and even parents who may have physical disabilities in order to promote active participation and learning. For all in the community, once children are excluded from early childhood education programmes because they cannot access the programmes, their chances of being excluded from formal basic education can be equally high (Naanda, 2005).

The findings also revealed that a significant majority of early childhood educators in Namibia teach without the necessary teaching qualifications. The majority of ECD educators teaches without the necessary qualifications or experience in ECD or in special needs, which is a cause for concern, especially with regard to ensuring that children with special needs fully benefit from ECD provisions. A lack of qualifications and experience in teaching, and in particular in special needs education can be considered a barrier to the implementation of quality education (Wilson, 1998; Mastropieri and Scruggs, 1994). Improving the quality of ECD and making inclusion a reality in Namibia will remain elusive if efforts are not made to address the standards of ECD educators by institutionalizing the training of ECD educators and ensuring minimum standard for teaching in ECD centres. In the absence of any diploma and degree courses in early childhood education in Namibia, it is important to introduce a capacity building programme for the training of early childhood educators in the short to medium term, while the colleges of Education and the University of Namibia are working towards the development of specific diploma and degree courses targeting early childhood education in the long term. The National Qualifications Framework should assist in setting up standards and criteria for the accreditation of ECD educators. The inclusion of children experiencing barriers to learning and development should be made an

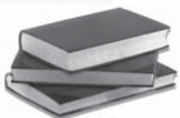


integral component of the training curriculum of teachers and early childhood educators should be provided with the necessary skills to be able to address challenges facing such children. It is evident from the review of the literature (Evans, 1998; Lieber, Hanson, Beckman, Odom, Sandall, Schwartz, Horn & Wolery, 2000), that training is a very important aspect in the implementation of quality inclusive ECD programmes. Well qualified and fully committed educators who have a better knowledge about the relevant curriculum, policies and strategies in place are critical to the implementation of an inclusive early childhood education programme. Given the fact that all children grow at a different pace and have different needs, it is imperative for teachers to be aware of such different needs and to have the necessary skills and expertise to implement the curriculum according to these individual needs of learners, within the context of a larger group.

The findings further reveal that children in ECD centres are faced with a number of barriers which hinder their effective participation in education and learning. While some barriers were contextual and related to the physical environment at the ECD centres as discussed earlier some were due to specific disabilities (hearing impairments, poor vision, learning difficulties, HIV/AIDS) as well as poverty. Although teachers revealed their willingness to teach children with special needs in the same classroom settings with their peers without such needs, a majority also revealed that their lack of skills to deal with special needs in the classroom, thus resulting in specific barriers for effective inclusive education. Once trained, educators would be in a better position to identify the special needs of children at an early stage and to provide early interventions and thus to make a significant impact on the children's development (Evans, 1998). Such interventions also contribute to the children maximizing their learning so that they can make a difference in the quality of their own lives.

Although access and quality has been a central concern in the provision of early childhood education in Namibia the findings also reveal that there is no national early childhood education curriculum in Namibia with the result that each centre develops its own curriculum. As a result there are no mechanisms to assess the quality of curricular provisions in ECD at both national and regional levels. Similarly, while some educators believe that their curriculum does make provision for children with special needs, there are some educators who indicate the opposite. It is crucial to develop national guidelines to inform curriculum at regional and community level on which basis regions can be expected to define individual curricular and programmes based on the needs and demands of the children. An inclusive school, including ECD centers, is characterized by appropriate curricula, support systems in place, teaching methods and other modes of communication that are adapted to meet the needs of the different types of learners in an educational setting (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff, Pettipher & Oswald, 2001).

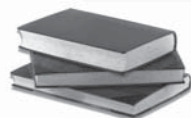
It therefore becomes very important to have one national broad curriculum and guidelines for the implementation of an inclusive ECD programme from which individual centres and regions should draw in developing their centre specific curriculum. This will help avoid uncoordinated and disjointed programmes, improve the quality of programmes being offered and facilitate a better monitoring and evaluation of the programmes in place in line with the national standards. Educators will also be expected to adapt their teaching methodologies, according to the requirements of the curriculum in order to provide an individualized approach to teaching and learning in an inclusive context, which should be in line with the child's zone of proximal development.



The results revealed that communities play a critical role in early childhood education in Namibia. While parents and communities were more involved in providing financial support to ECD centres, they played a very limited role in technically and materially supporting the centres. The systemic (Ainscow, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2002; Engelbrecht, 1999) approach to early childhood education and development considers home and school, as critical aspects in the child's development which have an impact of how the child develops cognitively as well as psychologically and physically. Parental and community involvement in ECD is very important, especially due to the fact that parents are the first teachers of their children at home and collaborative teaching between parents and teachers facilitates putting in place effective early intervention strategies, especially to assist those children experiencing barriers to education and participation. The findings are consistent with those of Evans, (1998); Giangreco, (1997) and Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff, Pettipher & Oswald, (2001) who confirm that parents are the first and foremost educators and decision-makers of the children and should thus be key participants in the design of inclusive programmes and in supporting the teacher in an inclusive school setting. For those parents who do not send their children to ECD services due to their children's special needs, would be motivated to do so, once they are fully involved in the activities of the ECD centres. Partnerships should also continue to be extended to the communities and to ground teaching on the daily life experiences of children within the context of their communities. While the Ministry responsible for the welfare of children prominently features as concerns their technical and material contribution to ECD in Namibia, the ministry responsible for education hardly had a role to play. There is thus a need to improve the management and the delivery systems related to early childhood education within the government structures and to ensure a better and coherent coordination of services between the two ministries responsible for the welfare of children and that responsible for education.

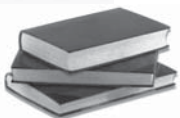
Conclusion

The study was conducted to analyse the situation regarding the provision of early childhood education in Namibia and to suggest guidelines to facilitate the implementation of an inclusive approach in the country. The study highlighted a number of complexities and challenges which may hinder the implementation of inclusive education in ECD centres. It is obvious from the results that early childhood education in Namibia does not benefit from the government in the same way that general education does. In addition, early childhood education is primarily the responsibility of communities and parents in terms of financially supporting the running of such centers with both the ministry responsible for education and that responsible for the welfare of children playing a very limited role with regard to the financial contribution to ECD services, with their contribution limited to either technical and material support in some instances.



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