

A Bumpy Transition: From Institutionalization to the Emergence of Inclusive Education in Cameroon

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Abstract

The education quality offered by special education centers, also known as rehabilitation centers, in Cameroon has consistently been below standard. In the twenty-first century, no child should be denied access to an education of quality and of their choice due to a disability. However, evidence from this study indicates that many children with disabilities in Cameroon remain largely restricted to vocational training, often offered by “rehabilitation centers” or “centers for handicapped persons.” These centers, mainly financed by the Ministry of Social Welfare, are based on an antiquated perception of education for disabled children, treating it more as a matter of welfare than as a societal responsibility or investment. The shift from post-colonial institutionalization practices to inclusive education following the signing of the Salamanca Accord in 1994 has been slow and uneven. This study reveals that the implementation of inclusive education is hampered by insufficient teacher support, lack of training, and inadequate resources for both educators and students involved in special education programs. Recommendations aimed at enhancing the capacity of school leaders and instructors to implement inclusive practices are proposed.

Keywords: Beliefs, Institutionalization, Inclusive education, Training, Attitudes, Students with disabilities, Special needs

1. Introduction

Since Cameroon's independence in the 1960s, both the Francophone and Anglophone education systems have traditionally encouraged the institutionalization of people with disabilities. The evolution of special education in Cameroon can be broken down into four key phases: pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary. Similar to global trends, the acceptance and treatment of individuals with disabilities in Cameroon have progressed over time, though at an exceptionally slow pace (Ambei, 2016; McNally et al., 2001; Obeng, 2007; Tani & Nformi, 2016).

Attitudes toward disability vary across the diverse cultural landscape of Cameroon, which consists of approximately 230 distinct tribes. However, the overarching trend in education for persons with disabilities follows a national pattern. In pre-colonial times, individuals with disabilities received no formal education and were often hidden from public view (Oliver, 1990; Shey, 2003; Tohnain & Tamajong, 2014; Yuh & Shey, 2008). During the colonial period, European missionaries provided education to a limited number of children with mild disabilities, often alongside able-bodied students in church-run schools. Post-colonial policies continued to institutionalize children with disabilities, offering primarily vocational training in rehabilitation centers (Tchnain, Fonkeng, & Ngueffo, 2008).

In the 1980s, the government made efforts to promote inclusive education. However, a lack of necessary resources hindered effective implementation. Teachers often report frustration due to inadequate training and a lack of technical and material support (Arrah & Swain, 2014; Ebontane, 2010; Mngo, 2017; Shey, 2003; Tukov, 2008). General education institutions and professionals frequently lack the training to support students with special educational needs. Rehabilitation professionals and special education experts are scarce, exacerbating challenges in delivering inclusive education (Disability and Rehabilitation Team, 2002). These barriers have delayed the implementation of inclusive education policies in schools.

Recent initiatives show promising progress. The Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBC Health Services) has been actively involved in enhancing inclusive education. Their programs have included capacity-building workshops for teachers, the recruitment of special needs teachers, and the provision of scholarships and assistive devices (CBC Health Services, 2023). Additionally, the "We Ring the Bell" campaign, launched in 2023, has focused on moving from policy to practice, highlighting successes and ongoing challenges in inclusive education (Timely Performance Care Center, 2023).

Despite these efforts, challenges such as limited resources, attitudinal barriers, and insufficient teacher training remain significant obstacles to fully realizing inclusive education in Cameroon (Timely Performance Care Center, 2023). Continued investment, community engagement, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are necessary to ensure sustainable progress (CBC Health Services, 2023).

By understanding the historical context and current initiatives, this study aims to shed light on the ongoing efforts and challenges in the transition towards inclusive education in Cameroon, with a particular focus on recent developments in the North West Region.

1.1 Background and Problem

The number of students worldwide who have special learning needs continues to grow, and the categories of students with special education needs (SEN) have also increased considerably over the years. Almost every classroom around the world now includes some students dealing with a disability, whether physical, educational, psychological, or a combination of the three. Consequently, there is an increasing need for teachers to have basic knowledge of special education, as they will likely address special needs issues at some point in their classrooms.

In the early stages of special education in the United States, institutionalization of students with disabilities was preferred to any form of inclusion (Smith, 2007). This changed significantly for the better after the enactment of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 and the enforcement of laws protecting the civil rights of persons with disabilities. Since then, much has been done to integrate children with disabilities into general education classrooms and curricula.

Despite the increase in the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) worldwide, the implementation of inclusive education in Cameroon remains slow. Many general education classrooms still lack the resources and expertise to accommodate students with disabilities. Mncube, Lebopa, and Adesegun (2020) highlighted similar challenges in rural South African schools, where inadequate teacher training, poor infrastructure, and insufficient resources are major obstacles to inclusive education. These issues parallel those in Cameroon, where special education policies often remain unimplemented due to systemic constraints.

In low-income countries, including Cameroon, children with disabilities are disproportionately marginalized in educational systems. The 2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report indicates that children with disabilities, particularly those with sensory, physical, or intellectual impairments, are 2.5 times more likely to have never attended school compared to their peers without disabilities (UNESCO, 2020).

The first official commitment by the Cameroonian government to promote inclusion in schools was marked by the signing of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement. The statement acknowledged that many countries, including Cameroon, had “well-established systems of special schools” for individuals with specific impairments, which could also serve as “a valuable resource for the development of inclusive schools” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 12). However, these so-called “well-established systems” are hindered by operational issues, including poor leadership and inadequate human and material resources, and thus have not been able to provide a strong foundation for the development of inclusive schools in Cameroon. The policy of inclusion can only be effective if general education schools are equipped with essential facilities, such as self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, trained teachers, and paraprofessionals to support students with learning challenges. Beyond resources, studies have shown that the success of inclusion depends on the knowledge, instructional skills, and particularly the attitudes and beliefs of general education teachers toward integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms (Cook, 2001; Friend

& Bursick, 2006; Tanyi, 2016; Thaver & Lim, 2014). Deficits in these areas remain significant in the context of Cameroon.

The Cameroonian government signed a law in 1983 covering the protection of people with disabilities and promulgated this law in 1990 (Biya, 1984, 1990). The government also committed to promoting inclusion in schools by signing the UNESCO Salamanca Statement in 1994 and reinforcing it with another law in 2010 emphasizing the welfare and education of people with special education needs. However, the effective implementation of special education laws, particularly related to inclusive education, has been lacking. This is largely due to the non-readiness of schools, caused by the lack of appropriate facilities and a shortage of trained teachers and paraprofessionals. Considering that inclusion is still in its initial stages in a few secondary schools in Cameroon, it is imperative to diagnose institutional and teacher readiness for it. Mngo (2017) concluded that most teachers in a pilot inclusive education program in the North West Region did not have the skills or resources needed to manage inclusive classrooms.

Recent initiatives, such as the CBC Health Services' programs, have shown progress. These programs include capacity-building workshops for teachers, the recruitment of special needs teachers, and the provision of scholarships and assistive devices (CBC Health Services, 2023). The “We Ring the Bell” campaign, launched in 2023, also emphasizes moving from policy to practice, highlighting successes and ongoing challenges in inclusive education (Timely Performance Care Center, 2023).

Despite various efforts, including capacity-building workshops and initiatives such as the “We Ring the Bell” campaign launched in 2023, challenges such as limited resources, attitudinal barriers, and insufficient teacher training remain significant obstacles to fully realizing inclusive education in Cameroon (Timely Performance Care Center, 2023). Recent initiatives by organizations like the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBC Health Services) have shown promise by actively enhancing inclusive education, but sustainable progress requires continued investment, community engagement, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (CBC Health Services, 2023). The 2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report underscores the need for policy reforms and increased efforts to create inclusive educational environments. It stresses the importance of adequate teacher training and ensuring that educational materials and environments are inclusive. Many teachers in various countries report a need for professional development in teaching students with special needs, a critical gap that must be addressed in Cameroon as well (UNESCO, 2020).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

No comprehensive review of literature on the history of special education and inclusive education, as well as the perceptions and treatment of persons with disabilities, has ever been conducted for Cameroon. This gap in the literature is perhaps understandable given the limited available research on the subject. To understand the current state of special education and inclusive education in Cameroon, it is crucial to review literature that explores the country's cultures, norms, and how these have historically influenced special education.

Additionally, examining the role of the government, religious organizations, and other educational stakeholders in the development and practice of special education and inclusive education is essential.

This review study to trace the evolution of special education practices in Cameroon from the pre-colonial era to the present-day sporadic and inadequately funded efforts at implementing inclusive education policies nationwide. Understanding the sequence of events related to attitudes and practices provides a solid foundation for improving special education and inclusive education services, which are currently below twenty-first-century standards.

The purpose of this article is to present an interpretative summary of the literature on the historical evolution of the education of people with disabilities in Cameroon. Specifically, this review aims to: (a) Examine the historical background on the treatment of persons with disabilities and its impact on special education practices in Cameroon. (b) Summarize findings in three outcome domains: stigmatization related to disabilities, institutionalization, and rehabilitation centers. (c) Discuss the current state of instruction for students with special needs and provide future directions for research and practice. By addressing these objectives, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges surrounding special education and inclusive education in Cameroon and several other developing countries.

2. Methodology

The literature review process was challenging due to the limited number of peer-reviewed studies available on special and inclusive education in Cameroon. As a result, we expanded our sources to include governmental policies, ordinances, and publications. Given the scarcity of peer-reviewed materials, we applied broader inclusion criteria. Other resources consulted included conference proceedings, theses, books, pamphlets, reports from the United Nations and UNESCO, as well as local documents that addressed aspects of special and inclusive education either directly or indirectly.

The following sources were reviewed: (a) eight peer-reviewed articles, (b) eleven UNESCO reports, (c) six United Nations reports, (d) one doctoral dissertation and one master's thesis, (e) two governmental decrees, (f) five reports from the SEEPD (the pioneer pilot inclusive education program in the North West Region of Cameroon), (h) two books, and (i) several unpublished reports, documents, and articles.

A significant number of the decrees, documents, and unpublished papers were obtained from online sources. Some information could not be obtained from online searches and libraries, so we visited offices or sent representatives to collect relevant materials from government offices, rehabilitation centers (institutions for the institutionalization of persons with disabilities), pilot inclusive education head offices, and individuals. Useful material was obtained from the Etoug-Ebe Center for Persons with Disabilities and the head office of the SEEPD (Socio-Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities) pilot inclusive education program.

This diverse range of sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of the historical and

current state of special education and inclusive education in Cameroon.

3. Results

3.1 Historical Overview

The development of special education in Cameroon can be traced through four key periods: pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and the modern era.

3.1.1 Pre-Colonial Era

Historically, the perception of disability in Cameroon was heavily influenced by the cultural diversity across approximately 230 ethnic groups. Disability was often viewed as a curse or an ill omen affecting the family (United Nations [UN], 2008). People with disabilities were typically seen as “invalids” or social outcasts, requiring special care (Tukov, 2008). Such views fostered a sense of pity towards them and their families. In cases of severe disabilities, families and communities frequently considered individuals as burdens or sources of shame (Oliver, 1990; Shey, 2003; Tohnain & Tamajong, 2014; Yuh & Shey, 2008). Some tribes even concealed children with noticeable disabilities to avoid societal mockery. Consequently, these children primarily received home-based education (Tabot & Ojong, 2008).

3.1.2 Colonial Era

The arrival of Western missionaries in the 19th century, along with the spread of Christianity, gradually changed how people with disabilities were treated. Christian schools and churches began offering more compassionate treatment and education for individuals with disabilities (Shey, 2003; Tukov, 2008). The missionaries' emphasis on fairness, love, and social justice influenced local attitudes, leading to increased care and education opportunities, particularly for those with mild impairments (Tabot & Ojong, 2008). Church-run schools began accepting children with orthopedic and visual impairments, fostering a more inclusive environment.

3.1.3 Post-Colonial Era

After gaining independence in 1960, Cameroon prioritized expanding educational opportunities for all. The government initially addressed the education of disabled children by establishing “Rehabilitation Centers” that offered vocational training (Tchnain, Fonkeng, & Ngueffo, 2008). Schools such as the Ecole Spécialisé pour les Enfants Déficients Auditif-ESEDA and Externat Medico Pédagogique-La Colombe were founded in 1972, followed by PROHANDICAM in 1975. However, these institutions focused more on vocational training than on integrating students into mainstream education.

3.1.4 Contemporary Period

Today, special education is administered jointly by the Ministries of Education and Social Welfare. New advocacy groups have pushed for legislative reforms, though challenges persist. Laws enacted in 1983 and 1990, as well as the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2001, signify a commitment to inclusive education, but implementation has been slow (Hegarty, 1995; Tanyi, 2016).

3.2 Challenges in the Administration of Special Education

In Cameroon, the management of special education falls mainly under private organizations, with the Ministry of Social Welfare providing oversight. However, the ineffective enforcement of legal provisions and the lack of a centralized system to register and categorize children with special needs remain major hurdles (UNESCO, 1995; UNESCO, 2009).

3.2.1 Cultural Impact on Special Education

While strong family support networks within communities help mitigate the lack of special education resources, cultural views that frame disability as a curse are still prevalent, particularly among less educated populations (Tukov, 2008; UN, 1991; UNESCO, 1990). These beliefs often lead to families hiding children with disabilities instead of sending them to school, further impeding the progress of inclusive education (Tohnain & Tamajong, 2014).

3.2.2 Availability of Special Education Resources

The provision of special education facilities and assistive technologies in Cameroon is extremely limited. Government support for providing and distributing assistive devices is minimal, with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) being the primary providers (Disability and Rehabilitation Team, 2002). This lack of government assistance, reflected in the insufficient availability of tools like crutches and wheelchairs, highlights the urgent need for increased investment in special education (Shey, 2003).

3.2.3 Legal Framework for Inclusive Education

The legal framework supporting special education in Cameroon is based on the 1983 law that protects individuals with disabilities, and the 1990 law which enforces its implementation. Further decrees and circulars have aimed to improve access to education for disabled children, although the actual support often depends on the resources available (International Disability Alliance, 2011; Mbibeh, 2013).

3.2.4 Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Cameroon faces a severe shortage of trained special education teachers. The few teachers who are qualified often receive their training abroad. Although the establishment of the Special Educational Needs Training Institute (SENTTI) in 2007 marked progress in addressing this issue, the system still relies heavily on foreign expertise (Tukov, 2008).

3.2.5 Identification of Students with Disabilities

A significant challenge to implementing special education programs effectively is the absence of comprehensive legislation defining the categories of students with disabilities. Additionally, the lack of reliable statistics further hampers these efforts. Though the government and NGOs are working to improve data collection and expand services, current efforts are still insufficient (COCADE, 2010). The Salamanca Statement of 1994 brought legal requirements for schools to admit students with mild to moderate disabilities, but the application of inclusive education policies has been slow, primarily due to factors such as insufficient teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, and cultural resistance (UNESCO, 1994;

APEHM-UNESCO, 2000).

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

The early efforts towards inclusive education encountered several significant challenges, such as issues in administration, insufficient teacher preparation, and cultural resistance. The lack of active supervision by regional authorities, combined with the complex interactions between various ministries, continues to hinder progress (UNESCO, 2013).

Nevertheless, some strides have been made, particularly through initiatives like the SEEPD program, which has played a pivotal role in advancing inclusive education in the North West region. The establishment of resource centers and the provision of teacher training have produced positive outcomes, though these improvements remain localized to specific areas (Muffih, 2010, 2011; Laurin-Bowie, 2009).

The study's findings highlight that for special and inclusive education to be successfully implemented in Cameroon, there needs to be a clear focus on financial investment. This includes prioritizing resources for teacher education, establishing dedicated special education programs, and improving school infrastructure. It is crucial for the government to view funding for both special and inclusive education as a top priority. Upgrading under-resourced special education centers into modern, inclusive learning environments is essential.

The government should also introduce specialized courses on special education in teacher training institutions, offer continuous professional development in inclusive teaching, and support the creation of special education programs at universities. Furthermore, it is important to adjust curricula to address the diverse needs of all learners, and a dedicated team should be formed to evaluate and improve these curricula.

Efforts should focus on removing the systemic barriers that impede the success of inclusive education in Cameroon. Key actions include enhancing teacher training, establishing specialized academic programs, and modifying curricula to cater to students with varied learning requirements. Addressing cultural stigmas surrounding disabilities and securing adequate funding for inclusive education are equally vital. By prioritizing these areas, Cameroon can ensure better educational opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities, helping them thrive in mainstream schools.

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