

## ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS TOWARDS STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN MAINSTREAM CLASSES: THE CASE OF TEACHERS IN SOME SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

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### ABSTRACT

Attitudes about inclusion are extremely complex and vary from teacher to teacher and school to school. This article explores how the teachers' attitudes can influence academic performance of students with disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, with 50 secondary school teachers as participants from ten purposefully selected secondary schools in Umguza district. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers' favourable and unfavourable feelings towards their students with disabilities had a significant effect on their educational attainment. The results also showed that some teachers' frustration and negative attitudes influenced the students' academic performance. Labeling or classification of students, teachers' definition of students and low expectation can significantly affect the academic performance of students with disabilities. The study recommended that an effective teacher must have high expectations on all students without discriminating the less intelligent students or those with disabilities. It was further recommended that teachers should attend seminars and conferences to improve their knowledge about ways of practicing and accepting students with disabilities.

**Keywords:** Teacher Attitude, Teacher Expectations, Academic Performance, Students.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important aspects of the classroom interaction concerns the ways in which teachers make sense of and respond to the learning behavior of their students. It is the teacher's attitudes and expectations that will either improve or worsen the students' academic performance. The attitude of the society, government and citizens on special needs children has been highly negative and degrading, where the disabled were thought to be incapable of contributing anything meaningful to the society (Fakolade, Adeniyi & Tella, 2009). In teaching attitudes of teachers play an important role in children's academic performance. The teacher's attitude to himself, his work, his or her students and many other things depends on a number of variables which in turn influences his productivity. This study examines how teacher attitudes' can influence academic performance of students with disabilities in secondary schools of Umguza District in Zimbabwe. According to Macqueen (2010), attitude is defined within the framework of social psychology as a subjective or mental preparation for action. Hayes (2010), also view attitude as the individual's prevailing tendency to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object (person or group of people). Within this context, attitudes refer to the teacher's either favorable or unfavorable feelings or mood towards the learners thereby influencing their academic performance. Miller (2001) defined teacher expectations as presumptions that teachers make about the academic achievement of the students. Thus, teacher expectation involves a teacher's prediction about how much academic progress a student will make over a specified period of time. Such prediction can positively or negatively influence the student's academic performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many regular education teachers who feel unprepared and fearful to work with learners with disabilities in regular classes display frustration, anger and negative attitude toward inclusive education because they believe it could lead to lower academic standards (Gary, 1997). Additionally, access to resources and specialist support affects teacher confidence and attitudes toward inclusive education for students with disabilities in secondary schools. During classroom interaction, teachers develop and establish various attitudes towards their students' behavior (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Such teachers' favourable or unfavourable feelings towards their students have a significant effect on their educational attainment. In the learning situation, teachers express their attitudes towards learners with disabilities (Yara, 2009). Most of the teachers classify their students according to social class. For instance, in sitting arrangement, table one is reserved for fast learners while table two, three and four are basically for the less able. Moreover, "A" streams are also reserved for intelligent students while slow learners are grouped in "C" streams. Pupils in group one and "A" streams will enjoy favourable learning conditions from the teachers thereby developing their self-concept and attain better academic performance than pupils in the last groups (Hinnant, O'Brien & Ghazzarian, 2009). Negative attitude towards slow learners and 'C' streams may affect their academic performance. This study therefore sought to investigate how the teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities influence their academic performance in an inclusive class environment.

According to Miller (2001), teachers tend to develop positive attitude towards students who have neat and clean appearance, those who are known to come from educated families and those who are able to conform to the teacher's own middle-class standards. A teacher can develop his/her own children of choice and term them bloomers (Jussim & Harber, 2005). These children will get a lot of favours from the teacher such as the first to get textbooks and thereby promoting their academic performance. One wonders what would happen if the students with disabilities are found in such classes. How would such teachers classify them? How would students with disabilities feel accepted by the teacher? Labeling of pupils by teachers can have important effects on their progress (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). Labeling theory argues that once a label is attached to a person there is a tendency for them to see themselves in terms of the label and act accordingly. For instance, middle or upper-middle class students can be labeled as intelligent and teachers often place them in first class or allocate them higher status subjects while less intelligent students in lower streams with low status subjects. Labels given to students with disabilities also have a bearing on their performance in class. Teachers can label students basing on the catchment area of the school or their disabilities (Hayes, 2010).

Some pupils' labels are attributed to their language they speak at home; others are labeled according to their physical appearance. Students who teachers label as gifted in class make the greatest progress, primarily because of differential treatment by teacher (Demagnet & Van Houtte, 2012). On the other hand those labeled as less intelligent will be de-motivated and failing to recognize the importance of their subjects thereby affecting their academic performance (Mwamwenda, 2004). In secondary schools of Zimbabwe, teachers give labels to their students and this may affect their academic performance in class. This study sought to investigate whether the teachers' attitudes shown by the labels they give to the students will affect the performance of students with disabilities in inclusive class environment. Labeling provides the kind of attitude teachers have towards their pupils. According to Hayes (2010), labeling may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. In classroom situation, there is a tendency

for other pupils to see themselves in terms of the labels given by the teacher and act towards them on this basis. Self-fulfilling prophecy theory argues that predictions made by teachers about the future success or failure of pupils will tend to come true because the prediction has been made (Harambos & Holborn, 2008). For instance, a teacher can define the pupil with disabilities in a particular way such as bright or dull. Based on this theory, the teacher makes prediction or prophecies about the ability or behavior of the pupil with disabilities. Due to the self-fulfilling prophecy, the pupil with disabilities labeled as bright will work hard and improve his/her academic performance while dull pupils with disabilities will be demotivated to put extra effort thereby worsening their academic performance (Hayes, 2010). Despite the plausibility of the self-fulfilling prophecy and labeling theory, it has been criticized that not all pupils will live up to their labels (Burotukula, 2010). Some students will try to work hard to prove the labeling wrong. They devoted themselves to school work in order to try to ensure their success.

Practically, teachers' interaction with students will be influenced by their positive or negative definitions of their learners. For instance, teachers may expect higher quality work from, and give greater encouragement to, those whom they have defined as bright students. Thus, students' self-concept will tend to be shaped by their teachers' definition during their interaction (Rosenthal, 2002). They will see themselves as bright and act accordingly. Their action will be a reflection of what their teacher expects from them. In this way prophecy is fulfilled. Thus, the student's performance or attainment level is, to some degree, a result of positive or negative interaction between teacher and pupil, and teacher's prophecy. However, some teacher's definition of their learners might not work or contribute to the academic performance. The way teachers conduct, records and report assessments with consistent monitoring influence the students' performance. For instance, teachers who have negative attitude towards their teaching and learner assessment due to some factors such as poor incentives and working conditions will affect the students' academic performance. Moreover, school infrastructure, poor libraries, laboratories and safety conditions create new variables that re-define the attitudes of even the most devoted and well prepared teacher which also affect the learner's academic performance.

The key point is that if the teacher worries about the students' performance through consistent assessment and monitoring then the students will succeed, but if they are ignorant of the educators' duties then the students will be left behind. One wonders what will happen to the teacher's attitude if the teacher has an added burden of having a student with disabilities in her inclusive class. According to Barros and Ellia (2000), some students' academic performance was negatively affected by some of teachers' attitudes during learning processes. They said that teacher's lack of confidence due to poor conceptual and phenomenological subject foundations may negatively influence academic performance. Due to the introduction of technology in Zimbabwean education, some of the teachers are being challenged by the new phenomenon and are seemingly not confident to use computers in teaching and learning thereby affect their students' academic performance. Teachers lack confidence to assist students with disabilities using new teaching methods that involve ICT. This attitude affects students with disabilities in way or another in their academic performance. This research sought to examine how teacher attitudes and expectations can influence academic performance of students with disabilities in Zimbabwe secondary schools.

## METHODOLOGY

The survey design was used to collect data for the study. The survey design was preferred because it is the most appropriate design where self-reported beliefs and opinions are sought (Davis and Sotton, 2004). It can also elicit information about attitudes that are otherwise difficult to measure using observational techniques (Glasow, 2005). Quantitative data was collected using questionnaires with the 50 randomly selected secondary teachers from Umguza district. The observations focused on interactions between the teachers and their students in order to see how teachers' attitudes and expectations affect students' academic performances. The questions that were designed for the questionnaires focused on the teachers' experiences on how teacher's attitudes influenced the academic performance of students with disabilities. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

## FINDINGS

The table below shows the responses that teachers agreed or disagreed concerning their attitude that contribute to the performance of students with disabilities in the mainstream class.

**Table 1.1: The extent to which teachers' attitudes influence the performance of students with disabilities in mainstream classes in secondary schools of Zimbabwe (N=50)**

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Teachers have inadequate training in inclusive education and therefore cannot assist children with disabilities.	20 (40%)	15 (30%)	0 (0%)	14 (28%)	1 (2%)
Teachers ignore children with disabilities because of the extra attention that children with disabilities require thus disturbing other students in the mainstream class.	15 (30%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)	15 (30%)	10 (20%)
Teachers' frustration and negative attitudes affected academic performance of students with disabilities..	25 (50%)	16 (30%)	0 (0%)	9 (18%)	0 (0%)
Teachers resist and develop negative attitudes towards inclusive education practices on account of inadequate training	30 (60%)	15 (30%)	0 (0%)	4 (8%)	1 (2%)
Teachers' expectations of students with disabilities are low and they spent less effort and time teaching these students	15 (30%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)	20 (40%)	5 (10%)
Teachers' favorable and unfavourable feelings towards the students with disabilities had a significant effect their educational attainment	18 (36%)	17 (34%)	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	4 (8%)

Children without disabilities avoid interacting with students with special needs in inclusive classrooms	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	0 (0%)	30 (60%)	10 (20%)
Teachers' attitudes towards children with disabilities influence their academic performance within the mainstream class.	25 (50%)	15 (30%)	0 (0%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)

From the Table 1.1 above, the secondary school teachers (80%) in Umguza viewed the attitude of the regular teachers towards children with disabilities influence the children's academic performance within the mainstream class. The negative attitudes of the regular teachers meant that they were unlikely to support effective and efficient implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities. The secondary school teachers (70%) felt that they were not trained in assisting children with disabilities and may have lacked confidence that may have contributed to the negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education in schools, thus affecting the performance of students with disabilities.

## DISCUSSION

Teacher attitudes can have a profound impact on students' educational growth. The findings revealed that teachers' favorable and unfavourable feelings towards the students with disabilities had a significant effect on their educational attainment. From the questionnaires the respondents indicated that that some teachers frustrated and affected academic performance of students with disabilities. The respondents indicated that that subject teachers unfairly treated students with disabilities by being late for lessons, not giving them enough notes, exercises or home works thereby affecting their academic performance. Teachers' attitudes can significantly affect the academic performance of students with disabilities (Miller, 2001). The secondary school teachers who participated in this study believed that when their expectations of students with disabilities are low, they spent less effort and time teaching these students. When this reduced effort is perceived by students with disabilities, it can be expected to engender feelings of goal blockage, which might lead to feelings of strain and ultimately acting out by students in class. From the study, some teachers used negative expectations through verbal comments such as 'useless' thereby affecting the student's ability thinking that he or she cannot do anything better in his or her education.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the above opinions on how teacher attitude influence academic performance of students with disabilities, the study recommends that an effective teacher must have high expectations on all students without discriminating students with disabilities or discriminating other students on gender, social class and culture. Teachers should strive to raise the bar for every student through effective classroom interaction in order for each learner to reach his or her best potential. Teachers should work on an attitude that all students can achieve to the teacher's level of expectations thereby giving the sense of confidence too. Positive teacher attitude is a great asset in teaching and learning life and this will help teachers cope with both fast and slow learners and influence their academic performance. With the right attitude and framework, teachers can start the learning process on an equal footing for all students including those with disabilities and help them to take responsibility for their learning and exploration.

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