EXPLORING IN-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS PERSPECTIVES ON IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN BENINESE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study presents Beninese in-service EFL teachers' perspectives on obstacles and facilitators to the implementation of an inclusive approach to teaching and learning in secondary schools. Following a qualitative design, 180 participants were selected and organized into heterogeneous discussion groups in order to collect relevant data. Eventually 160 participated in the study, thereby giving a participation rate of 88,88%. Audio recordings of the sessions were made and transcribed using Voice Notes 3.56 (free) set on a TECNO-F2 android cellphone. The data analysis indicated two different approaches to the concept of inclusion: one focused on students with special educational needs and another that argues that inclusion has to do with all students. Principal obstacles relate to the lack of teacher training as far as attention to diversity and inclusive approaches and techniques in classes as well as the scarcity of resources. Factors that boost inclusion in classes include solidarity and collaboration with peers and other school professionals.

KEYWORDS: *Benin Context, In-Service EFL Teachers, Obstacles, Facilitators, Inclusion.*

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

In this era of globalization, it is necessary to build a school for everyone, where diversity is perceived as an opportunity. This is a fact that has been widely discussed and addressed for years (Sapon-Shevin, 2013). Indeed, inclusion is more than integrating students in the system and, therefore, in the ordinary classroom. It involves a modification of the educational environment, with special emphasis on current beliefs in it and the educational practices that are developed in it. The teacher, as designer of the teaching-learning processes, is a key element in guaranteeing an education with all and for all students. However, the literature (Acedo, 2011; Colmenero, Pantoja and Pegajalar, 2015; Molina and Holland, 2010; Sharma and Jacobs, 2016) warns, on the one hand, of the little attention that has been paid to the training of competent teachers, attentive and sensitive with an inclusive model of education; on the other hand, how inadequate such training has been so far in not responding to the real needs of teachers. This is the motif for the present research. Actually, the main purpose is to know what EFL teachers understand by inclusion and the advantages and drawbacks in the process of its implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have made efforts to define the quantitative and qualitative indicators of inclusive education (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; Tjernberg and Mattson, 2014; Kyriazopoulou and Weber, 2009) together with the importance of creating a school culture where students feel competent, valued and not excluded, regardless of their characteristics, interests, abilities or difficulties.

However, the central obstacle to making schools truly organizations that are attentive to diversity is found in the ideas, norms, beliefs prevailing in the school, the operating patterns and the actors involved in teaching (Ahmmed, Sharma and Deppeler, 2014; Fernández Batanero and Benítez Jaén, 2016; Weiß et al., 2014). This shows clearly how some educational practices classified as inclusive have done nothing more than perpetuate the existing status quo of the system and open new doors to marginalization and inequality among students (Parrilla, 2007). In fact, as found in Arnáiz and Guirao (2015), discourses in favor of inclusion have evolved at a faster rate than educational practices, causing, on too many occasions, situations of segregation and exclusion.

Such a situation truly highlights the decisive role of teachers, their teaching competencies and their interpretation of diversity as the fundamental condition for the success of educational inclusion through the transformation of approaches, organizational structures and teaching methodologies that guarantee students an education tailored to their characteristics and thereby achieve full learning and participation (Colmenero et al., 2015; Donelly and Watkins, 2011; Fernández Batanero and Benítez Jaén, 2016; Kitsantas, 2012; Sharma and Jacobs, 2016).

To succeed in this, Molina and Holland (2010) point out that initial teacher training is the most effective method to improve teachers' assessment of inclusion. This is also reflected in Barber and Mourshed (2007) who worked on the 25 best educational systems in the world, by placing the quality of teachers as the main explanatory variable of differences in student learning.

These observations and conclusions give rise to the fact that low rates of teacher training in attention to the needs and difficulties of students can lead to rejection behaviors, which translate into poor teaching-learning strategies and low expectations of students, which in turn prevent a true inclusive education (Mosia, 2014). In the meantime, a favorable predisposition towards the inclusion of all students leads to the development of more and better educational strategies for inclusion to be successful (Álvarez Castillo and Buenestado Fernández, 2015; Kitsantas, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to address training for education professionals focused on the main difficulties and gaps that attention to diversity has had so far.

It appears, from the literature (Ahmmed et al., 2014; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Colmenero et al., 2015; Echeita et al., 2008; Lledó and Arnáiz, 2010; Muntaner et al., 2010; Sharma and Jacobs, 2016; Torres and Fernández, 2015), that the common denominator for school improvement and student success is the teacher and the educational practices that he develops.

At this point, the European Agency for the Development of Education of Students with Special Educational Needs (2011) determines some of the competences that teachers must possess to work and promote inclusive education: assess and support the progress of all students, work as a team in the class, employ diverse teaching methods, foster active and participatory learning experiences and diversify teaching content and assessment methods. However, Rouse (2010) posits that two positions currently persist regarding the training that teachers must receive to teach in inclusive environments. The first one is that of those who defend that it should focus more on the knowledge of the different types of difficulties that some students may present and on teaching strategies to work with them. The second one is concerned with inclusion as an opportunity to rethink the operation of the school and for educational professionals to critically reflect on their teaching methodology and beliefs about differences and the way of and in their working.

The present study is linked to the last perspective since the main perspective is to explore the development of inclusive educational practices based on the perception of teachers. The analysis that teachers themselves carry out on what it means for them to educate under the paradigm of inclusion and their perspectives on existing barriers and facilitators for the implementation of good practices to attend to the diversity present in the classrooms is to be done.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was used (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado and Baptista, 2010). Specifically, 10 heterogeneous discussion groups made up of a total of 180 EFL teachers were assembled. It was decided to use this technique since it facilitates the creation of a shared space among peers that allows participants to face a real situation but in a relaxed atmosphere, which favors the manifestation of perceptions of high subjective value, stereotypes and more or less repressed discourses (Soares, Veloso and Keating, 2014).

Care was taken to select participants at the rate of 15 per region throughout the 12 regions of the country. Most of them were men with their age varying between 25 and 50 years. Eventually 160 participated in the study, thereby giving a participation rate of 88,88%.

Ten discussion group sessions were held. At the beginning of each, participants were informed about the specific objectives of this study: the description and definition of the factors indicative of inclusive education and the analysis of the barriers and facilitators for development of inclusive practices. For this, three open questions were asked:

- What do you understand by inclusive education?

- What are the barriers that hinder the development of inclusive education?

- What are the factors that facilitate, empower and favor the development of the inclusive school?

Oral authorization was requested each time before the audio recording of the session was made and transcribed using Voice Notes 3.56 (free) set on a TECNO-F2 android cellphone. Each and everytime, confidentiality, anonymity and the use of the resulting information solely for investigative purposes were guaranteed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data obtained were analyzed through a thematic coding process. Thus, teacher interventions are divided into three thematic blocks: concept of inclusive education, barriers to the development of inclusion and facilitators to achieve it.

It is essential to note that, despite the individual differences (teaching experience, nature of the schools, age or gender), all the participants are in agreement in the identification of the main barriers that hinder the development of inclusive education, as well as its driving facilitators.

Defining Inclusive Education

Two aspects are distinguished when defining inclusion. The first one is focused on inclusive education as an education whose main purpose is to benefit students with specific needs for educational support and to design educational strategies for them almost entirely. From this position, defended by 67% of the participants, the terms inclusion and integration are used interchangeably, regardless of the defined sample characteristics. As some participants stated:

Kokou: *Inclusion is a school for everyone, but it goes for those who simply have learning difficulties or those who already have serious learning difficulties.*

Dossi: *Inclusion is not only related to educational needs. It also concerns students who come to you from outside and who have other types of social or other problems. All children who have these physical, psychological, social or other problems that need a certain support.*

The second aspect indicated by sixty-five per cent of participants does not make distinctions between some students or others, since it is based on the fact that any person may present difficulties and / or needs related not only in to his educational career, but in his life. And that, therefore, requires the design of a quality education that responds to all those needs that may arise in the classroom. That means an education, which, among many other things, is inclusive. As Edou stated:

"Many times when we speak, we speak more of integration than of inclusion (...) we must think that when we speak of inclusion we cannot think of students with educational needs, but of all students because they all have their needs".

Anna and Pana further noted:

Anna: *I think that it is more an education that seeks to recognize that each learner is different, that they have capabilities and that they must all be integrated in the classroom to carry, above all, the teaching-learning process, which is what it brings us together.*

Pana: *The teacher has to include all students in the classroom, no matter how different they are and be able to work in the same but different way at the same time.*

Obstacles to Inclusive Education

The main barrier mentioned by all participants (regardless of gender, educational stage or ownership of the center) is the one related to the lack of training in attention to diversity. Teacher-participants highlight the disconnection between theory, taught in teacher training institutions and universities and the reality of the classroom. They indicate that training covers the area of inclusion from a very theoretical position, but without addressing practical questions focused on the development of methodological strategies or the design and search of didactic resources. Furthermore, they note that, despite the changes in the terminology used all along these years, training is still defined by the same pattern: excess of theory and little applied or coherent educational practice. This is remarkable in comments made by Nina and Fifa.

Nina: *For example, in my case, I got a course on special education.... I knew it in theory, I knew the theory, but each learner is different.*

Fifa: *The training we got through at the teacher training school has nothing to do with this. Most of us are graduates or teachers with a specialty, because you don't come prepared to teach, least to find all these issues that you have to deal with.*

In addition, 70% of participants add another fundamental aspect in this regard: their limited pedagogical training is insufficient to acquire teaching skills and competences, which leaves teaching at the mercy, on many occasions, of intrinsic capacities and motivations of individual teachers. In the words of Pol:

Some teachers do have that initial training because they have pedagogy, didactics. You finish a degree and you get into teaching because you like it, because it is an opportunity, but we are not prepared.

85% of participants noted the lack of resources, especially personal resources. The existing educational resources are excessively limited for inclusive education. Pepe mentions it as follows:

There is a paradox, the government wants to improve educational quality and yet limited resources are allocated to schools nationwide and recruitment as well as in-service training are not priorities.

Baké further emphasizes: *There are children who are not even said to have problems because there is no specialist to take care of them.*

Insufficient time, a habitual complaint of teachers, is another barrier mentioned by 70% of participants. They are aware of that dedicating excessive attention means more time, but such a practice is fair and necessary to the students who manifest the most difficulties. They believe that there is a lack of time to provide a quality educational response to all students. In addition, some believe that the time they dedicate to those students who specific needs, absorbs the time they should dedicate to other children, damaging the educational attention provided to the rest of the students in the classes. This last fact is emphasized by the majority (92%) of participants. As some put it:

Dissou: *Lack of time, I can't do things in different ways.*

Abena: *You include the child in the classroom and I think it is great that you integrate him, but it is also to the detriment of the rest of the classroom, because with 50 or 70 students I cannot dedicate the time that each learner needs to him in a course that is supposed to last 120 minutes. And, don't forget that the time I dedicate to each specific child is taken away from the rest.*

Another obstacle that many of the teachers mention is the role of the ministries in charge of education. In fact, 80% of participants stress their low involvement in the daily operation of schools. Although the ministries are in charge of writing the guidelines on how to organize and how the education system should work, in most cases these guidelines are very difficult to put into practice. In addition, necessary resources are not provided for an education that truly meets those previously defined standards. Idriss and Bintou point this out in their comments:

Idriss*: The ministries make laws and all these beautiful theories. These are nice but you have to be in the daily reality.*

Bintou*: Everything that is administration is terrible to, for example, make the curriculum a little more flexible. Each time, it is more difficult to give the answers that each learner needs and many times it is a pure and simple bureaucracy.*

The families of the students with special needs is another of the points of interest. 70% of participants noted that, on many occasions, parents find it difficult to assume that their child presents some type of difficulty that prevent following the explanations or work on the activities at the same rate as his classmates. In this sense, some of the participants observed that the way in which parents are informed of the possible existence of difficulties in their child as one of the important aspect. They warn that it is essential not to transmit them that they are facing a problem and that it is essential that they feel accompanied at all times. Also, with the collaboration between family and school that is presently

more emphasized and the design of an educational action adapted to each specific situation, a quality response to the needs presented by the student can be provided, which will contribute positively in achieving the didactic objectives. However, other participants focused on the little support that parents had for problematic situations with students (not doing homework, not carrying the necessary material, bad behavior in class, etc.). Some comments include:

Niba: *I believe that parents have a hard time admitting that children have a difficulty.*

Rita: *I never posed it to parents as a problem and I think the way to approach it is to tell them that the sooner they see the difficulty and the sooner they have the answers, the solutions, the better the result. But parents still have a hard time being aware of the difficulties their children are having. But very often, they do not see it and expect too much from teachers and their children too.*

Some participants (20%) also highlight the fact that when we talk about inclusion, it should not be limited solely to the educational field, but it is vital that it is also extended in the social sphere. They rely on this statement because they point out that many times it is the parents of students with specific needs for educational support who segregate their child from their peer group for fear of rejection, fear that something will happen. This position was defended by 60% of participants. As Primo mentions:

When a boy is invited by his friends at the recess or after class two or three times and he never goes to any, to any. So you didn't know what to do then, and then he didn't invite the others either, that is, and what did you do? You cannot obligatorily tell the parents to come.

Facilitators for the Development of Inclusive Education

The great majority (90%) of participants noted peer support as one of the keys to achieving changes that are accompanied by real improvement in education. But with this they did not only refer to the teaching staff, but also to the non-teaching staff of the school as a fundamental part in the daily life of school life. But, above all, the role played by the management team is highlighted, how the leadership assumes when coordinating the entire staff and the defense it makes of the values and principles that characterize the operation of the school. As Ruth said, "if the management team is for the work, they will always support any action".

The teaching experience itself is mentioned as a facilitator by 75% of participants. Indeed, for them, working day-by-day, encountering new situations each year, the introduction of changes in the operation and organization of the schools, makes one develop oneself the competencies and skills necessary to carry out professional work correctly and according to the occasion that arises in everyday education. Michou stated:

As you see more needs, the need makes you learn. So when we see a greater diversity of learners with different educational responses, it makes you educate.

60% of participants indicated struggle and perseverance as key values in inclusive education. Indeed, they note the importance of never giving up and of proposing as a professional and sometimes personal challenge that all your students learn and reach their goals. This is a very important aspect in that it is a factor that can most contribute and encourage a professional to when addressing challenges and solving difficulties that may arise in his daily work.

Fafa indicates: *Fighting barriers is often the best facilitator because that is a beastly injection of self-esteem, everything. We must pay more attention to the positive reinforcements, that is, when we get things, although it often takes time to get them.*

Finally, although in the questions that were formulated for the focus groups, they did not directly ask how they conceived support from an inclusive perspective, indirectly, and in line with the comments that arose about what inclusion was and the main barriers or facilitators with whom they met daily in their educational practice, there were several occasions when supports were discussed within an inclusive school.

Specifically, all the participants stated that there are some supports that must be provided outside the classroom, as is the case of students who need attention from the specialist in hearing and language, since these are specific activities of phonological articulation, regardless of the development of the rest of school activities.

Bona: *Support can be done, in most cases, it can be done within the classroom. I help them to do articulation exercises.…*

Another of the aspects discussed in relation to this topic was related to who should provide the supports. The majority of participants (90%) considered that it was an exclusive function of the specialist, while some (10%) considered that support can be provided by more education professionals, including the teachers of other subjects or the tutors themselves. The latter made us reflect on what the role of the support teacher really was and if its recipients were only those students who presented specific needs for educational support.

Bansou: *It is not that the specialist in particular is the one who works with learners with specific educational needs, it is that they all have needs at a certain time.*

Gnon: *Not only does the teacher does not work with children in need only, but he works with everyone. If at any time a child has not understood an exercise, he raises his hand and the teacher explains it to him.*

As such, only one comment was made on the benefit of peer support in responding to certain difficulties that could arise in the classroom:

Kira: Today, we are using the active method in the teaching and learning processes nationwide. With the requirements of this method, you bring together in the same group students who have different learning rhythms and help each other and have to get a final product.

This shows that, although it is a very positive methodological practice for working in the classroom with students, as well as for the acquisition of values such as camaraderie, collaboration, help or respect, it is a little resource used by teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The research was to find out, from the own voice of EFL teachers who work day to day in the classrooms, what it meant for them to work in an inclusive way and what are the main aspects that, in their opinion, make it difficult or easy to teach and work from this perspective.

In this line and referring to the first question posed about their conceptualization of inclusion, the information collected from the different focus groups reveals, in general terms, a positive perception of inclusive education by the majority of the participants, from the educational ethics perspective for all students. But the truth is that, as has happened in previous investigations (Echeita et al. 2008; Jurado de los Santos and Olmos Rueda, 2010; Shapon-Shevin, 2013), in the speech the majority of the participants tended, it was shown to identify attention to diversity only with learners with specific needs and not with an education model aimed at all students, regardless of their needs. , characteristics, capacities or interests, which has led to the fact that, on numerous occasions, some teachers have not made modifications or adaptations in their daily work depending on the needs of their students.

Even so, there is a smaller group of teachers who see inclusion as the educational model to teach all students from an enriching perspective of human difference (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Echeita, 2013). Previous studies (Colmenero et al., 2015; Jurado de los Santos and Olmos Rueda, 2010; Sharma and Jacobs, 2016) show that, given this fact, the teachers of infant and primary education present a more favorable perception than that of secondary school, by having more resources and supports to function within an inclusive school model, differences attributed to less didactic training in general, and in attention to diversity in particular, that the secondary school teacher has. However, despite the differences in initial training, these have not been reflected in different views about inclusion.

The second question asked led the participating teachers to identify the main barriers that hindered adequate educational attention to diversity. At a general level, and in accordance with the above, teachers have highlighted the lack of training in attention to diversity as one of the main barriers to functioning as inclusive educational centers. The fact that secondary school teachers make more latent, if possible, when arguing the lack of initial training in basic pedagogical issues that provide them with resources to program the teaching-learning process. This aspect has already been captured in previous research (Echeita et al., 2008; Colmenero et al., 2015; Lledó and Arnáiz, 2010; Muntaner et al., 2010; Sharma and Jacobs, 2016; Torres and Fernández, 2015). In this sense, López López and Hinojosa (2012) point out that, although research and theoretical contributions focused on inclusive education have increased substantially, this has not had an impact on improving teacher training in inclusion since it continues to receive marginal attention in study plans. This despite the fact that it has been found that initial and permanent teacher training are essential in improving their assessment of inclusion (Molina and Holland, 2010), as long as they are linked to the principle of social justice and move away from the deficit model (European Agency for the Development of the Education of Students with Special Educational Needs, 2011; Álvarez Castillo and Buenestado Fernández, 2015).

Other difficulties that were revealed in the different focus groups were those of an organizational and pedagogical nature, such as scarcity of resources or insufficient time, issues that coincide with some previous studies (Álvarez Castillo and Buenestado Fernández, 2015; Lledó and Arnáiz , 2010; Torres and Fernández, 2015). The lack of time is due to having to assume the responsibility of imparting a large part of the curriculum. The limited support of the educational administration, which is usually characterized by practicing teachers as a barrier to the implementation of inclusive processes (Fernández de la Iglesia, Fiuza and Zabalza, 2013), as well as families, was also highlighted. This obstacle, families, in our work was also mostly highlighted by professionals in early childhood and primary education, stages where, due to the age of the students and the higher volume of time that the teacher-tutors stay with the same group of students, family contact is increased. Even so, previous studies (Muntaner et al., 2010) have already indicated that such contact continues to be insufficient.

However, Echeita (2013) points out that, although existing barriers are an element on which we must dedicate efforts to initiate and reinforce the improvement processes that inclusion requires, we must not forget the facilitators to achieve such inclusion. It is equally important to recognize, reinforce, and expand the existing concepts, practices, and resources among teachers as part of the school restructuring process that brings schools closer to promoting the presence, participation, and achievement of all students. This aspect leads directly to the third question posed where all the participants in the study highlighted as strengths-facilitators that promoted the improvement in their educational practice, fellowship and teamwork with the rest of the teachers at their school.

The struggle, perseverance and professional experience have also been indicated as positive factors that influence the best achievement of a true education for all. As expected, these elements have been highlighted by teachers with longer professional experience, as they have had more opportunities to learn, internalize and develop inclusive educational practices. In this way, the power of values such as the spirit of struggle, commitment and perseverance are reflected as predictors of inclusion and acceptance of diversity, which in turn influence the construction of teachers' knowledge about students, teaching and their own teaching practice (López López and Hinojosa, 2012). Kitsantas (2012) also reflects this by stating that the teachers who want success for all their students are those who put the most effort into designing quality teaching for each and every one.

Finally, regarding support, as an issue that was addressed in the thread of the discourse of the participating teachers, it is often understood as a delegation, a separation, rather than a process of collaboration and shared responsibility to guarantee the principles of equality and equity (Parrilla, 2007; Tjernberg and Mattson, 2014). In fact, the support needed is a support to the diversification of the curriculum and to enable the participation of all, without exclusions, in the ordinary classroom. Thus, the support that the inclusive classroom proposes is not expert or prescriptive support, it is on the contrary, a support that promotes inquiry, joint search for solutions, dialogue and confrontation between teachers at school (Echeita, 2013), which shows the long way to go to achieve it, if we intend to provide all students with a quality educational response to all their needs, whatever they may be.

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