

**Transforming Education Systems to Respond to All Learners
Experience from Oriang Cheshire
Inclusive Education Project**

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Abstract

This paper highlights the key initiatives undertaken through the support of Leonard Cheshire International (LCI) to rehabilitate persons with disabilities using a community based participatory approach. This is in line with the resolution and education master plan of the Jomtien Conference of 1990 which states in one of the articles:

'.. steps need to be taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an integral part of the education system.'

The 5 year Oriang Inclusive Education Project involving 5 pilot schools cluster and 2,568 school children, 565 of them with disabilities, it makes it the largest single community based inclusive education initiative in a nucleus area.

The paper also amplifies the aim of the project, which is to facilitate inclusive education in the project schools with a vision of influencing the government policy on the education curriculum, attitudinal stances towards disabilities and positive community participation within the wider Kenyan context. The project

envisages doing this through community participation, improving the skills of the teachers, involving of children as stakeholders in their learning by providing learning resources and environmental accessibility.

Inclusive Education has been misconstrued by many to be some kind of special approach that seeks to accommodate children with disabilities in the mainstream education. In as much as this may be valid to some extent, it is not the focus and thrust of inclusive Education (IE).

The core focus of Inclusive Education is best described in the words of Heijnen E. (Bangladesh 2002):

"Inclusive Education looks into how to transform the mainstream education system in order to respond to different learners in a constructive and positive way."

It is based on this premise that the Oriang Cheshire Inclusive Education Project (OCIEP) has targeted the following strategic areas in its implementation:

- An adapted, accessible and inclusive environment
- Teaching skills that attend to the diversity in children
- Provision and encouraging of the development adaptive aids and devices

- Attitude change in children, parents, teachers and the rest of the community
- Enhancing the teaching and learning resources in the project schools.
- Socio-economic uplifting of the communities
- Government policies that are responsive to the needs of PWD

All these target areas have a direct impact on the provision of education for the children with special needs as articulated in the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education where it states in one of the articles:

'...every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs' and that 'those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs.'

The Child

The OCIEP project has made deliberate efforts to improve the child's environment both at school and at home. This is with a view to giving a qualitative life at the home front and a quality education at the school level in acknowledgement of the fact that every child is an individual with unique needs.

This intervention is not only limited to the primary school children but the early childhood as well. Since the government does not financially support Early Childhood education, the project is taking the initiative to assist by way of sensitization and involving the teachers at this level in its training programmes.

Classroom environment have been spread up from the poorly lit rooms without any learning aids to bright well-lit rooms with charts, drawings, pictures and music instruments. Learning Centres within the classrooms where children can explore their talents and access learning materials and manipulatives have been set up.

Children are encouraged to actively participate in their own learning as opposed to being passive recipients of knowledge. Co-operative social skills are developed through group work, peer tutoring and child-to-child approaches. Child-to-child support programmes in the classrooms have shown an excellent cooperation and positive interdependence among the children. This positive interdependence has also been reflected during the physical education lessons where the children now play together, share and enjoy. It is also noteworthy that the children with cerebral palsy have shown a marked improvement in their physical coordination.

These strategies have shown a marked improvement in the children attitudes, growth of positive self-esteem and nurturing of leadership skills. The goal here is to cultivate lifelong positive social skills that will nurture a truly inclusive society with all encompassing acceptance.

There are programmes in place to cater for the children with severe disabilities through homebased care. And for those children that require medical care as in the case of epilepsy for example children, parents and community health workers are trained to handle these children. Medicine is also provided at the health unit under a trained nurse to alleviate the medical condition. In addition, the issues about stigma and negative attitudes are also tackled in this particular intervention.

On the other hand, the children through child-to-child activities and co-curricular activities create awareness on disability through poems, songs and drama during Inclusive Education Days and in forums like churches.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

OCIEP has worked at changing the perspective of communities from rejection to that of acceptance. Accepting the children with disabilities and accepting their responsibilities to cater for these children.

The two big challenges in changing course for the community were the cultural aspect and feeling of hopelessness. The wider community held the view that having children with disabilities was a curse and unacceptable. Parents of children with disabilities had the negative concept that having children with

disabilities made them an object of pity and social welfare. This had the parents resign themselves to their fate and did not make any effort to improve their lot and the state of their children.

Through community meetings (barazas), funeral gatherings, church services and Youth theater, OCIEP project educated the members of the community about disabilities and then helped to change the negative attitudes that were held previously. The awareness of the community about issues of health, customs and environmental adaptation was raised. Initially the community never minded the welfare of the disabled people. They cared less about the roads, entrances to buildings and even toilet facilities. With awareness creation, the community is now much keener to find practical ways to adapt the environment for the benefit of the disabled children at schools and the rest of the community members. Efforts are also being made to ensure that other social amenities like churches and homes are made disability friendly as well.

The other aspect that was tackled during these forums was the attitude towards schools. This is where the parents abdicated their parenting roles to schools instead of working in partnership with schools. The wider community members on the other hand believed the role of developing schools belonged to

parents whose children enrolled in the schools and the teachers. This is changing.

The project seems to have scored on these areas because of the following developments, which clearly reflect an attitudinal shift:

- Parents with CWD have positively accepted their children and are willing to expose these children and identify with them.
- Parents who do not have CWD are now willing to let their children mix with CWD.
- In spite of the poor infrastructure, the parents and siblings are carrying their severely disabled children to school on their backs.
- Community members are now volunteering their time and meagre material resources to improve school facilities and make the school environment more adaptive.
- In one of the project schools the parents have put up a whole new block of 8 classrooms to ensure that their children had a welcoming learning atmosphere.
- Parents have worked on the school landscape, put up user friendly ramps at entrances, widened the windows of the classes, put shatters in doors and windows and re-done all the walls with brighter effective material.

- Vibrant School Disability Communities (SDC's) and management committees actively participated in the affairs of the schools enabling them to support project activities. This was observed during the Inclusive Education Day where all the stakeholders congregated to celebrate.

The role of developing and improving schools goes way beyond the narrow confines of the school parents. The improvement of schools has been taken to encompass the community in its totality. All are partners in this endeavour.

Teachers' skills

Teachers in the project schools have continued to undergo vigorous training and empowerment in inclusive education skills. This was deemed very necessary as teacher attitudes and pedagogical stances had a direct bearing on school attendance and enrolment.

Before the project, one disabled child was quoted:

" I work slowly because I cannot see properly, so it takes me longer than others to complete my work. After the lesson, the teacher leaves the class. The other children take away my magnifying glass and poke jokes at me. Am therefore unable to finish my work and the teacher does not take this too kindly. I wish could be taken to another friendlier school."

All this has since changed, for it is not only teachers who have shifted their attitudinal stance but the pupils too. The training of social skills in the school coupled with the teachers being able to organize a more receptive learning environment has made all the difference in the teaching/learning environment. Play activities are encouraged in the project schools and the children now play together. Previously during games time which is usually in the afternoons, the disabled children were asked to go home as:

' they could not play since they could get hurt and more over would make no meaningful contribution to the team'

School enrolment that has grown steadily over the three years is a clear indicator of things getting better. The same period has seen the rising in enrolment of CWD by over 100%.

Through the training programmes that are geared towards improving teacher skills, the teachers are now sensitive to the needs of special children like preferential sitting and multi-sensory teaching strategies.

Table:1
Improved school attendance

Year	2003	2004	2005
SCHOOL	Total	Total	Total
Othoro	609	655	659
Kadie	286	312	347
Oriang	730	767	817
Otondo	472	555	556
Wang'apala	365	348	358

Through training, the teachers are being encouraged to adopt a much more eclectic reflective approach in their teaching. This ensures that the teachers are not only sensitive to the children in their classrooms but are also able to share with colleagues and counsel parents.

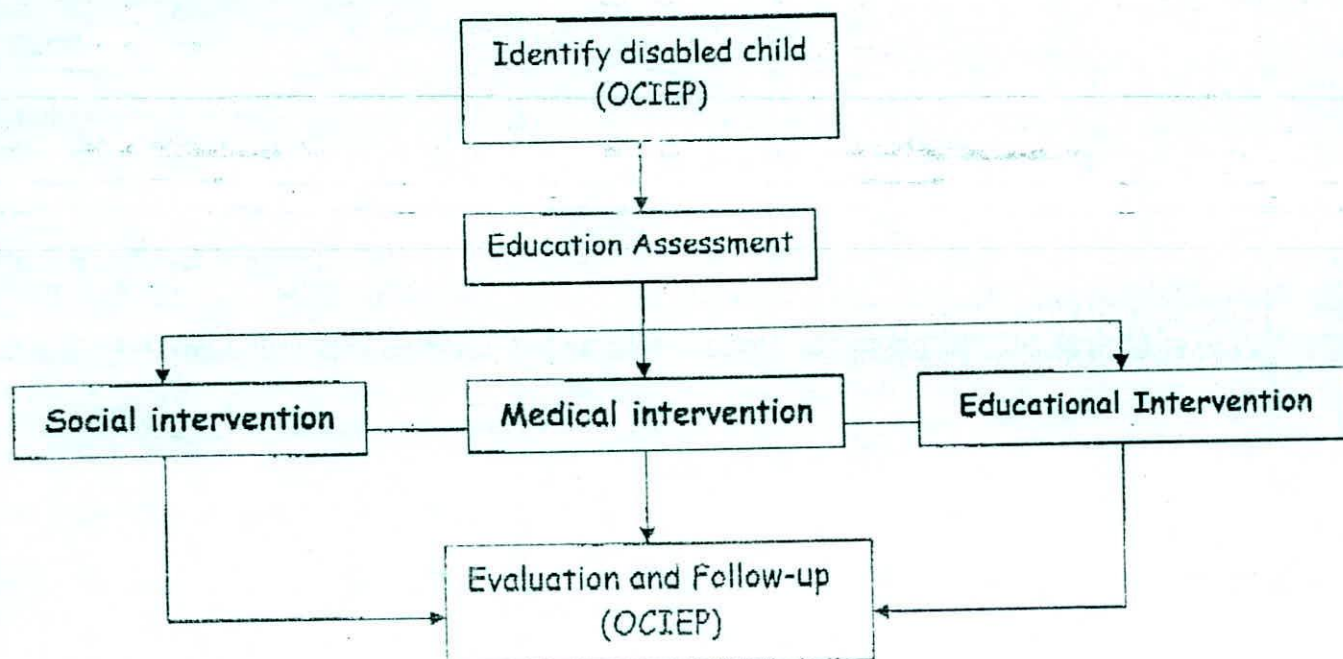
The teachers also have access to the Resource Centre where they can utilize various devices and technological facilities like the video. These are essential in supplementing the teacher input, training and raising awareness among the parents.

Environmental adaptations of facilities like the playground; windows, door entrance, walls and toilets have complimented the teachers' work positively.

The teacher training has also ensured that the intervention strategies are valid, relevant and correctly applied. Instead of the previous haphazard intervention, the identified children are taken through an assessment process and appropriate intervention strategies drawn.

An inter-disciplinary team participates in Educational Assessment and Resource services. The core team includes physiotherapists, ophthalmologist, specialist teachers and social workers.

Diagram 2: Education Assessment



There are also strategies in place to use local resources but others to provide adaptive aids like wheel chairs, glasses, crutches and manipulatives.

Government Policy

It is encouraging to see the government making great strides in fulfilling and meeting the goals of the Jomtien Conference, Education For All (EFA,1990) through the free primary education initiative and ensuring that CWD are accepted in schools. There are also deliberate strides in the same vein to formulate an inclusive education policy.

The OCIEP project is working closely with Ministry of Education - Kenya organs at the grassroots and national level to trigger a transformation process

At the grassroots level the project works closely with education officers and government administrators by way of collaboration and sharing of information. Whereas at the national level this is happening at the inspectorate level, special needs unit and the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE).

The government has started to show goodwill towards special needs in the country. In its recurrent expenditure, it voted a special needs fund for each school for purposes of environmental adaptation. These funds are however far

from adequate. The Government of Kenya (GOK) has gone further specifically for the inclusive Education Projects- Oriang Cheshire Inclusive Education Project Schools. Project schools received 151,000 Kenya Shillings for adaptive aids and environmental management. Even so, there is still some ground that has to be covered through private, community and government initiative: Deaf children for example cannot be fully amalgamated in the inclusive setting if sign language is limited to schools. In one case study:

A deaf boy attending a boarding special school for the deaf came home for holidays. To the parent's dismay, the boy refused to eat a few days before schools re-opened. Baffled, the parent was forced to take the child back to school 100 km away. It is at the school that the parent was told that all that the child needed was a pair of shoes.

This case study clearly illustrates the need to have a wider community literacy in the tools of communication in special circumstances if we are to fully realise an inclusive society. The project schools have put in place sign language communication amongst teachers, children and parents. This is envisaged to enable the severely hard of hearing to communicate effectively within and outside the school.

The experiences of the OCIEP project are definitely going to have positive ramifications not only in Kenya but the rest of the world, being on record as the largest community based inclusive education project to date.

Challenges

Even though schools and communities are making efforts, there is still need to have the government involved in improving the road infrastructure as this has a bearing on school attendance and retention.

So much focus has been laid on improving the school environments. This is good but it is compromised when the other social amenities and homes are not improved as well. The input of government organs is important if this is to be realized.

The local administrators have to mobilize the community and supplement this with government resources to improve social and health amenities like churches, markets, water supplies and so on.

Poverty is a sore thumb in the success of inclusive education beyond the school confines. To this end, the project is making deliberate efforts to find means and ways to empower these communities through Income Generation Activities (IGA's). These efforts are coupled with interventions to shift the attitude that people with disabilities are supposed to be dependant on handouts.

The OCIEP project team also realizes that it is raising the socio-economic levels of the community that will ensure the sustainability of the project beyond the direct intervention phase.

Conclusion

Most of all, we are glad that Inclusive Education has raised the awareness for parents and communities about school environments to new heights. Parents now want to have better schools and consequently, Inclusive Education is ensuring better schools, which are a benefit to all children. Fittingly ensuring not only education for all but a better education as well.