

Barriers and Enablers to Inclusive Education in Mauritius: Perceptions of Secondary School Educational Practitioners

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Abstract

Advocated as an educational philosophy to tackle exclusion, inclusive education (IE) is now a worldwide trend. Despite the well-acknowledged benefits of inclusion, educational practitioners have several difficulties which act as significant setbacks in operationalising inclusion in practice. Given its novelty in Mauritius, IE implementation is not fully understood. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of secondary school educational practitioners on certain aspects of inclusive education, namely the academic profile of students with special education needs encountered by secondary school educators and rectors, the difficulties faced when dealing with them, and the barriers and enablers to inclusive education. It involved a quantitative descriptive research design. Data were collected from 588 secondary educators and 42 rectors using a specifically designed questionnaire. Following the analysis of data, respondents confirmed the presence of children with special education needs in their classrooms. While respondents indicated that the majority of students with special education needs had an academic profile of the same level of age-matched peers, they reported difficulties encountered with these learners in terms of deficits in attention, participation and behavioural problems. The main barriers identified were the lack of training in special education and the lack of proper infrastructure. Findings revealed training and knowledge in special education, the availability of proper infrastructure, support in terms of teaching aids, specialised equipment and teaching assistants as the main enabling factors. Training is therefore recommended to build competency of educators and rectors in inclusive practices. Appropriate infrastructure and support in terms of educational materials and support personnel should also be provided.

Keywords: inclusive education; special educational needs; behavioural challenges; barriers; enablers.

Introduction

Fundamentally, Inclusive Education (IE) means educating learners with special education needs in regular education settings (Mitchell, 2015). The inclusion of children with disabilities is now a worldwide trend that has been growing in popularity during the last three decades (Sharma et al., 2012, p.12). Despite the growing popularity and benefits at the international level, there still are many barriers to the implementation of IE.

Literature Review

Special education needs refer to learners with learning, physical, and developmental disabilities; behavioural, emotional, and communication disorders; and learning deficiencies (Kryszewska, 2017, p. 525). While traditionally, children with special education needs have been educated in segregated settings, an inclusive orientation in education is called for in the worldwide effort towards ‘education for all’, including children with special education needs.

As established by the United Nations in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims for the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education as a way to combat discrimination in education and achieve sustainable development. An inclusive orientation in education is based “on the belief that differences in learners is an essential aspect of reality and that education is about supporting and extending this diversity through a transformation of pedagogy” (Heung and Grossman 2007, pp.160). IE is thus, a school-wide approach to providing support and education to students with disabilities in general education settings together with those without disabilities (Sailor 2014). Therefore, to attain inclusion, the need for a reorganisation of regular schools is crucial to accommodate and cater for the educational demands of all learners regardless of their disabilities.

Behavioural difficulties of students with special education needs.

As reported by many previous studies, teachers repeatedly identify students’ behavioural difficulties as hindering inclusion (Forlin et al., 2008; Idol 2006). An Australian study conducted by Forlin et al. (2008) on teachers’ concerns on coping with inclusion revealed classroom issues as one major concern. Specifically, respondents identified the child’s behaviour as mostly concerning but also put forward difficulties like “short attention span, inappropriate social skills, poor communication skills and limited speech” (Forlin et al., 2008, p. 256).

Another study by Yildiz (2015) in Turkey on teacher and student behaviours in inclusive classrooms in primary settings indicated that the rate of academic engagement of students with mild intellectual disabilities during the lesson was 58.58%; off-task behaviour

was 34.11%, and problem behaviour was 7.31%. This indicates that “these students engaged in academic tasks little more than half of the lesson time and showed off-task behaviour and problem behaviour in the remaining time” (Yildiz, 2015, p.182).

Barriers to IE

While inclusion depicts an impeccable and ideal education system in terms of ideology and outcomes, its translation from policy to practice is often met by many barriers (Barton & Armstrong, 2007). Studies in different samples and contexts reveal several barriers to IE (Kawser et al., 2016; Zwane & Malale, 2018; Geleta 2019). In their investigation of barriers in the implementation of IE at high schools in Swaziland, Zwane and Malale (2018) have identified them as a non-inclusive curriculum, high numbers of learners, lack of resources and teachers’ lack of competence. Similarly, in a Bangladeshi study among professionals directly involved with programmes and research regarding IE, Kawser et al. (2016) reported negative social attitudes, lack of teachers training, limited resources, accessibility issue, lack of awareness among people, faulty policy making and problems in administration, institutional power distance and lack of teamwork. Likewise, Geleta’s (2019) study revealed inappropriate classroom setting, large class size, unsuitable school physical structures, lack of knowledge on IE, lack of skills on implementation of IE, lack of appropriate materials, lack of continuous training on IE, and inappropriate curriculum towards disabled students as barriers affecting teachers’ motivations towards implementation of IE in Ethiopia.

Tiwari et al. (2015) found that Indian teachers had “a deficit view of students with disabilities, which was reinforced by institutional barriers like large class size and lack of training and support” (p.134). Another Indian study by Das and Shah (2014) on teachers in private schools in Delhi revealed some of the barriers to IE to include a lack of trained teachers, parental pressure, negative attitudes of teachers, and a fear of reducing the overall academic performance of the class.

Gaad and Khan’s (2007) study in Dubai reported that “the teacher's rejection of inclusion in many cases stemmed from their perceived lack of support and resources” (p.105). They reported that teachers identified heavy teaching load, lack of instructional time and shared time for collaboration, lack of adequate training, and class size as areas to be addressed when including students with special needs in regular school environments. A Kenyan study on the attitudes and concerns of teachers towards inclusion revealed four main concerns; lack of time to meet the needs of students with disabilities, lack of training to cope with diversity, concern about academic assessment and concern to maintain discipline in an inclusive

classroom (Odongo & Davidson, 2016). Another study conducted in Namibia by Möwes (2012) on the views of educators regarding IE revealed the need for support services in the form of social workers, psychologists and therapists and noted concerns about large class sizes.

The implementation of IE is also accompanied by concerns from principals. Past research literature indicates that principals are very prudent with respect to inclusive programmes (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; Salisbury, 2006). It has also been reported that school leaders usually highlight the lack of relevant knowledge and skills to effectively deliver inclusive education programmes (Ball & Green, 2014; Williams, 2015). According to Lashley (2007), principals may not view educating students with disabilities as their responsibility. Impediments to principals' willingness as noted by Billingsley (2012) relate to the lack of preparation about and experience with students with disabilities, uncertainty about the goals of inclusion and how to lead an inclusive school. They viewed inclusion as others' responsibility and had apprehensions about time and resources.

Enablers of IE

The fundamental factors for the success of IE would depend on addressing the concerns of the direct implementers of IE. Kuper et al. (2018, p.15) argue that the solutions to improving the inclusion of children with disabilities in education should address the barriers operating at different levels, including the system (e.g. policy and legislation), schools (e.g. better teacher training) and families (e.g. providing financial support to aid).

Studies on determinants for successful IE reveal important factors for its success. A Nigerian study by Adeniyi et al. (2015) among 227 teachers and head teachers/principals reported that material, mind-set, manpower, experience and qualification jointly determined the success of inclusive education. It was also found that the "availability of materials was identified to possess the highest potential to [sic] success and failure of inclusive practices in Nigeria" (Adeniyi et al., 2015, p.30). Another study revealed other factors like the availability of resources in form of instructional materials, professional and para-professional staff and funding as important for successful IE (Sharma, 2001).

IE in Mauritius

In Mauritius, the education of children with special education needs has been encouraged through a dual system of education, involving regular schools for students without special education need and special schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the preferred educational setting of parents of children with special education needs is a special school.

Within the predominant approach of segregated education for children with special education needs, estimates however, indicate that “102 children with various types of disabilities (Visual, Hearing, Speech, Health, Physical and intellectual impairments) have been admitted in some 81 Pre-Primary schools, both Public and Private in 2012 (MOEHR, 2014, p.7). Moreover, in laying the ground for IE, 22 integrated units (Statistics Mauritius, 2018) were set up in regular primary schools to address special educational needs such as autism, specific learning difficulties, intellectual impairments, hearing and visual impairments. Another step towards IE is reflected in the accommodation of slow learners and low performing students via the Extended Stream programme in secondary schools. The Extended programme has as rationale, “inclusiveness, equity and quality in all teaching and learning processes” (MOEHR/TESR 2017a, p.3) and from an IE standpoint, this programme provides equal educational opportunities to children with learning difficulties and supports the rationale of the educational reform. Another measure geared towards IE relate to the retrofitting of secondary schools to increase accessibility of students with physical disabilities as indicated in the budget (2019) whereby provisions were made to equip “20 State Secondary Schools with ramps, handrails and adapted toilets for disabled students” (MOFED 2019, pp. 42).

Following the major and comprehensive educational reform with the Nine Year Continuous Basic Education (NYCBE) reform in 2017, equity and equal access in education have again been emphasised. One objective of this reform is to provide an early support programme at primary level for timely intervention and remediation of learning gaps for children with learning difficulties (MOEHR/TESR 2017b). To achieve this, support teachers are recruited to assist the class teacher in Grades 1 and 2 in either in-class support or pull-out classes for students with learning difficulties in literacy and numeracy and other foundational learning skills (Gungapersand 2019). While the above are indicative of laudable efforts of the Government to achieve IE, a fully inclusive system is yet to be established. The specificities and peculiarities of the Mauritian education system may account for the delayed establishment of a fully inclusive education system. For instance, the high stakes evaluation system (Bunwaree, et al., 2005) along with an overloaded curriculum, the language of instruction, and an institutionalised system of fee-paying private tutoring (Bunwaree, et al., 2005, Busgopaul, 2006) have been designated as major causes of inequalities in the Mauritian education system.

Mauritius has clearly indicated its intention to implement inclusion through various laws, policy papers and its support of influential international conventions. The Republic of Mauritius ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in January 2010 with some reservations, notably Article 24.2(b), which specifically pertains to IE. Underlying this reservation is that “Mauritius considers that there will be a need for a few special schools to continue for some more time to cater for those disabled students with very special needs” (Republic of Mauritius, 2010, p.6). Mauritius, however iterated its efforts to remove that reservation in the future (CRPD, 2014).

Aims of the study

This research is part of a larger study. Most studies have investigated barriers and enablers in primary school settings. This calls for an exploration of perception of barriers and enablers to IE at the secondary level. Considering the paucity of research on this area in Mauritius, an identification of barriers and enablers to IE is justified. Given that educational practitioners (referring to rectors and educators in this study) are the implementers of IE, their perceptions of these factors need to be taken into account and addressed to develop strategies to achieve successful IE implementation.

Educational practitioners’ views of barriers and enablers to IE potentially differ across different contexts and related research is lacking in Mauritius. This study is therefore an attempt to fill this research gap and contribute groundwork information on these aspects from the perspectives of secondary school educational practitioners (SSEP).

The objectives of the study were to identify:

- (1) The perceived academic characteristics and behavioural challenges of students with special education needs in secondary schools in Mauritius;
- (2) The main barriers to the successful implementation of inclusion in regular schools of Mauritius perceived by secondary school educational practitioners.
- (3) The enabling factors that could make IE a practical reality from secondary school educational practitioners’ perspectives.

Method

Participants

The respondents comprised of a nation-wide sample of secondary school educational practitioners (SSEP) namely educators and rectors/deputy rectors. The total number of educators as at March 2016 was 9359 (Statistics Mauritius 2016) and the total number of schools providing secondary education (state and private) was 166 in four educational zones;

Zone 1: 54, Zone 2: 42, Zone 3 : 38 and Zone 4: 32 (Statistics Mauritius, 2016). The sampling procedure involved stratified random sampling based on the number of secondary schools (State and private) in each of the 4 educational zones in Mauritius. 21 schools were sampled out as follows; Zone 1: 7, Zone 2: 5, Zone 3: 5 and Zone 4: 4. Questionnaires were distributed to 42 Rectors/deputy rectors (given that there is 1 Rector and 1 deputy/rector in a given school) and 588 were randomly distributed to Educators.

Research design

A quantitative, descriptive survey research design was adopted. The chosen approach would enable baseline information on barriers and enablers towards IE to be collected considering the very limited research knowledge available on these factors in Mauritius.

Research Instrument

As mentioned before, this study forms part of a larger study on factors affecting attitudes towards IE in Mauritius. It used a questionnaire to collect data on various variables under study and comprised of adapted existing scales and self-developed questions. It was pilot tested among 15 colleague educators prior to administration. The survey instrument also had high reliability given that it was adapted and based on three existing scales which had high internal consistency. The questionnaire was self-administered to respondents and consisted of:

- A one-page informational text describing four children (with fictitious names) with four different special needs.
- Parts A-G which assessed different variables under study.

The questions of relevance to this study related to academic characteristics, behavioural challenges, barriers and enablers. They were essentially self-developed and were multiple response questions. Open-ended questions were also included to get more insights on the views of respondents on problems encountered with students with special needs, barriers to and enablers of IE. The questions addressed in this study were contained in Parts A and C of the questionnaire and these identified the:

1. Participants' exposure to students with special needs.
2. Difficulties they faced when dealing with students with special needs.
3. Perceived barriers to IE.
4. Perceived enablers of IE.

Data collection

Prior to data collection, permission was sought from the concerned authorities. The quantitative study was carried out over a four months period (April 2016 to July 2016). Prior to administering the questionnaires, the Rectors of each sampled school were personally contacted and explained the objectives of the study. It was also stressed that participation in the survey was voluntary. The distribution and collection of questionnaires was done solely by the researcher. A total of 400 completed questionnaires were collected with a response rate approximating 63%.

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis was done using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, frequency counts and percentages were calculated. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed by content analysis. Frequencies and percentages were generated on the occurrence of identified categories using Microsoft Excel.

Findings**Descriptive characteristics of the participating secondary school educational practitioners**

As presented in Table 1, it can be seen that out of the secondary school educational practitioners (SSEP) who completed the survey, 95.25% were educators (full-time/part-time) and 2.75% were rectors/deputy rectors (11 out of the 42 expected). The respondents were predominantly female (65.5%). Most were in the 31-40 year age range and more than 20% had between 10-14 years of experience in their current occupation. More than 60% of respondents had postgraduate qualifications but the large majority (89.25%) reported having no training in IE. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents had no relatives or friends having a child with special needs. As for the school profile, 61.75% were from State secondary schools and 34.25% were Private (Grant-aided and fee-paying) secondary schools. 79.0% of respondents acknowledged having students with special education needs in their school or classroom. With respect to their familiarity with IE, a majority of 40% acknowledged being somewhat familiar with this principle as opposed to 26.75% who knew very little and 9.75% who had no knowledge of IE. 16.5% of respondents were much familiar with the concept and only 6.0% were very well aware of this principle.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents ($n = 400$)*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
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Relative/friend having a child with special needs	Yes	129	32.25
	No	255	63.75
	No response	16	4.00
Gender	Male	128	32.00
	Female	262	65.50
	No response	10	2.50
Age group (years)	20 – 30	89	22.25
	31 – 40	159	39.75
	41 – 50	76	19.0
	Above 50	65	16.25
	No response	11	2.75
Present occupation	Rector	8	2.0
	Deputy Rector	3	0.75
	Full-time educator	351	87.75
	Part-time educator	30	7.5
	No response	8	2.0
Highest level of education	B Ed/BSc	115	28.75
	PGCE	116	29.0
	M Ed/MSc	114	28.5
	D Ed/PhD	12	3.0
	Other	36	9.0
	No response	7	1.75
Training received in inclusive education	Yes	35	8.75
	No	357	89.25
	No response	8	2.0
Number of years of experience in present occupation	Less than 5	60	15.0
	5 – 9	59	14.75
	10 – 14	92	23.0
	15 – 19	51	12.75
	20 – 24	50	12.5
	25 or more	58	14.5
	No response	30	7.5

Zone**	1	132	33.0
	2	55	13.75
	3	111	27.75
	4	74	18.5
	No response	28	7.0
Type of school	Public	247	61.75
	Private Aided	110	27.5
	Private Unaided	27	6.75
	No response	16	4.0
Presence of children with special education needs in classroom	Yes	316	79.0
	No	84	21.0
Familiarity with IE	Not at all	39	9.75
	Very little	107	26.75
	Somewhat	160	40.0
	Much	66	16.5
	A great deal	24	6.0
	No response	4	1.0

* Missing values are indicated as 'No response'

** Based on the number of respondents selected from schools

Typical academic characteristics and behavioural challenges of students with special education needs in the participating secondary schools as perceived by secondary school educational practitioners

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of the academic characteristics of students with special education needs as perceived by survey respondents (n=309)[§]

	N	Percent of Cases
Same level as age-matched peers	139	45.0%
One grade level lower than age-matched peers	111	35.9%
Two grade levels lower than age-matched-peers	95	30.7%
One grade level above that of age-matched peers	41	13.3%
Two grade levels above that of age-matched peers	34	11.0%

[§] Multiple response question

45.0% of SSEP perceived students with special needs as being of the same academic level as age-matched peers. However, 35.9% and 30.7% of respondents perceived the academic profile of students with special education needs as being one grade level and two grade levels lower than age-matched peers respectively. In fairly fewer cases, students with special education needs were one grade level (13.3%) or two grade levels (11.0%) above that of age-matched peers.

Table 3 Frequency Distribution of the types of problems encountered by respondents when dealing with children with special needs (n=316)*

	N	Percent of Cases
Does not follow and participate in class	208	65.8%
Constantly disturbs ongoing activities	195	61.7%
Answers back	175	55.4%
Has low self-esteem and confidence	129	40.8%
Is aggressive with peers	127	40.2%
Is aggressive with teachers	117	37.0%
Withdraws himself/herself from others	108	34.2%
Is sad and lonely	76	24.1%

[§] This was a multiple response question to which only 309 respondents answered. The overall % exceeds 100% as participants were asked to choose more than one option (checklist). The respondents selected all options that were true for them. For each statement, percent of cases was calculated as the % of how many times each option was selected out of the total number of cases (respondents) for the question. E.g. for statement 1 in Table 2 this statement was selected by 139 respondents out of the 309 who responded to that question on academic characteristics. All the figures in the tables were generated by SPSS (Multiple response frequencies)

Is depressive	57	18.0%
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§ Multiple response question

As reported by the SSEP, children with special education needs do not follow and participate in class (65.8%), they constantly disturb ongoing activities (61.7%) and answer back (55.4%). Respondents also perceived that some children had low self-esteem and confidence (40.8%). Additionally, aggressive behaviour with either peers (40.2%) or teachers (37.0%) was put forward. To a comparatively lesser extent, withdrawal from others (34.2%), sadness and loneliness (24.1%) and depression (18.0%) were perceived.

Open-ended responses (n=14) on other types of problems encountered were gathered into three main categories. Examples of comments given are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Examples of comments given on difficulties faced with students with special education needs.

Category	Examples of comments
Lag behind	<i>“students cannot keep up with other students of the class”</i> <i>“is absent-minded and lost”</i>
Rebellious attitude	<i>“they are rebellious against the school system”</i> <i>“disrupts ongoing activities”</i> <i>“does not complete work given”</i>
Do not succeed academically	<i>“most of them do not do well”</i> <i>“low performing students”</i>

Perceived barriers in IE implementation in Mauritius.

Table 5. Barriers to making IE a reality. *

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	Rector**		Educator^		SSEP	
	N	Percent of cases	N	Percent of cases	N	Percent of cases
No or inadequate training in special education	10	90.9%	301	79.4%	311	79.7%
No proper infrastructure to accommodate children with special needs	7	63.6%	271	71.5%	278	71.3%
No proper guidelines to guide the process	6	54.5%	266	70.2%	272	69.7%
No teaching aids to help in the teaching of children with special needs	9	81.8%	261	68.9%	270	69.2%
Current curriculum is not adapted	8	72.7%	244	64.4%	252	64.6%
Lack of time	7	63.6%	196	51.7%	203	52.1%
Lack of leadership from administration	6	54.5%	176	46.4%	182	46.7%
Too much responsibility for school leaders and educators	4	36.4%	172	45.4%	176	45.1%
Lack of support from parents	7	63.6%	169	44.6%	176	45.1%
Children with special needs would not be accepted by their non-disabled peers in the school/classroom	4	36.4%	115	30.3%	119	30.5%

§Multiple response question; Number of rectors =11; Number of educators: 379; Total (SSEP): 390

**Rector refers to rectors and deputy rectors

^Educator refers to full-time and part-time educators.

The results in Table 5 indicate that for rectors/deputy rectors, the chief barrier related to the absence or inadequate training in special education (90.9%), followed by the absence of teaching aids (81.8%) and an unsuitable curriculum (72.7%). Educators also perceived the lack of adequate training in special education as the main obstacle in IE implementation (79.4%). The lack of proper infrastructure (71.5%) and the absence of proper guidelines on how to implement IE (70.2%) were also reported as important barriers.

As can be seen from Table 5, the chief implementation barrier to IE in Mauritius according to the SSEP is the lack of adequate training in special education (79.7%), followed by the lack of proper infrastructure to accommodate children with special needs (71.3%).

Other reported barriers included the lack of proper guidelines for implementing IE (69.7%), and the lack of teaching aids to help in the teaching of children with special needs (69.2%). The school curriculum not being adapted to children with special needs (64.6%), and

the lack of time to devote to these children (52.1%) also constituted noteworthy barriers in making IE a reality in Mauritius.

To a lesser extent, lack of leadership from administration (46.7%), excessive workload (45.1%) and lack of support from parents (45.1%) were reported. Lastly, the non-acceptance of children with special needs by their non-disabled peers in the school/classroom (30.5%) represented a minor but non-negligible barrier.

Following content analysis, open-ended responses (n=11) were grouped into four main categories. Examples of comments are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Examples of comments expressed by respondents on barriers to IE.

Category	Examples of comments
Mindset towards children with special education needs	<p><i>“the mindset of people - not accepting of differences”</i></p> <p><i>“Other normal students may be insensitive and harsh towards children with special needs”</i></p>
No specialised support	<p><i>“schools do not have specialists to help children with learning difficulties”</i></p> <p><i>“No support given for them to develop their abilities”, “Should be provided with an environment where they will feel more comfortable with trained teachers</i></p>
Large class size	<p><i>“class size must be reviewed”</i></p> <p><i>“ a class of 30 or 40 students is too much for handling special education needs students”</i></p> <p><i>“difficult to cope with disruptive pupils in a class of 38”</i></p> <p><i>“In a class of 30 or 40 students, a teacher’s time and attention is already taken by the task at hand”</i></p>
Academically oriented schools	<p><i>“most schools are academically oriented and there never seems to be enough time to devote to slow learners or children with special needs”</i></p> <p><i>“Stress to keep a balance between syllabus and students’ personal needs”</i></p>

Perceived enablers to IE implementation in Mauritius.

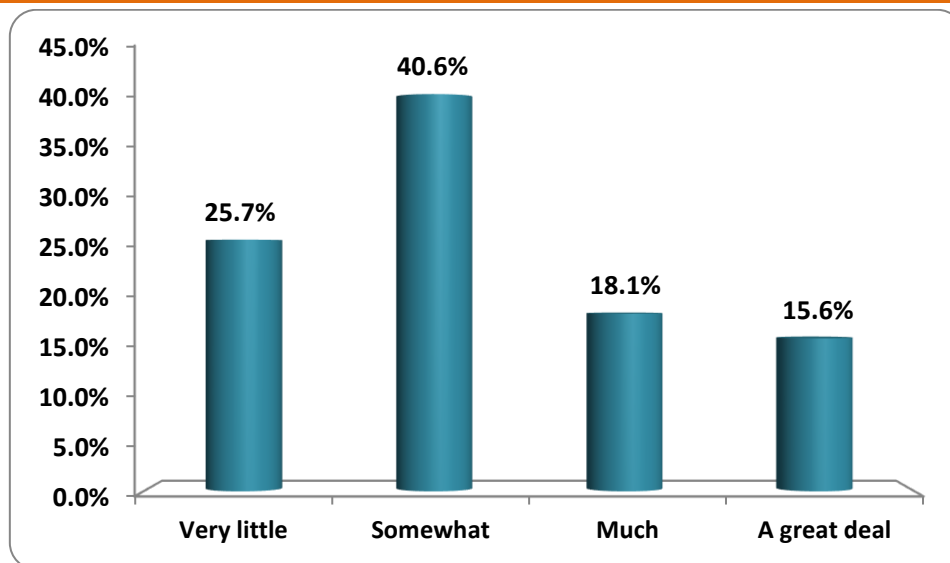


Figure 1. Perceived feasibility of IE in Mauritius.

Given the positively skewed distribution in Figure 1, most respondents were quite pessimistic about IE becoming a reality in Mauritius. The widely held stand was that 40.6% believed to some extent that it might happen, with 25.7% saying that there is very little chance of achieving inclusion. However, 18.1% of respondents thought that there is good likelihood of IE to be implemented and only 15.6% were greatly convinced that IE will become a reality in Mauritius.

Table 7 Factors that could make IE a reality.*

	Rector**		Educator^		SSEP	
	N	Percent of cases	N	Percent of cases	N	Percent of cases
Adequate training and knowledge in special education	7	63.6%	299	79.5%	306	79.1%
Availability of a proper infrastructure, teaching aids and specialised equipment to teach children with special needs in school/classroom	6	54.5%	299	79.5%	305	78.8%
Provision of teaching assistants (trained in special needs education) to help educators plan lessons adapted for children with special needs	9	81.8%	294	78.2%	303	78.3%
Support from parents of children with special needs at school	8	72.7%	262	69.7%	270	69.8%
A very supportive administration in school	7	63.6%	260	69.1%	267	69.0%
Very clear guidelines from the Ministry of Education	7	63.6%	256	68.1%	263	68.0%

Support from parents of non-disabled peers at school	8	72.7%	205	54.5%	213	55.0%
A special allowance in line with additional workload and responsibility	5	45.5%	190	50.5%	195	50.4%
Feeling of accomplishment in contributing to social justice	8	72.7%	165	43.9%	173	44.7%

[§]Multiple response question; Number of rectors =11; Number of educators: 376; Total (SSEP): 387

**Rector refers to rectors and deputy rectors

^Educator refers to full-time and part-time educators.

As can be seen in Table 7, educators perceive adequate training and knowledge in special education and the availability of proper infrastructure and teaching aids/equipment (79.5%) as the most enabling factor of IE while for rectors/deputy rectors, the provision of support staff in an inclusive environment (81.8%) was the most important one. 72.7% of rectors/deputy rectors also perceived support from parents of students with special education needs and those of non-disabled peers as important enablers. The feeling of accomplishment in contributing to social justice through IE was also agreed upon by 72.7% of rectors/deputy rectors. In contrast, the other factor perceived as important by educators related to the provision of support staff in an inclusive environment (78.2%).

With reference to Table 7, overall, the three factors identified by respondents as enabling inclusion in the Mauritian context are, adequate training and knowledge in special education (79.1%), availability of proper infrastructure, teaching aids and specialised equipment to teach children with special needs in school/classroom (78.8%) and the provision of teaching assistants (trained in special needs education) to help educators plan lessons adapted for children with special needs (78.3%).

The importance of support as a factor to achieve IE was also perceived as being critical, namely from parents of children with special needs at school (69.8%), from school administration (69.0%) and from Government via the elaboration of clear IE implementation guidelines in schools (68.0%). The support from parents of non-disabled peers at school (55.0%) was also stressed.

The provision of a special allowance in line with additional workload and responsibility (50.4%) was perceived as a motivating incentive for those working with students with special education needs. To a lesser degree, the feeling of accomplishment in

contributing to social justice by having children with special needs in school/classroom was perceived as an enabling factor by 44.7% of respondents.

Analysis of open-ended responses (n=25) indicated four categories as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Categories and examples of comments expressed by respondents on enablers to IE.

Category	Example of comments
Sensitisation to create awareness	<p><i>“Sensitisation of issues concerning special needs education as far as the public is concerned especially children who will be studying with peers requiring special attention”</i></p> <p><i>“Sensitisation among other students and parents”</i></p> <p><i>“Sensitising non-disabled learners to treat special needs learners as equal”</i></p>
Adapted curriculum	<p><i>“Decrease the syllabus content or increase the number of years to complete the syllabus”</i></p> <p><i>“More emphasis on formative assessment in the curriculum. Use of portfolio”</i></p>
Support from specialists	<p><i>“having teaching assistants not only to plan lessons, but to help with teaching, to respect student’s pace of learning and to tackle any behavioural problem”</i></p> <p><i>“need adequate support in our system”</i></p> <p><i>“should work with teachers trained in special needs education”</i></p>
Teacher attitudes	<p><i>“A change in teachers’ attitude – need values of compassion, tolerance, understanding, justice and equality”</i></p> <p><i>“Mindset of teacher should change to be more accepting of these children as sometimes such children are tagged as being ‘difficult’”</i></p> <p><i>“Students with disabilities should be welcomed by teachers”</i></p>

Discussion

The study found that among the topmost behavioural challenge experienced by respondents was the lack of academic engagement of students, i.e., following and participating in class. This result is in line with Yildiz’s (2015) finding in a Turkish study showing that sustained academic engagement constituted the main difficulty for students with mild intellectual disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Respondents also perceived the constant disruption of ongoing activities as another major difficulty experienced when dealing with students with

special education needs in class. While such difficulties have also been identified in previous studies, hierarchical differences have been reported in terms of the type of disability (Forlin et al., 2008; Idol 2006; Yildiz, 2015).

With respect to the barriers which could hinder the implementation of inclusive practices, respondents acknowledged the lack of training in special education and the lack of proper infrastructure as the most important. Other substantial barriers included the lack of proper guidelines for implementing IE, the lack of teaching aids to support the teaching of children with special needs, inappropriate curriculum and lack of time to cater for individual needs of children with special education needs. The study's findings corroborate with the range of barriers identified in different samples and different contexts (e.g. Zwane and Malale, 2018; Kawser, Ahmed & Ahmed, 2016; Geleta, 2019).

In Mauritius, IE is still at its nascent stage. Many uncertainties still prevail given the lack of training and familiarity of educational professionals on the concept. It is legitimate that practitioners question their competency in this regard given their lack of training in special education and inclusion. This may explain why respondents considered this barrier as the most important one in IE implementation. Lack of proper infrastructure as the second topmost barrier to IE is explained by the fact that most secondary schools are not compatible with various forms of special needs in terms of infrastructure. Many schools are not even equipped with mobility ramps to accommodate children with physical disabilities. The lack of supportive infrastructure is thus considered a major barrier to the placement of children with special education needs in regular secondary schools. It is believed that addressing the barriers indicated by respondents will lead to a better acceptance of IE and secure better chances for its successful implementation.

Barriers in the form of lack of guidelines to support IE implementation, curriculum not adapted to needs of students with special education needs, and lack of time to devote to them may be related to the deep-rooted tradition of an elite and competitive education system with a strong emphasis on academic performance in Mauritius. The highly competitive evaluation system in Mauritius (Bunwaree et al., 2005) clearly depict the absence of a diversified evaluation system that fits all learners with special education needs in the current education system. Therefore, pressure to fit in this meritocratic system and ensure the completion of the syllabus constitute the realms of competitive Mauritian classrooms.

Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that students with special education needs are labelled as “difficult” and “uneducable”. Altogether, this may explain why educational practitioners perceive IE to be concerning in terms of adapting the curriculum and cater for the different learning styles of children with special education needs and typically developing peers within the same time frame.

With timetables already bulky and the absence of training in IE, teachers are confronted with difficult situations which render the accommodation and presence of children with special education needs in regular classrooms challenging. Moreover, some respondents pointed out that they teach in classes of 30 to 40 students and therefore in already overcrowded classes. To realistically attend to children with special education needs in these conditions is all the more challenging and overwhelming especially without the required training and support to deal with them. The perceptions gathered in this study signal an urgent need to address barriers at the classroom, school environment and staff levels.

The factors recognised as being important for successful IE implementation by respondents are training and knowledge in special education, the availability of a proper infrastructure, teaching aids and specialised equipment to teach children with special needs in school/classroom as well as the provision of teaching assistants (trained in special needs education) to help educators plan lessons adapted for children with special needs. Support from the key stakeholders in the IE process namely parents of children with special needs, school administration and Government have also been reported as essential for success.

Past research display similar factors. For instance, Ahmed, Sharma and Deppeler (2012) found that the most significant factor affecting IE is the perceived school support while Adeniyi et al. (2015) identified the availability of materials, human resources, mind-set, experience and qualification of teachers as enablers of successful IE in Nigeria. The research’s findings are also consistent with that of Sharma (2001) in New Delhi who found that success of IE is rested on the length of teaching experience, contact with students with special needs, availability of resources in form of instructional materials, professional and para-professional staff and funding. Gaad and Khan (2007) also noted that sufficient teaching and learning materials and accessibility would promote enrolment of children with special education needs and contribute to viable inclusion. The enablers to IE implementation as perceived by respondents of this study seem to stem from their reservations with respect to IE. If properly set in place, these factors could help minimise barriers to IE.

Limitations

The researcher relied on the self-reported responses of participants. Despite the fact that anonymity was assured, responses could have however been affected by social desirability concerns. The questionnaire included an informational text which comprised a description of children with special education needs namely learning difficulties, physical disability and emotional or behavioural problems. This was meant to induce respondents to a specific and common orientation on the meaning of special needs and eliminate any subjectivity, given the novelty of this concept. However, it did not cover all types of special needs. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalising the results of this investigation to all types of special needs as respondents could have reacted to the questions based on the described cases only.

Conclusion and recommendation

The study provided baseline information on the academic profile and behavioural challenges educational practitioners face in inclusive classrooms. It also helped uncover the various factors that could jeopardise and enhance successful inclusion in the Mauritian context. Identifying those variables is crucial to help educational authorities understand and address these factors to give an inclusive turn to the Mauritian educational system.

It was found that educational practitioners were slightly pessimistic about IE becoming a practical reality in Mauritius. Educational practitioners identified the difficulties they encountered when dealing with students with special education needs in the form of behavioural challenges students with special education needs exhibited. These are significant barriers to inclusion given that if such behaviours are not effectively managed, they can act as hurdles to successful inclusion. The lack of training in special education and inclusion was viewed as the most important barrier to IE and proper training in IE was perceived as a prominent enabling factor for IE. It is thus suggested that providing training (pre-service and in-service level) to educators and rectors would help address the concern over inadequate professional preparation with respect to IE and increase capacity building. This would also foster accepting and positive attitudes towards IE. Creating more awareness on local IE policies is also crucial in fostering knowledge about IE and reduce concerns over its implementation. Appropriate measures like the provision of supportive infrastructure, support staff, a reduction in class size and a flexible curriculum would also help in coping with inclusivity.

To get more insights on the barriers and enablers of IE, this study can be complemented with face-to-face interviews of educational practitioners. Studies based on class observations would help explore the various barriers in a more realistic and accurate manner. The wide range of different barriers reported in the Mauritian sample calls for more structured investigation to assess and better understand their relationship with other variables like demographics, level of training, teaching experience and class size.

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