

# Autism and Inclusive Education in Cameroon: Attitudes, Resistance and Pitfalls

Chaffi W. Cyrille Ivan

**Abstract**— Integrating children affected by autism in ordinary education remains a challenge within public primary schools in Yaoundé. Actually, children living with autism, despite the "Inclusive education" slogan, still do not have access to ordinary schools, which hinders significantly the achievement of Education for all. This article examines the attitudes of teachers with regards to the integration of children affected by autism into ordinary schools. It seeks to verify the hypothesis that the attitude of teachers dealing with autistic children in educational situation has a clear impact on the integration of these children into ordinary schools. Through a qualitative approach based on interviews, the study brings out a set of unfavorable factors that strive against the inclusion of autistic children at ordinary schools.

**Index Terms**— Attitudes, Autism, Inclusive Education, Teaching, Resistance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background and justification of the study

The right to inclusive education is a universal right recognized by the International Bill of Human Rights. It applies to everyone including people with disabilities. In Cameroon, there are ordinary schools for children known as valid and special schools for disabled children. The schooling of children with disabilities in mainstream schools is still very difficult; students living with disabilities are often enrolled in special schools. Yet the principles of inclusive education no longer distinguish normal children of those with disabilities. Will the persistence of special schools and the negative attitudes vis-à-vis autism not jeopardize the relevance of inclusive education in the Cameroonian context? What do teachers think of the inclusion of autistic children in regular schools and what attitudes have they developed regarding this issue? Teachers do not spontaneously adhere to inclusive education reforms; they are often suspicious of attempts to change (Tardif and Lessard 2002). This article focuses on the description of subjective singularities of teachers' attitudes in relation to inclusive education in a psycho-educational perspective that makes the educational act a necessary need for any man. It aims to study the relationship between teachers' attitudes vis-à-vis autistic children and the connotation of the effect of these attitudes on inclusive education.

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The right to education is fundamental and compulsory for all children, including autistic children. In Cameroon, several children living with disabilities, including autism, do not have access to social activities. Most autistic children are often not in school and may not have access to employment. According to the World Health Organization, out of every 10,000 children, at least 6 are autistic, which gives an estimate of 600,000 autistic children out of 10 million children of school age in Cameroon. It is distressing to note that it is often at the cost of long individual battles conducted by parents that an autistic child is admitted in a mainstream school. The non-inclusion in the mainstream schools of children with autism makes it difficult to achieve socio professional integration (Nuss, 2009). The teacher is the person responsible for awakening the student's potential to develop the physical, moral and cognitive abilities of the student for his socialization. To this effect, the teacher must understand the pupil to make him/ her capable of developing their cognitive and affective potential in view of their socialization. The teacher ought to combine the necessary knowledge and expertise to that effect. In the absence of this, the exclusion of people with autism from schools is very common, even in public institutions. The refusal of admission of children with autism has emerged as a rule, and many of these children are still out of school. Autistic children in Cameroon do not attend school even when accepted in mainstream schools. Although UNESCO has recommended education for all and despite the fact that the Cameroonian State is being involved in this movement and has initiated laws and circulars for inclusive education, children with autism are still not accepted in ordinary schools. These children would not be admitted to the school on the basis of attitudes developed vis-à-vis their disability. However, ordinary education provides better educational outcomes for many students with disabilities, especially those with autism disorders, and has shown greater openness to difference (Labregere 1990; and Panchaud Lauper, 2001; Gilling, 2006).

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Autism is a neurological disease that is known as "pervasive developmental disorder" (ASD), which causes a cognitive defect information processing. This is a malignant disease that impairs the development of children and most often

appears before the age of three. This disease is mainly characterized by behavioral, communication and language disorders. A child with severe autism demonstrates a total inability to communicate or interact with others. This heavy and debilitating pathology is more often discussed in psychology and psychiatry through clinical and psychoanalytic interventions. The different therapeutic approaches so far proposed are aimed mostly at improving social interactions in order to open the autistic world. In the current context, where the scientific understanding of autism is still unknown, people with autism are marginalized, subject to several biases. This would be why their social acceptance and access to regular school remain difficult.

In Africa, a child who does not evolve like all other children, who does not speak quickly becomes a great tragedy for the family. Misunderstood, it is often rejected, ostracized from social life and recluses in his family, indexed and charged with crimes against custom and ancestors. In Cameroon, Autism is likened to witchcraft, a curse; that's why autistic children are excluded and rejected; their parents are often indexed as authors of this disease. Also, because of beliefs, most autistic children, instead of going to the doctor, are more oriented towards traditional healers, also called "marabouts" for rituals (Camerve, 2010). In Cameroon, a few years back, we got rid of autistic children by throwing them downstream of a river so that they turned into snake and returned to their country of origin. In some families with autistic children, they are locked in bedrooms when visitors come, because they are a disgrace to the family. Autism is therefore a great suffering for families whose attitudes, practices and beliefs in relation to this disease are still influenced by traditions (Heider, 1958, TsalaTsala, 2009). Hence the interest in teachers' attitudes to behavioral change, as the successful integration of autistic children in ordinary schools depends largely on the attitude of teachers towards students with special needs, their way of understanding the differences in classrooms and their willingness to deal effectively with these differences (Bandiera, Larcinese&Rasul, 2010). The attitude of teachers has generally been put forward as a decisive factor in the integrating character of the school (European Agency, 2003, p. 15). Changing attitudes among individuals is a long and complex process, especially as regards the conception of so-called "mystical" diseases such as autism and albinism. This is reinforced by cultural biases such as autistic children are children "witches, snakes." Every child with autism is potentially comparable to a "witch child" (D'Haeyer, 2004). But being considered as a sorcerer child is first and foremost a charge widespread in the social rhetoric of exclusion and stigmatization that has a strong influence on teachers' attitudes (Degorge, 2009). Such attitudes develop resistance to behavior change.

#### A. The concept of Attitude

An attitude refers to an internal arrangement of the individual which determines his/her perception and behavior vis-à-vis an object or a situation (Tapia and Roussay 1991: 15). Strongly correlated with an opinion or a value judgment, attitude is descriptive and prescriptive, that is, it works as a behavior organizer, trainer of the action. Attitudes are predispositions that cause a person to respond favorably or unfavorably to a situation or person (Doré, Wagner and Brunet, 1996, p. 85). Cognitively, attitude is involved in the drafting of opinions, beliefs, judgments and objects identification, all of which give it a regulatory function in behaviors and communications. Faced with inclusive education, teachers' attitude is ambivalent (Panchaud Migrone Lauper and 2001). As a matter of fact, teachers' attitude is a factor that can determine the success or failure of inclusive education. Doré, Wagner and Brunet (1996) highlight the emotional factor and reluctance to open schools. They also note that many researchers underscore the fact that teachers show a rather negative attitude to integration. This negative attitude is due to feelings of incompetence and ignorance of the disability on the part of teachers. In addition, Bless (1994) shows that the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education vary according to the type of disability. If teachers are favorable to the integration of students with motor disabilities, they are clearly opposed to the idea of integrating students with behavioral or personality disorders. It is therefore important to analyze the attitudes of teachers towards the integration of autistic children in regular schools; since beyond conventions and laws, any positive attitude adopted by a teacher facing a pupil in difficulty is already a success in its integration, as Lavallée(1990, p. 18) points out. A negative attitude would lead to resistance to the integration of autistic children in regular schools.

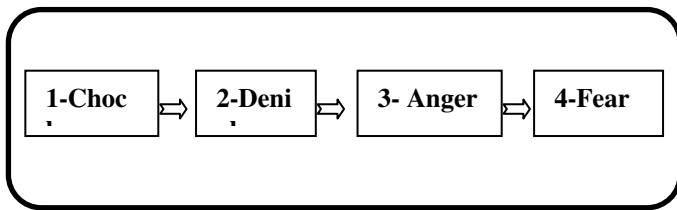
#### B. The notion of resistance

Resistance to change is an unavoidable phenomenon as human behaviors manifest differently to the same situation. It is an individual or a collective gesture that prevents the establishment of a new system in a given organization. According to Dolan, Lamoureux and Gosselin (1996, p.486), resistance to change is

*The individual or collective attitude, conscious or unconscious, manifested as soon as a transformation is announced. It therefore represents a negative attitude of teachers when changes are introduced in the normal functioning of their labor.*

Resistance is often described by several authors as an irrational phenomenon, non-productive, led by a minority of people at the expense of the development of a structure. Teachers would stop at stage four of Kübler-Ross' (1999) change process which states that, faced with a frustration, the subject goes through five stages: shock, denial, anger, fear

and acceptance.



**Figure 1 : The process of Change**

**Source :** inspiré de Kübler-Ross (1999).

The shock occurs immediately after the announcement of the change. This frustration can be characterized by a silence due to misunderstanding of change and its purpose, perceived as brutal. The phenomenon of denial or negation is characterized by doubt and the conscious or unconscious refusal that is born following the announcement of the change. It becomes more resistant when change is coming to something important. Anger, which is another way of refusal to face reality, is the realization that the change will be effective and inevitable, which results in the subject feeling instability, discomfort and now undergoing the situation as a victim and not an actor. Fear is a phase of great anxiety and stress characterized by a resentment of new challenges. Acceptance means to be in agreement with the change and be part of the process; this study is not concerned with this phase since autistic children are not admitted to the regular school. Let us now move on to the contents of autism concept.

### C. Autism and its considerations

Autism comprises several conditions whose manifestations vary widely not only from one person to another, but also in the same individual over time. Generally, children have problems that affect many areas regarding their development including: social interaction, language, communication and behavior. Children have difficulty expressing their emotions, making eye contact or understanding facial expressions. Other difficulties involve inability to play symbolic game; inability to initiate or sustain a conversation; repeating words without understanding; a trend to perform stereotypes as clapping or turning on oneself; a certain fascination for some parts of an object, such as a spinning wheel on a toy. The autistic child moves continuously, not seeking to share their interests with others and performing aggressive actions against oneself (self-harm) and / or directed at others (hetero-aggressivity). In all, Autism is characterized by severe difficulties in communication, understanding and interactions (Vermeulen, 2005, Maurice, 2006, Declic, 2009 Oeynhausen, 2012).

### Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has been recognized as the most appropriate means of ensuring universality and non-discrimination in the project of education for all. Thus, the Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities recognizes that in order for persons with disabilities to exercise this right, States should modify their education system to give way to inclusive education which is now an inalienable right of every individual with disabilities.

UNESCO in this direction defines inclusive education as

*an education system that allows schools to serve all children, particularly those with special needs, including children with disabilities. These schools value the differences between children rather than see them as problems. They draw on the resources available in their communities to ensure that learners' needs are met effectively.*

Thus, the issue of inclusive education is neither the teacher nor the student, but knowledge for all children without discrimination (Emtcheu, 1998, p. 25). In this sense, the challenge of education today is that of favoring the development of the regular school environment for all children of school age. In general, there is school integration when students with disabilities are enrolled in regular schools with the so-called normal children, provided that it meets the standard of school provision. Inclusive education involves transforming the education system through the training of its actors to ensure interpersonal interactions based on core values that allow the integral development of learning abilities of all students. It also assumes inclusive pedagogies that respect the values of equality, non-discrimination of students, and sharing good teaching practices. Thus, the inclusive approach should recognize the difference of each child as a learning opportunity, because it offers a moment of interaction to fight against stigma and discrimination. Inclusive education also enhances quality education for all by leading to larger programs and educational strategies that contribute to the overall development of capacities and skills. It is the school system to adapt its environment to this new approach, and also the students to integrate into their environment.

## IV. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

To support this study, we've made use of the attitude theory. The operationalization of the independent variable through the Roussay Tapia (1991) reading the grid of attitudes yielded three indicators namely skills, perceptions and beliefs. Many studies (Tapia and Roussay, 1991, Emtcheu, 1998 and Ebale, 2001) show that attitude formation is strongly correlated with these indicators. Attitude is therefore directional and determines the intention of a person vis-à-vis another person or an object with a positive or negative feeling connected to an external object. It is also a positive or negative predisposition associated with the perception of an object. The attitude is latent and perceived as a result of learning;

thereby it exerts a dynamic influence on the conduct and behavior of individuals. It's therefore means that the attitude of teachers towards autistic children could determine their behavior in regards to their acceptance into regular school. This is what has allowed the formulation of research objectives and research questions of the following specific assumptions.

#### A. Objective of the study

This article aims to analyze whether the attitudes of teachers regarding autistic children significantly influence the education of these children in regular schools. From this, arises the following research question:

#### B. Research question

Is there a link between attitudes of teachers vis-à-vis autistic children and their integration into regular schools?

This study has a general hypothesis and three specific assumptions. The general assumption is as follows: "The attitudes of teachers of autistic children significantly influence the education of these children in regular schools". The independent variable (IV) here is the attitudes of teachers and the dependent variable (DV) is schooling in ordinary schools.

#### C. Hypotheses of the study

This study has a general hypothesis and three specific hypotheses. The general assumption is as follows: "The attitudes of teachers of autistic children significantly influence the education of these children in regular schools". The independent variable (IV) here is the attitudes of teachers and the dependent variable (DV) is schooling in ordinary schools.

**Sh1-** The refusal of integration of autistic children in regular schools is linked to the abilities of teachers vis-à-vis the supervision of these children;

**Sh2-** The refusal of integration of autistic children in regular schools is linked to the beliefs of teachers vis-à-vis autism;

**Sh3-** The refusal of integration of autistic children in regular schools is linked to the negative perception that teachers have of these children.

### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article adopts the qualitative approach and is structured around the following methodological points:

#### A. Population and sampling

The population of the study is that of primary school teachers of the city of Yaounde. The reasons for choosing a population of primary school teachers are simple: they are the basis of our research to the extent that it is within primary schools that we see the recurrence of exclusion of autistic children. The study was conducted in five public primary schools in Yaounde, with teachers in grades 1, 2 and 3. The selection of respondents was done on the basis of simple random

sampling. We have chosen for the needs of the cause a sample of 15 participants of both genders, aged 20-47 years. They were submitted to semi-structured interviews during breaks and at the end some lessons for others. The interviews lasted 25 minutes on average. We presented them the object of our study before proposing them to complete our data collection materials, after which we conducted the interviews. The interview guide is as follows.

#### B. Data collection tool (Interview guide)

As part of work on attitudes, several techniques are used to locate or identify the core elements that determine them. In this study, we opted for the block selection method that involves developing a set of items and ask respondents to present their feelings vis-à-vis the said items. Using speech, the most recurrent answers are those that best describe the attitudes of respondents. The interviews were the subject of a thematic content analysis. Three themes of the field vis-à-vis autism attitudes were identified: skills, perceptions and beliefs. After collecting field data, followed the treatment phase of said data via content analysis. The semi-structured interviews allowed us to have the verbatim teachers. We have for the sake of the cause held talks with two parents who experienced refusal of their autistic children in regular schools.

### VI. RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in two major axes :identification and attitudes related items. The different percentages in form on changes in the specified items. Concerning identification, questions were interested in the following items: gender, age, academic qualifications/professional and marital status.

#### A. Identification section

As for the gender variable, 69.7% of respondents are of the female gender against 30.3% who are of the male gender. Their age is between 20 and 47 years, with the modal class 27. 20-30 years representing 55% of total respondents, class 31-40 years 22% of respondents and the age group of 41-50 year representing 23% of respondents. Respondents are holders of a CAPIEMP, the professional degree for teachers of general education. As concerns their highest academic degree, 15.9% hold a Probatoire; 42.1% hold a Baccalauréat; 30% are holders of a Bachelor's degree and 12% hold a Master's degree. Regarding marital status, it emerges that 24.7% of respondents are single, among which 9.7% have children. 75.3% of respondents are married and 69.6% of the respondents have children. Note that most teachers have a quite satisfactory academic level to know what autism is and almost all (79.3%) have children.

#### B. Results on Attitudes

Regarding items related to the attitudes of teachers vis-à-vis autism, they come in three main categories namely:



teachers skills, teachers perception and beliefs vis-à-vis the education of autistic children in regular schools.

### Teachers skills

Educational attitudes are individual provisions developed through learning or through regular lessons that allow the development of skills in this area. Regarding autism-related items, it appears that after analysis, 100% of respondents have heard of autism and have already seen autistic children; but few of them can actually define and describe autism. Autism is defined with concepts like "This is a disease that affects children's brain" (Mrxy1) or "autism is a disease that affects children and prevents them from living normally» (Ms. xx1). In terms of whether they are parents of an autistic child, all respondents, 100% said they were not parents of a child suffering from autism. However 4.7% of teachers acknowledge having friends who have children with autism, against 2.6% who say autistic children exist in their families in general. When asked whether they have already had a child with autism in their classrooms, only a minority of respondents, 3.2%, reported having had autistic children in their classrooms and wished they would not like to repeat the experience because "these children are difficult, you never know what they want, they can be very violent at times and I do not know how to teach with other students. The director told me that if I could not keep the child with others, then he would have to send him back to his parents and that's what eventually happened. But these children are difficult character, sometimes calm, sometimes unruly" (Ms. xx2). On the question of whether they were trained in guiding children with autism, 82.1% say they have never been trained on the education of children with autism. "Do you think we can put together in the same classroom autistic children and normal children?" To this question, 96.8% said that it is not possible to put all children with autism with other children because "teaching autistic children is not easy. These are children with special needs who deserve a different framework with proper teaching materials for their development. Besides even if we can put them together, I have not been trained to teach them and I do not know what approach to implement them. I take the case of mathematics, how do I go with him? Meanwhile, others are evolving normally. It is very difficult, they need to find special classes with teachers trained to take care of them" (Mrs. xx2). In the same vein, (97%) of respondents say they do not want to receive any child with autism in their classrooms. Furthermore, in general a student with autism has difficulties of all kinds that are an obstacle to its regular schooling. The majority of teachers agree that the integration of students with autism in regular classes is very difficult because "they must be given a longer learning period" and this is being reinforced by the lack of teacher training in the care of people with autism, and in inclusive education as a whole.

### The problem of training

Many points of views following the current situation appear both inappropriate and unacceptable. In inclusive education, the training of teachers at ENIEG, teacher training schools, greatly proves insufficient. The actions relating to the inclusion of students with disabilities are extremely scarce. The syllabus in the schools that train kindergarten teachers as well as elementary and secondary school teachers in Cameroon, proposes no training in order to promote inclusive education for all children. At the political level, although efforts are being made in speeches that express generosity for the disabled, their implementation remains insufficient. We would note a lack of real training project truly coherent, proactive and integrative. According to the statements of the respondents, they have never received any training in the care and education of children with autism. Also according to them, the cohabitation of children with autism and those considered normal is impossible in the same classroom, in the sense that autistic children need a different type of teaching materials and cannot keep pace with teachings as other students. This negative attitude of teachers vis-à-vis children with autism shows anguish and reluctance in integrating autistic students in mainstream schools. This is negatively reinforced by the perception that teachers have of these children.

### Teachers' perception

When analyzing the interviews related to the acceptance of children with autism in regular schools, it is clear that teachers find it difficult to accept children with autism in mainstream schools. This stems from a negative perception of this handicap, because autism is perceived by them as a disorder affecting communication, cognition and socialization, which in turn, generates anxiety, incomprehension and makes teachers behave in a discriminatory and inappropriate way. Teachers perceive and categorize autistic children as "morons, idiots, mentally retarded". In addition, the actual presence of an autistic child in a classroom can thus be likened to a situation of forced cohabitation with an individual of an unusual nature that creates anxiety and leads to expulsion.

Since regular schools tend to reject individuals that appear as "disabled" or "unfit", autistic children may be tolerated so long as they unnoticed and fit in the classroom environment. But as teachers tend to perceive the autistic child negatively, the school runs the risk of falling into fatalism when faced with their slow learning progress at reading, writing and mathematics. However, many autistic children show great aptitude for academic and social learning, thanks to appropriate pedagogical and therapeutic aids. Therefore the fears of teachers vis-à-vis autistic children is not insane at all, but reside in the fact that autism is still misunderstood.

### Teachers' beliefs

Teachers as a whole have a negative judgment vis-à-vis autism. They interpret autism as incurable, contagious or evil. All have a strong negative attitude to this handicap; they are crystallized in their opinion regarding the education of autistic children. For them, children with autism are "difficult, strange and misunderstood." This commonly shared belief gives rise to attitudes of rejection of these children in regular schools. This situation raises concern about the possibility of living together with autism in mainstream schools. This judgment of autism prevents the autistic subject from being a member of the "in group".

In their failure to reconsider autism in their belief system, teachers are unable to educate in the same cohort autistic and normal children. Furthermore, the State which introduced inclusive education as a matter of principle has not put in place sufficient resources to achieve this goal. A policy of inclusive education in Cameroon has not actually been established; neither teachers nor the educational system have been adapted to the implementation of inclusive education. In addition, the so-called normal students are not prepared to accommodate children with autism who are most of the time marginalized and placed in special schools. In fact, even when they are accepted, children with specific needs are hardly at ease in a school environment that is not adapted. The interviews with two families confirmed that autistic children are discriminated against in ordinary schools, they are not received even when parents decide to enroll them. Mrs. Vv, housewife, testifies:

I went to school to enroll my son Jojo in class 1 in a public school in my neighborhood. I filled the entire form I was given and paid the fees requested by the parents' association. When the lady in charge saw the picture of my son, she asked if my son was normal, I said yes. She added that they were not enrolling the "moumou" in their school and I left. When I came with my son to the school at the beginning of the school year, the teachers who were at the gate, as they saw my child, asked me to go and meet the headmaster. I went to the headmaster, he looked at my son and called the class 1 teacher. I was asked to wait out of the office as they talked. After talking in secret, they called me to join them in the office and told me they did not accept this kind of children in the school. A lady came in and refunded me my money. I nearly cried but I went away with him. After that, a friend advised me to put him in a specialised institute, but it was so expensive that I could not afford it. I do not know what to do. He is

at home with me, day and night. There he is, what else can I tell you?

### CONCLUSION

Autism is a disability that is still poorly understood by the general public that regards disabled people as a homogeneous group made up of "mental, instrumental and motor disabilities" (Ezembe, 2009). This obscures their original capacity and their destiny. In the autism spectrum, there is a wide variety of profiles that vary greatly from one person to another. Each one has a unique set of cognitive and behavioral characteristics. Because of this diversity, one must take into account the specific characteristics of autistic people to be sure to understand and adequately support the integration efforts in the mainstream school. However, in reality, the fact remains that teachers who are willing to work with students with autism are poorly equipped to do so. They neither have the information nor the training, let alone the necessary elements to adapt their teaching to different individual profiles. Therefore a conducive environment should create in maintain schools coupled with teacher training to facilitate the inclusive education of children with autism. The State is called upon to implement information and teacher training strategies for a better response to the needs and development potential of these students.

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