

Leentjie van Jaarsveld

Special Education in BRICS: A Comparative Overview

Abstract

Many discussions have taken place around the issue of the special needs of learners, special schools and inclusivity. UNESCO argues that inclusive education will accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This would include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged areas or groups. In inclusive education, the diverse needs of students would be recognised and responded to, accommodating different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all. However, globally, the views of countries on inclusivity differ, and setting up schools for learners with special needs is often preferred. The overall aim of this study is to give an overview of the perspectives of the BRICS countries regarding learners with special needs, special schools and inclusivity. A document analysis was done of both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. The views of the BRICS countries on learners with special needs, special schools and inclusivity differ.

Keywords: BRICS, inclusive education, special education

Introduction

The main purpose of any education system is to support future citizens in obtaining a bright future and to provide the necessary skills to be well-educated in a career. Education, per se, is a key to life, knowledge, self-confidence and self-respect (Bhardwaj, 2016). Furthermore, education enables individuals to interpret things and prepare them for life. For this reason, every child, including those with disabilities, should be given the opportunity to receive an education, as education is a fundamental human right. During the World Education Forum in Dakar, the Dakar Framework Education for All was established. This UNESCO education objective provided goals to address the basic learning needs of children (UNESCO, 2000). With this initiative, the importance of international cooperation to improve education globally has been emphasised once again. Subsequently, Brazil, the Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) are striving for collaboration to improve policies, activities and structures in education. The need for quality education has become a priority for BRICS. In addition, reforming education, promoting equity in education, fostering quality education and organising student exchanges all form part of the pledge.

Special education

The goal of special education is to provide an opportunity for specialised education to learners with disabilities. However, when comparing special education globally, there is a clear difference in how special education is viewed, especially in

the BRICS countries (Pullen & Hallahan, 2015, p. 37). Several studies have contributed to the body of scholarship about special schools which include characteristics of learners with disabilities, learning difficulties and memory difficulties as disabilities and the controversy about the accommodation of learners with abilities.

BRICS

“BRICS” is the acronym coined for an association of five major emerging national economies – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Originally, the first four were named “BRIC” (or “the BRICs”), before the induction of South Africa in 2010. The BRICS members are known for their significant influence on regional affairs, and all of them are members of G20. All of the BRICS members recognise that they need to improve the quality of education in their countries significantly if learners are to succeed in life and work and contribute positively to the economy (UNESCO, 2015, p. 10). Achieving equitable economic growth and sustainable development will require further investment in education. In this regard, “Brazil, China, India and South Africa need to achieve universal primary and secondary education; reduce inequalities in attainment (the number of years children spend in school), and raise learning achievement. Countries also need to place increased emphasis on expanding good quality early childhood care and education programmes” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 11).

Methodology

The study was employed in a comparative design, where the researcher investigated whether there were differences between the various BRICS countries in their approach to schools with special needs. The purpose of this comparative study was to investigate the relationship of one variable to another by examining whether the value of the dependent variable in one group is different from the value of the dependent variable in the other group. In this study, special education in the BRICS countries is compared based on descriptive data. The significance of this comparative study lies in the description, understanding, interpretation, explanation, evaluation, application, motivation and furthering of the philanthropic ideal. A systematic document analysis of both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material was done, with a focus on content analysis. Researchers regard content analysis as a flexible method for analysing text data. The specific type of content analysis approach chosen by a researcher varies with the theoretical and substantive interests of the researcher and the problem being studied.

Discussion

In 2000, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, 164 governments agreed on the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Collective Commitments, launching an ambitious agenda to reach six wide-ranging education goals by 2015 (UNESCO, 2015). The aims of UNESCO (2015) were to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, to ensure that by 2015, all children,

especially girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality, to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes and to improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure the excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. In addition, one of the aims of BRICS is to accelerate the realisation of the Education for All objectives, which includes vulnerable and poor children. During the ninth summit of BRICS (2015), an outcome was the acknowledgement that the BRICS community aspires to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and to promote lifelong learning. It was acknowledged that all member states face common challenges in promoting educational equity and accessibility (BRICS, 2015).

Special needs education

“Special education” is a broad term used by the law to describe specially designed instruction that meets the unique needs of a child who has a disability (Hans, 2015, p. 12). Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology or delivery of instruction and addressing the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability. The goal of special education is to provide an opportunity for specialised education to learners with disabilities. However, when comparing special education globally, there is a clear difference in how special education is viewed, especially in the BRICS countries.

Special education in the BRICS countries

Brazil

Special needs facilities for children with learning difficulties or physical disabilities in Brazil are limited compared to other developed countries. Going back in history, it is clear that a lack of effort to establish institutions for the handicapped was experienced. The first school for individuals with physical impairment was established in the 1600s (Kiru, 2018). Following this initiative, the first school for blind children was established in 1954. Hereafter, special education services in Brazil were provided in special schools. After 2003, school inclusion as a guideline that integrated a policy for the Brazilian state to minimise the mechanisms of school selectivity and the precariousness of schooling directed to people with disabilities was affirmed. The national policy on special education in the perspective of inclusive education of 2008 (BRASIL, 2008) provided guidelines on the expansion of schooling for students with disabilities. In this policy, the focus falls on schooling for *all* students (Baptista, 2019). In addition, specialised support, such as CNE Resolution No. 04/2009 (BRASIL, 2008), which ensured the right of access to ordinary schools for students with disabilities, such as Decree No. 6949/2009 (BRASIL, 2008), which has constitutional amendment effects (Baptista, 2019), was affirmed. The Brazilian National Plan of Rights of Persons with Disabilities covers

four areas: access to education, health care, social inclusion and accessibility (Baptista, 2019; Borges & De Freitas Compos, 2016).

Russia

The first inclusive educational institutions appeared in Russia on the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Then, in 2008 and 2009, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation implemented a model of inclusive education in educational institutions on an experimental basis. The implementation of inclusive education in Russia is done in accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the Federal Law on Education and the Federal Law on Social Protection of Disabled Persons in the Russian Federation and is regulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Protocol No. 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. In April 2010, the Moscow City Duma adopted the Law on Education of Persons with Disabilities in the City of Moscow or Moscow City Law No. 16 (Valeeva, 2015). The new law guarantees persons with disabilities the implementation of their constitutional right to education and the creation of the conditions necessary for them to get education according to their individual needs. In Moscow, there are currently more than 1 500 schools, of which 50 are implementing the programme of inclusive education (Valeeva, 2015).

Inclusive policies and practices in different regions of Russia vary. In some instances, the government provides education for disabled people only in primary schools. In addition, the accessibility of schools sometimes is an obstacle. Other obstacles with regard to the architectural environment, vital facilities, modern technology and public transport also occur in Russia (Valeeva, 2015).

India

In the year 2000, there were only 2 500 special schools in India to cater to the needs of almost 50 million children with disabilities. Currently, millions of children with disabilities do not have any place to receive education or related services. In many special schools, children with various disabilities, such as autism, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment and learning disability, are all receiving education in the same classroom. Most of the special schools charge a monthly fee or require an initial donation for admission. These types of requirements make many special schools inaccessible to the poor. The result is that millions of children with disabilities do not receive any education or related services (Antony, 2013).

Although it seems as if special education in India is being neglected, the government of India has enacted four special statutes for people with disabilities: the Mental Health Act of 1987; the Rehabilitation Council of India Act of 1992; the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD Act) of 1995; and the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act of 1999. Of the four laws listed, the PWD Act protects the educational rights of people with disabilities (Antony, 2013, p. 6). In addition, six sections of the PWD Act (Sections 26-31) provide specific protection for children with disabilities, which includes government responsibilities, local authorities, nongovernmental organisations, teacher training, alternate facilities and public laws. Recent initiatives by the central government have made it incumbent on all schools

falling under state government jurisdiction to move beyond a separate, parallel structure towards a unified, inclusive system of education that serves all students together.

China

Europeans and Americans established the earliest special education schools in China in the 19th century, and the delivery model was entirely restricted to separate schools (Deng & Zhu, 2016). Thereafter, a new special education service delivery model was advocated in 1988. A three-tier service delivery system, consisting of an array of placement options for special schools, special classes and learning in regular classrooms (LRC), with the LRC as the major initiative, to serve students with disabilities was grafted into the Chinese educational system, resembling the continuum model adopted in the United States. The number of special classes rapidly increased in the 1990s and then dropped drastically during the 21st century. About 6 148 special classes were established in 1998, reaching the peak of expansion, but declined very fast to 684 in the year 2008 (China Education and Research Network, 2008). Many special classes were closed, and a few of them were transferred to resource classrooms for students with disabilities to study in regular schools (Deng & Zhu, 2016). According to the China Ministry of Education (cited in Huang, 2012), there were 1 706 special education schools across the country, with 425 613 students, at the end of 2010. The China Disabled Persons' Federation also cited 86 000 community therapy centres with 314 000 therapists in 1 823 cities across China in 2011 (Huang, 2012).

South Africa

The provision of education for learners with disabilities has been part of the development of an inclusive education system that can be traced back to the founding document of the nation, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 (Department of Education, 2001). The framework for an inclusive education system is laid out in Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001). The scope of this policy is broad, as it attempts to address the diverse needs of all learners who experience barriers to learning. Currently, in South Africa, education for students with special needs is provided in special schools, full-service schools and regular schools.

South Africa has various special schools in different provinces. The Transoranje Institute for Special Education was founded on 13 March 1947. The aim was to start a school for deaf children in the north. The first school to be established, on 16 August 1954, was Transoranje School for the Deaf. It became clear, however, that the Institute would also have to establish schools for children with other disabilities. The current Institute schools are the following: Transoranje School for the Deaf, Prinshof School for the Visually Impaired, Sonitus School for the Hearing Impaired, Transvalia School for Epilepsy and Learning Disabilities and Martie du Plessis High School for the Cerebral Palsied. Current learner count of the various Institute schools is 1 858.

Conclusion

It is clear that although the five BRICS countries more or less have a special education system in place, there is a common factor experienced by parents in the countries, namely that they struggle with their children who have disabilities. Furthermore, finances play a major role. In most cases, parents do not have the necessary funds to send their children to special schools. However, children with special needs must not be left behind. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every education department in the BRICS countries to ensure that all learners are accommodated, whether in special schools or through inclusivity.

References

- Antony, P. J. (2013): Special education history, current status and future: India. *Journal of International Special Education*, 16(1), 5-16.
- Baptista, C. R. (2019): Public policy, special education and schooling in Brazil. *Educação e Pesquisa: Revista da Faculdade de Educação da USP*, São Paulo, 45, 1-17.
- Bhardwaj, A. (2016): Importance of education in human life: A holistic approach. *International Journal of Science and Consciousness*, 2(2), 23-28.
- Borges, A. A. P. & De Freitas Compos, R. H. (2016): Special education in Brazil in the early 20th century: An innovative experience inspired in new education ideals. *Creative Education*, 7, 971-978.
- BRASIL (2008): Política nacional de educação especial na perspectiva da educação inclusiva. *Revista Inclusão*, Brasília, DF, 4(1), 7-17.
- BRICS (2015): *Memorandum of understanding on the establishing of the BRICS University*. <http://en.brics2015.ru/documents/> (Accessed 4 December 2020).
- China Education and Research Network (2008): Basic Statistics of Special Education. www.edu.cn/2008_9414/20100121/t20100121_442053.shtml (Accessed 10 January 2021).
- Deng, M. & Zhu, X. (2016): Special education reform towards inclusive education: Blurring or expanding boundaries of special and regular education in China. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16, 994-998.
- Department of Education (2001): *Education White Paper 6. Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Hans, E. (2015): Comparative study of special education and general education. *World Journal of Research and Review*, 1(1), 12-16.
- Huang, S. (2012): Understanding families with children with special needs in China. *Inclusion*, 2(3), 227-236.
- Kiru, E. (2018): A comparative analysis of access to education for students with disabilities in Brazil, Canada, and South Africa. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 21(2), 34-44.
- Pullen, P. C. & Hallahan, D. P. (2015): What is special education instruction? In: B. D. Bateman, J. W. Lloyd & M. Tankersley (Eds.) *Understanding special education issues: Who, where, what, when, how & why* (pp. 36-50). New York: Routledge.
- UNESCO (2015): *BRICS. Building Education for the Future. Priorities for National Development and International Cooperation*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2000): *The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments*. Paris: UNESCO.

Valeeva, L. A. (2015): The current state of special needs education in Russia: Inclusive policies and practices. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 2312-2315.

Dr. Leentjie van Jaarsveld, North-West University, South Africa