

# TEACHER PERCEPTION TOWARDS INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN ERITREA

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of the study was to investigate teachers' perceptions on the implementation of inclusive education for learners with disabilities in regular primary schools of Central and Anseba Regions of Eritrea. The proposed study was guided by Heider and Kelley's Attribution Theory of Perception. The study used descriptive research design, targeting 650 teachers, and 28 head teachers in 28 regular primary schools of Central and Anseba regions of Eritrea. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select 6 regular primary schools from the two regions of the country, 6 head teachers, and 120 regular primary school teachers. The study utilized a questionnaire and an interview guide for data collection. Questionnaires were administered to regular primary school teachers, while the head teachers participated in interviews. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically based on the research objectives, while the quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 20 for windows. The study findings revealed that regular primary school teachers have positive perceptions of including learners with disabilities. However, the knowledge base and practice of inclusive education was found to be very low among the regular primary school teachers. The study recommends urgent pre-service and in-service training of regular primary school teachers.*

**Keywords:** - *Inclusive education, Perceptions, Eritrea, Regular primary schools, Learners with disabilities.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right, and it is crucial for the implementation of other human rights. Nevertheless, "75 million children of primary school age are not in school; seven out of ten live in Sub-Saharan Africa or South and West Asia... one-third of these are children with disabilities" [1, p. 5].

Children with disabilities have the right to benefit from education. However, all children are different; and where their needs will meet also varies. Educational service delivery models for learners with disabilities have changed from segregation which involved isolation of learners with disabilities from the mainstream school system and relegating them to special schools or classes, to integration, which involved helping the learners with disabilities to fit into the existing regular school system, to the contemporary movement towards the inclusive education model. [2].

The concept of inclusion includes disadvantaged learners besides learners with disabilities. UNESCO has defined inclusive education as: "an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination" [1, p. 126].

Essentially, the quality of education is largely determined by the quality of its teachers. Inclusive education is one of the best practices but yet, so challenging for many teachers. Research findings from the Bahamas, Ghana, and Kenya

showed that teachers are not well prepared for inclusion, and their perceptions towards including learners with disabilities also influence the movement [3] [4] [5] [6].

Similarly, in their 2011 review of 26 studies on inclusive education conducted in Europe, De Boer, Pijl and Minnaert reported that findings of the reviewed studies ascertained that effective inclusion practice mainly depends on teachers' acceptance of the inclusive education philosophy. These authors recommended that perceptions of teachers towards including learners with disabilities should be investigated in order to improve the systems of education since paucities within the education system negatively impact teachers' perceptions. [7].

The current study was conducted in Eritrea, a country found in the Horn of Africa. The National Education Policy of Eritrea notes that "education is a fundamental human right and life long process. Hence, to realize the equal educational opportunity, the government believes that schools should accommodate all children irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional and other disabilities" [8, p. 24]. Considerable efforts are underway to expand educational opportunities in Eritrea. In the 2013/14 academic year, for example, the enrolment at Eritrean primary schools for the 7–14 year age group was more than 510,000. However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) further reported that approximately 10% of the primary school learners repeated or failed in the same year [9]. This large number of failures or repetition is a hindrance to the realization of inclusive education in Eritrea.

Education services for learners with disabilities in Eritrea started in the 1960s for learners with visual and hearing impairments. At present, there are only two special schools for learners with hearing impairments (run by the faith-based organization) in Anseba and Central regions and one special school for learners with visual impairment (Governmental) in the Central region.

Inclusive education in the Eritrean education context has been perceived as access to schooling for learners with sensory disabilities [10]. Inclusive education is also associated with special school services for learners with observable sensory impairments. In very few regular schools, special class arrangements for learners with intellectual and autistic impairments exist [11].

However, many learners with disabilities, such as those with physical and mental disabilities, remain excluded from schools. In the integrated education programs, the opportunity and quality of education rendered to learners with disabilities remain inadequate [8].

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Despite the Eritrean Ministry of Education taking appropriate measures to move the education policy and practice towards the inclusive direction, emerging literature and statistics indicate that some portion of the population is still not benefiting from inclusive education. The progress is not adequate, not equitable and qualitatively less fulfilling [8].

Various findings ascertain that a fundamental feature of inclusion is educators' readiness to receive learners with disabilities in regular schools and classrooms. However, research on perceptions of teachers towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities has yielded varied results worldwide. Additionally, though teacher perceptions of inclusive education have been studied worldwide, little is known about the Eritrean primary school teachers' perceptions on inclusive education. Inadequate research attention on this issue is of great concern, given that teachers' perception towards including learners with disabilities could be one of the possible challenges hindering the practice of inclusive education in Eritrea. Hence, more studies needed to be carried out to fill these gaps. Thus, this study sought to investigate the determinants of the perceptions of primary school teachers on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in Central and Anseba regions of Eritrea.

### **1.2 Significance of the Study**

Despite the progress in increasing access to and quality of education, inclusive education is still far from being realised in the Eritrean education system. It is essential to produce empirical evidence to improve the implementation of inclusive education. This study hoped to give a comprehensive picture of teacher perceptions towards inclusive education in regular primary schools. The comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive inclusive education may be useful to the Ministry of Education for reforming and structuring programs for the implementation of inclusive education.

The study may also be important in creating awareness on the teachers' perceptions among regular school teachers and head teachers. This awareness may help these stakeholders in tackling the challenges hindering schools from practicing inclusive education. Furthermore, the findings of this study may improve teachers' perceptions on inclusive education. Improved teachers' perceptions, may in turn, enhance the social acceptance and academic achievement of learners with disabilities taught in regular schools and classrooms.

Finally, the study may contribute to future research in Eritrea. Due to the scarcity of studies in this area, scholars and researchers may use the findings of this study as reference material for future studies.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study applied descriptive research design using mixed methods involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The target population comprised of regular primary schools, regular primary school teachers and head teachers of Anseba and Central regions. 28 schools, 650 teachers and 28 head teachers were targeted. Purposive sampling technique was applied to select six schools, six head teachers and 120 primary school teachers. Questionnaires for teachers and interview guides for head teachers were used to collect data.

A Pilot study was conducted in the Central region in one regular primary school. Purposive sampling technique was applied to select the regular primary school. The head teacher and five (5) randomly selected teachers participated in the pilot study. All participants of the pilot study were excluded from the main study. During the actual data collection, participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could opt out at any time. Informed consent was obtained by explaining to all participants the purpose and significance of the study. Participants who chose to participate in the study then filled the informed consent forms. The researcher also assured participants of the confidentiality of the information collected by explaining the procedures to be followed in handling the data collected.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically as per the objectives of the study. Quantitative data were coded, entered and cleaned for analysis applying Microsoft EXCEL and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Various statistical techniques were employed. Descriptive frequency distributions were used to describe the respondent's demographic characteristics, and regular primary school teachers' perceptions were computed using frequencies and percentages. Results of qualitative data are presented in text and figures, while those of quantitative data are presented in the form of graphs, tables and figures.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regular primary school teachers were asked to indicate their perception towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms through teachers' questionnaire. Head teachers were also interviewed to reveal their views and teachers' perception towards the implementation of inclusive education.

Table - 1 below presents the quantitative data from teachers' questionnaires.

**Table - 1** Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education.

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD	Tot.
LWD must be integrated in to the regular class.	48 (40%)	25 (21%)	11 (9%)	20 (17%)	16 (13%)	120
I believe all LWD can benefit from IE.	58 (48%)	41 (34%)	6 (5%)	9 (8%)	6 (5%)	120
LWD can do better academically in IE.	36 (30%)	52 (43%)	13 (11%)	11 (9%)	8 (7%)	120

LWD improve their social skills when placed in the regular classroom.	50 (42%)	42 (35%)	8 (7%)	14 (12%)	4 (4%)	118
Total	192 (40.2%)	160 (33.5%)	38 (8%)	54 (11.3%)	34 (7%)	478

Table - 1 shows teachers' perceptions on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. Majority of them (73.7%) agreed and strongly agreed to the statements on inclusive education. The most agreeable proposition was "I believe all learners with disabilities can benefit from inclusive education", followed by "Learners with disabilities improve their social skills when placed in the regular classrooms." Whereas the least agreeable proposition was "Learners with disabilities can do better academically in inclusive education." This finding shows that regular primary school teachers were positive on the benefits of inclusive education but not very sure if learners with disabilities can do better academically in inclusive settings. Qualitative data from head teachers also confirmed what was found from regular primary school teachers' questionnaire. All head teachers stated that regular primary school teachers in their schools have positive perception towards inclusive education. Head teachers disclosed that all the teachers believed that all learners with disabilities should learn with their nondisabled counterparts. They believed that this would be best for learners with disabilities. A head teacher from one of the primary schools said:

*Inclusive education is a sound principle, especially in countries like Eritrea with no other option or very few special schools for learners with disabilities. So if we ask a teacher to include a child with disabilities in his/her class, the answer will be encouraging, because the teacher knows that the child with a disability has only that choice to come to the school or stay at home. Not only teachers but also all the school community have positive perceptions to all learners with disabilities to come and learn in the regular schools. Finally, I can say with all the obstacles of inclusive education; our teachers have positive perception towards including learners with disabilities in their classrooms.*

(Head teacher No. 5, 2018)

Generally, the results showed that respondents agreed with the principles of inclusion and have a favourable perception of inclusive education. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies which showed that teachers had a positive perception of the principles of inclusive education. Odebiyi (2016), for instance, established that majority of pre-primary and primary school teachers (76.1%) were found to be enthusiastic about their perception to implement inclusive education in Nigerian schools [12].

A study conducted in Spain to examine teachers' perception towards inclusive education also revealed that educators had positive perceptions towards including learners with disabilities [13]. Odongo and Davidson found similar results in examining Kenyan regular teachers' perception of inclusion [5].

Accepting inclusive education in principle, however, did not mean that inclusive education was implemented in the regular primary schools. To find out this, the researcher first sought to determine if teachers and head teachers have a clear understanding of inclusive education. According to the attribution theory by Heidler and Kelly (1958 & 1967), our perceptions can be influenced by internal and external factors. Knowledge and understanding of teachers on inclusive education as a factor can influence educators' practice of inclusion and finally determine their perceptions towards inclusive education. A study conducted by Maria in 2013 also discovered that significant confusion on the concept of inclusive education affects teachers perceptions towards the implementation of inclusion [14].

Table - 2 presents teachers' knowledge about inclusive education. Regular primary school teachers were asked to define inclusive education.

**Table – 2** Teachers' knowledge of inclusive education.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I don't have any idea	80	66.7	66.7	66.7
I have some ideas	13	10.8	10.8	77.5
I know it properly	27	22.5	22.5	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. revealed the understanding of inclusive education by teachers.

Findings showed that two-thirds of the respondents (66.7%) had no idea what inclusive education is. These show that a substantial portion of the regular primary school teachers lack the knowledge of inclusive education. Nevertheless, about one-fourth (22.5%) of the participants wrote the correct definition of inclusive education. Qualitative data from the interviews conducted with head teachers, however, ascertained that all head teachers were aware of inclusive education. All the head teachers responded correctly to the question on what inclusive education is. However, their knowledge and understanding of inclusive education was not due to training. The primary source of their knowledge was participation in various meetings in the Ministry of Education.

Regarding head teachers understanding of inclusive education, one head teacher explained it as follows:

*Inclusive education is to educate learners with special needs with normal learners in the same school than to place him/her in a special school. However, in our case the issue is not about a choice; any child with or without disabilities should learn in the neighbouring and appropriate school, but the special schools are not existent in his/her neighbourhood. The few special schools we have also found only in the capitals. Do these special schools address all sorts of disabilities? This is also another issue. Finally, for the sake of learners with disabilities, it would be best if they learn with their normal colleagues to acquire normal social skills. I can say also it is economical and that way, only we can educate our learners with disabilities. That is why I am saying it is not a matter of choice in Eritrea.*

(Head teacher No. 2, 2018)

From the previous quotation, it was manifested that head teachers have a good understanding of inclusive education and perception on including learners with disabilities was also favourable. Thus, the knowledge and understanding of the basics of inclusive education shaped their perception towards including learners with disabilities in their schools. Head teachers also mentioned that from time to time, they encounter learners with disabilities in their schools. As a result, they usually try to integrate them with normal learners in collaboration with the teachers.

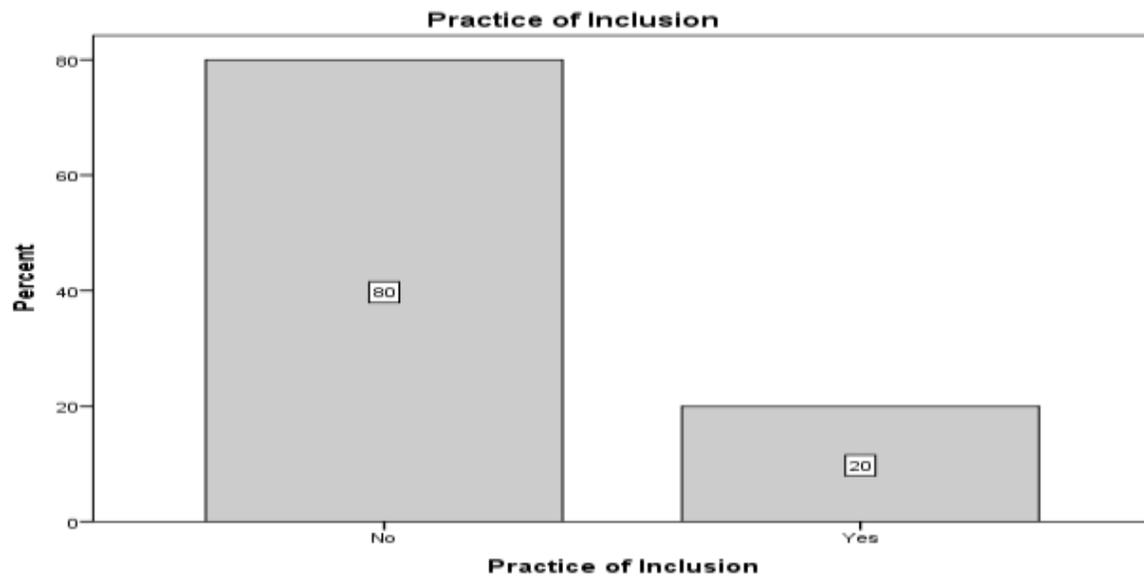
Regarding the knowledge of teachers towards inclusive education, head teachers confess that it might be difficult for teachers to define inclusive education as a terminology like it was presented in the questionnaire, but head teachers mentioned that majority of the primary school teachers have limited knowledge about inclusive education. However, some of the head teachers argued that how the definition was requested in the questionnaire could exaggerate the outcome that educators know very little about inclusive education. Yet, the researcher has presented how many of the participants can define inclusive education in table – 2.

Consistent with the findings of this study, a study conducted in some of the European countries, found that only 26.3% of the teachers gave the correct definition for the concept of inclusive education [14]. Chowdhury and Hasan in 2013 also found similar results with Bangladesh elementary school educators. They exhibited a positive perception of the concept of inclusive education. However, their knowledge about how to instruct learners with disabilities was very limited [15].

By contrast, Cameron teachers revealed that educators favoured the placement of learners with disabilities in special schools rather than being included in regular schools and classrooms. However, the findings further showed that still, teachers were very supportive of the benefits of inclusive education. Their negative perceptions of inclusion were reported to be due to the teachers' lack of confidence in their abilities to teach and cater for the special needs of learners with disabilities [16].

The practise of inclusive education in regular classrooms by primary school teachers was also an important indicator of favourable perceptions towards inclusive education. Attribution theory of perception also explained that the causal analyses of our behaviours could shape our perception. Thus, the fact that teachers have little knowledge about inclusive education will influence their perception negatively not to practice inclusive education in the schools.

Figure 1. summarizes regular primary school teachers' response towards their practice of inclusion in their respective schools.



**Figure - 1** Practice of inclusive education.

It is clear from Figure 1. that majority, of the regular primary school teachers 96 (80%) do not practise inclusive education in their classroom. Only very few 24 (20%) of the participants claimed that they had practised inclusive education in their regular classrooms.

This was triangulated by the interview with head teachers and teachers' response regarding their knowledge on the implementation of inclusive education in regular primary schools. Head teachers of the schools confessed that the practice of inclusive education in their schools was nonexistent. Moreover, teachers confessed that they lack the necessary knowledge.

This was evident by the revelation given by one of the head teachers:

*You can see there are many students with various disabilities in the school, even some types of disabilities you mentioned I did not hear them before. Now only I am wondering why some students were lagging or keep on repeating? So this shows that we are including them but not correctly addressing their problems. The solution seems that if we put them together, we have to help them learn the way they learn. However, with the types of teachers, we now have it is challenging. Some of our teachers even not trained to become teachers. Finally, inclusive education is not practised because our teachers do not know how to practise it.*

(Head teacher No. 6, 2018)

Another head teacher put his complaint about the training and inclusive education as follows:

*We know that inclusive education is written in the curriculum only. So how can you expect a teacher to practise inclusive education without any training? Now it is not about practice. First, we have to know that our teachers are not trained, do not know how to deal with a learner with disabilities. I have seen the questionnaire, and you might get some response from the teacher that says I practise inclusive education, but it is not true. I know they have the will to help, but this does not mean we practise inclusive education.*

(Head teacher No.1, 2018)

Thus, qualitative data from the head teachers confirmed that the practise of inclusive education in the primary schools was very low. However, all the head teachers claimed that lack of practise in inclusive education in their respective schools does not mean that teachers are against the movement, but they do not practise due to various reasons. All the head teachers claimed that lack of training and resources were their problems. This finding goes hand in hand with qualitative research within six schools of Slovenian primary schools. Results revealed that some of the teachers were positive about the practice of inclusion, but the practice of inclusion was not displayed due to the additional burden and dissatisfaction with school systems [17]. In a similar study, it was shown that teachers' perception tends to be favourable if the practise of inclusive education were practised effectively. Further, they indicated that as long as teachers' beliefs and practises are aligned with the positive perceptions of learners with disabilities, inclusive education can be successful [18].

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite all the hurdles of inclusive education, regular primary school teachers of the selected schools revealed positive perceptions towards including learners with disabilities. However, the implementation of inclusive education was very limited.

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education urgently should provide pre-service and in-service training of regular primary school teachers on inclusive education.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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