

Same curriculum.

Education advocates say inclusive education should not mean separating learners with disabilities through special examinations or different education systems, but instead, argue that teaching methods should be adjusted to ensure that all learners understand the same curriculum.

BY SYLVIA KATUSHABE

When the inclusive education approach was introduced in Uganda, it brought hope for the future of children with special needs, that they would learn alongside their peers in ordinary schools.

This policy aims at breaking barriers and ensuring that disability does not determine whether a child can have access to education.

However, years later, education experts and stakeholders say the reality in many schools tells a different story as many learners with disabilities continue to struggle in schools that have no capacity to support their needs.

According to stakeholders in the education sector, the challenge largely lies in the limited teacher training, inadequate learning materials and tools, as well as weak implementation of inclusive practices.

Ms Barbra Mudondo, the deputy Head teacher at Iganga High School, noted that although the school tries to cater to the learners with special needs, especially the visually impaired, learning materials/tools remain insufficient.

Mudondo explained that learners to share braille and some recording machines to catch up with their peers.

"We have some learning tools, but they are not enough; learners keep sharing. We have one machine that can transcribe braille to normal script so that other teachers can be able to mark," Ms Mudondo said.

She explained that in some school subjects, such as Mathematics and Physics, visually-impaired learners are separated while they are being taught by teachers who specialise in special needs education.

Mr Filbert Baguma, the Secretary General for Uganda National Teachers' Union, said that while the government adopted the inclusive education policy, many schools and teachers still lack the capacity and resources to effectively support learners with disabilities.

He explained that although inclusive education was intended to ensure that all children, regardless of their physical or intellectual disabilities, learn together with their peers in ordinary schools, the reality in many schools is far from this goal.

Mr Baguma highlighted the need to strengthen teachers' capacity to handle learners with special needs, noting that it is critical for inclusive education to succeed.

"There is a need to empower or build the capacity of teachers to identify these learners and support them so that they are given due attention during the learning process," Mr Baguma said.

He added that the absence of learn-



Joel Kawanguzi (right) and Susan Aciro (middle), both Persons with Disabilities share their experiences during a study and job fair event in Kampala City last week. PHOTO/DAPHINE NAKABIRI

It's time we make inclusive education a realistic dream

TEACHERS' UNION VIEW

Mr Filbert Baguma, the Secretary General for Uganda National Teachers' Union, said the implementation of inclusive education remains a challenge and called for strong collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Sports on the one hand and teacher training institutions. He explained that teacher training institutions should include Special Needs Education so that every teacher acquires basic knowledge and can identify learners who need special attention.

"You might find a tall child who wants to sit in the front, and you find a teacher saying, no. The arrangement must be tall ones sit at the back and short ones in front," he said. "You might also find a child who does not see properly from a distance. So if the teacher does not have the best information on disabilities, this child will be forced to sit at the back and will not see anything," Mr Baguma added.

He said teachers should get basic information so that before they go to general schools, the learners are treated and paid attention.

Beyond teaching, Mr Baguma urged the government to invest in learning materials such as braille equipment, hearing devices, and sign language interpreters to assist the learners with disabilities to catch up with lessons just like their peers.

ing materials like braille textbooks, hearing aids and other specialised teaching equipment cripples the education of learners with disabilities as they struggle to follow lessons alongside their peers.

The situation is not different at Kansanga Seed School, as the school headteacher, Mr Walusimbi Kato, said the school lacks assistive learning tools for learners with special needs.

However, he insisted that this school gives special attention to such learners, noting that those with sight problems and those who can't hear properly, the teachers ensure they take front seats.

Ms Esther Kyozira, the Executive Director of the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda, says inclusive education should allow children with disabilities to study in schools within their communities, rather than being forced into a few specialised institutions.

She notes that the number of special schools in the country is limited, and many families cannot afford boarding fees in such institutions.

"These children are expected to go to the nearest schools within their communities. The government cannot afford to build special schools everywhere, so the most practical solution is to make ordinary schools inclusive," she said.

However, Kyozira said many teachers are not adequately prepared during their training to deal with such learners, leaving them unsure how to adjust lessons to accommodate different abilities.

"For many learners with disabilities, this lack of preparation [by teachers] means they attend school but struggle to follow lessons effectively," she said.

"In disability advocacy, we say there is no one-size-fits-all approach. But creating separate exams for learners with disabilities can also lead to exclusion," she explained.

She argued that life outside school



Clarion call.

"If you are trained as a teacher, you should also be equipped with skills to handle learners with special needs. Otherwise teachers find themselves overwhelmed when such learners come to their classrooms," Ms Esther Kyozira, the Executive Director of the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda

Theoretical.

"When it comes to sciences, they [visually impaired learners] do study a subject called the general science, general science in physics, chemistry, and biology, which does not call for practical. It is taught to them in a theoretical form," Mr George Tumusiime, the head teacher of Hornby High School in Kabale District

does not separate people based on disability.

"The realities we face in society are the same. Hunger does not feel different because someone is blind or deaf. Medical bills are the same for everyone," she said.

For this reason, she believes the education system should focus on adapting teaching approaches rather than lowering expectations.

Some learners may need braille materials, others may need sign language interpretation, while those with intellectual disabilities may require practical life-skills training rather than conventional academic instruction.

Ms Sarah Bugosi, the Commissioner Special Needs Education at the Ministry of Education and Sports, noted that

Uganda is making progress in the implementation of inclusive education, although challenges persist.

"Much as there is progress, I can't say we are at 50 percent, it is still at a very minimal level. It means we still need to do a lot in terms of allocation of funds," Ms Bugosi said.

She explained that the government is aware of the challenges affecting inclusive education, including limited skilled teachers, inadequate learning tools/materials, among others.

However, she emphasized that the government is doing its best to carry out teacher capacity training, provide learning tools, subvention grants to some learners, and special instructional materials to support the learners, among others.

"As government, we have always tried to address all those concerns. But what we are giving still does not match the need. It's very small compared to what is required in the schools," she said.

However, Ms Bugosi emphasised that the government is committed to improving inclusive education by recruiting more teachers, especially in the next financial year.

"When you analyse the results, for all levels, learners with special needs have been improving year by year because there have been quite several interventions that include supporting teachers with capacity building in the areas of braille and sign language," Ms Bugosi said.

Ms Bugosi insists that all government schools should be able to admit all categories of learners regardless of abilities.

Mr Muhammad Bbosa, a teacher at Wasiko Secondary School for the Deaf, said teaching learners with hearing impairment requires instructors, who understand sign language grammar, which differs from spoken and written English.

He explains that while teachers often write notes on the board for learners to copy, effective understanding depends on sign language interpretation.

"When we are teaching the syllabus, we write on the board and use English as the language of instruction. Books are also written in English. However, the difference comes in interpretation through signing, even though what learners copy from the board remains in English," Mr Bbosa said.

Citing their approach at the school, Mr Bbosa noted that they employ teachers, who are well-versed in sign language.

However, he noted that in schools without sign language interpreters, learners with hearing impairment may struggle to keep up with their peers in the same classroom, as they rely on sign language for effective understanding.

"There must be a teacher who understands sign language to explain concepts in a way these learners can grasp and follow what is being taught," Mr Bbosa said.

Mr George Tumusiime, the head teacher of Hornby High School in Kabale District, said the school accommodates learners with visual impairment, emphasising that inclusive education can only be achieved when schools are equipped with the learning tools.

Mr Tumusiime explained that the visually-impaired learners study alongside their peers in some subjects. However, in science subjects, they follow a different curriculum; instead of taking subjects such as Chemistry, Physics, and Biology separately, they are taught a combined general science.

He added that during the national examinations, visually-impaired candidates sit for the General Science papers that differ from those taken by other students. "These learners are given an additional 45 minutes and support during examinations," Mr Tumusiime said.