

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A THEORATICAL PROBABILITY OR PRACTICAL POSSIBILITY?

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe has adopted an inclusive education system in order to address barriers to learning for children with disabilities. The implementation of inclusive education is hampered by the lack of teachers' skills and knowledge in differentiating the curriculum to address a wide range of learning needs. In this paper, the researcher identifies the challenges that affect the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities. A qualitative survey design was employed in which twenty teachers in rural and urban secondary schools were interviewed to solicit their views and observations on challenges of implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities in secondary schools. The study concluded that the implementation of inclusive education in secondary schools was not successful because of various challenges being experienced by teachers.

Keywords: Inclusion, Inclusive Education, Disabilities, Children with Disabilities, Special Needs Education.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The movement towards inclusion continues to dominate educational discourse the world over. Inclusion describes the process of integrating students with special education needs into the least restrictive environments as required by the United Nations declarations that give all children the right to receive appropriate education (UNESCO, 1994). The concept of inclusion has evolved towards the idea that all children and young people, despite different cultural, social and learning backgrounds, should have equivalent learning opportunities in all kinds of schools. The focus is on generating inclusive settings, which should include, respecting, understanding and taking care of cultural, social and individual diversities; providing equal access to quality education and close co-ordination. In Zimbabwe, inclusion of children with learning disabilities has been actively considered since 1994. However, there is still a lot of scepticism and ambivalence towards the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

In keeping with international trends in education, Zimbabwe has embraced inclusive education as the means by which children with disabilities should be educated (The New Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013). Premised on the need for secondary schools to change and become responsive to diverse learners by offering the support necessary for access and participation, inclusion is being realised in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Human rights issues have been discussed internationally and in Zimbabwe and political, socio-economic and educational transformation has been effected in different societies. This has created challenges for teachers in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Education (UNESCO 1994) proclaimed that regular schools with an inclusive orientation were the most effective means of combating discriminatory

attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Inclusive schools are intended to provide effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. Inclusion is a practice in education whereby the needs of individual learners are successfully and adequately met. It refers in particular to the meeting of learners' needs in the mainstream classes. Inclusion indicates a thorough commitment to create regular schools, which are inherently capable of educating learners including those with learning disabilities (Mpya2007). According to Engelbrecht (1999:25) this entails a radical restructuring of schools as organisations, re-evaluation of the curriculum, and changes in pedagogical methodology. Teachers in Zimbabwean secondary schools have experienced challenges in the implementation of the conditions necessary for inclusive education in their schools and hence this research is focussed on investigating the challenges and looking for solutions to them. The article aims at making a contribution to the understanding of educational needs of learners with disabilities who experience barriers to learning and to provide guidelines on how to support them. It examines how secondary school teachers manage inclusion in the classroom, their competencies and strategies they need to be aware of in order to deal with learners with disabilities.

For many years, regular secondary schools in Zimbabwe used to cater for learners who were regarded as 'normal'. Special schools accommodated learners with specific behaviour problems, and physiological, neurological or psychological shortcomings (Mafa 2012). Zimbabwe's educational policy emphasised the point that education is a basic human right and it should be accessible to all learners regardless of colour, race, gender, class, religion, disability, culture or sexual preference (The Zimbabwe Education Act 1987). This created room for inclusive education which is seen as a way of removing the discriminatory practices and accommodation of learners irrespective of their special needs. Challenges for teachers in the mainstreams are unique. The lack of knowledge and training for secondary school teachers and an inadequate infrastructure pose a lot of challenges for them in handling learners with learning disabilities.

The Problem Statement

The puzzle that is the driving force behind this article is the quest to find out the challenges that are being experienced by the teachers in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. The needs of learners with disabilities are not being adequately met in mainstream classroom settings as teachers have not had appropriate training and are still grappling with the implementation of inclusive education system. The research seeks to answer the following major question: *What are the challenges experienced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education for learners with disabilities in secondary schools in Zimbabwe?*

The Research Questions

- How do teachers manage inclusive education for learners with disabilities in the secondary schools in Zimbabwe?
- What obstacles do teachers encounter in managing inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities in the secondary schools?
- What guidelines can be suggested for the improvement of practice with regard to the implementation of inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities in the secondary schools in Zimbabwe?

Purpose of the Study

Due to lack of appropriately trained and skilled teachers in inclusive education in most primary schools in Zimbabwe, an investigation of effective classroom management for inclusive education for learners with disabilities has become an urgent necessity. The research aims to identify the challenges to the implementation of inclusion as experienced by teachers in secondary school classrooms in Zimbabwe and to investigate how teachers understand their role as primary implementers of inclusion and how they experience the implementation process in secondary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Mafa (2012) the philosophy of inclusion results in the creation of classes composed of pupils having different abilities, rates of learning and understanding of concepts, learning styles, motivational levels, special education needs and socio-economic backgrounds. Pupils' different characteristics are bound to present teachers with organisational and didactic challenges. In Zimbabwe, inclusion has been considered after the realization that approaches such as integration and institutionalization did not reap expected results. The former approaches were dogged by a plethora of implementation problems *inter alia*: teachers' negative attitudes, lack of resources, lack of proper laid out policies to inform practice, social repercussions such as isolation and stigmatization of children with learning disabilities. Notwithstanding this development, inclusion in Zimbabwe has not been fully embraced (Mafa 2012). Very few children with special educational needs have been included in Zimbabwe's mainstream public schools, most are still institutionalized. More often than not, pupils with special education needs fail to be cultivated to the limit of their academic potential in the mainstream schools due to a number of factors that are both within and without them. Unfortunately, in most cases, the school system blames the children for their lack of performance. The Presidential Commission on Education of 1999 also alluded to this unfortunate scenario (Nziramasanga 1999). The Commission noted that the Disabled Persons' Act Chapter 17.01 of 1992 is silent on education and training of people with disabilities. It is also silent on the language which helps people with disabilities to enjoy their rights as full citizens of Zimbabwe. The predominant objective of an education system is one of providing quality education for all learners in order to enable them to realise their full potential and thereby fully contribute to and participate in society (Prinsloo, 2001:344).

Inclusive education promotes a single system of education dedicated to ensure that all learners are empowered to become caring and competent citizens in an inclusive, changing and diverse society. Inclusion is a new way of thinking about specialised education. The shift from special education to inclusive education signals a dramatic philosophical change (Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 1999:7). Inclusion is a belief in the inherent right of all persons to participate meaningfully in society. Inclusive education implies acceptance of differences and making room for persons who would otherwise be excluded. This practice of educating children who have disabilities (impairments) together with non-disabled peers means creating learning communities that appreciate and respond to the diverse needs of the members (Engelbrecht, Kriegler & Booysen, 1996:7). The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Education (UNESCO 1994) proclaimed that regular schools with an inclusive orientation were the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Inclusive schools are intended to provide effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and cost-

effectiveness of the entire education system. Similar aims are being pursued in Zimbabwe and importantly towards the inclusion of children with disabilities. Inclusion, as it is understood by academics and policy makers is a practice in education whereby the needs of individual learners are successfully and adequately met. It refers, in particular, to the meeting of learner's needs in mainstream classes. Inclusion indicates a thorough commitment to create regular schools, which are inherently capable of educating all learners. This entails a radical restructuring of schools as organisations, re evaluation of the curriculum, and changes in pedagogical methodology (Engelbrecht, 1999:25). However, the implementation of inclusion in Zimbabwean classrooms presents challenges for the teachers in secondary schools. The universal right to education and its extension to children, youth, and adults with disabilities are enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNICEF, 2004). Article 23 of the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) covers the rights of disabled children and includes their right to education that is responsive to their individuality (United Nations, 2008:8). In 1990 the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand culminated in the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien Declaration). Sponsored by a range of United Nations Organisations as well as the World Bank, the Jomtien Conference placed education on top of the international agenda and was an attempt to halt the decline of basic education which had taken place in the 1980s.

The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality (Salamanca, Spain, 1994) and was restated at the World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal, 2000). The idea of inclusion was further supported by the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO: 2004) and proclaimed participation and equality for all. In the rapid assessment of primary and secondary schools conducted by the National Education Advisory Board, Chakanyuka (2009) estimate that in Zimbabwe, as many as 469 000 children may require special needs education. They further make the estimation that only 30% of these children were able to access special needs education by 1998. To think that this falls within the period when a figure of 97% literacy rate was being quoted, the revelation invokes a sense of helplessness. Viewed slightly differently, this means 70% of children with disabilities and other special educational needs were (or are still being) denied their right to education. Of course, this situation is in direct conflict with Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989.

Special Needs Education arrangements and provisions in Zimbabwe have, until recently, been planned with two main purposes in mind – either that special educational needs would be effectively diagnosed and cured or that children who presented particular special challenges would be taken out of circulation and placed in a special class or unit. In many schools in Zimbabwe today such “solutions” are still in practice. In models such as these, problems often arise because many schools plan provision on the curing assumption or on the segregation assumption and only recently have many schools in Zimbabwe recognized the need for a combination of short-term and long-term arrangements. There is no specific legislation for inclusive education in Zimbabwe (Mpofu, 2004). However, a number of government policy issues are consistent with the intent of inclusive education. For example, the Zimbabwe Education Act (Education Act, 1996), the Disabled Persons Act (Disabled Persons Act, 1996), and various Ministry of Education circulars (Education Secretary's Policy Circular No. P36, 1990) require that all students, regardless of race, religion, gender, creed, and disability, have access to basic or primary education (up to Grade 7). Yet, the Disabled

Persons Act (1996) does not commit the government to providing inclusive education in any concrete way; in fact, it specifically prevents citizens with disabilities from suing the Zimbabwean government regarding government facility access issues that may impair their community participation (Mpofu, Kasayira et al., 2006). In the absence of any mandatory order stipulating the services to be provided, and by whom, how, when, and where, there could be no meaningful educational services for learners with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The Secretary for Education's directive for inclusive education requires schools to provide equal access to education for learners with disabilities, routinely screen for any form of disability, and admit any school-age child, regardless of ability. Any school that refuses to enroll a child on grounds of disability is in violation of the Disabled Persons Act (1996) and faces disciplinary action from the District Education Office. This requirement for open access to education does not extend to high school, perhaps because the government considers literacy as achievable by Grade 7 and a high school education as a privilege, rather than a right.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of this research is essentially qualitative. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:398) maintain that qualitative researchers investigate in depth small distinct groups as the researcher is concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the research participant perspective. The qualitative design is relevant to the research since the aim is to investigate how teachers manage their inclusive classrooms particularly for a small selected group in their natural setting. The intent of this research is to determine the challenges experienced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe. The teachers will be given a platform to express themselves in the interviews, explaining how they feel about inclusive education. They will be given an opportunity to make suggestions on how to improve inclusion in schools and what teachers actually need to be successful in the management of inclusion.

The Sample

The sample included 20 teachers (10 female and 10 males) teaching in rural and urban secondary schools in Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe. The schools are implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities. The sample was conveniently selected from secondary school teachers where the researcher had contact persons for easy data collection.

Instrumentation

Data collection took place through individual interviews with teachers and school heads. The method of interviewing has been chosen because the quality of data it produces and for its ability to allow the researcher to combine the benefits derived from interviews as well as from participant observation. The researcher also recorded observations made during teaching practice sessions.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participating teachers. Participants consented to participate in the study and their responses were kept in strict

confidence as their names were not appended to their responses. Participants were also free to withdraw from the study when they felt to do so.

Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews sessions were qualitatively analysed. Responses from the teachers were analysed to come up with themes related to the research questions. The analyses were based on frequency of similar responses from the participants. Data were explored by reading through all the interview responses as well as from the general observations made during the interview sessions.

RESULTS

The findings from the questionnaire are discussed below:

What Challenges Do You Experience When You Are Teaching Children With Disabilities In Secondary School Mainstream Classes?

The teachers in the regular classes indicated that although inclusion was of benefit to the children, challenges were faced by the teachers in assisting children with disabilities. Teachers indicated that there were not trained to teach children with special needs hence to find them in one's class will be creating serious problems. Some of the children have learning disabilities that are clear when doing Mathematics and the teachers do not know how to help such children. Inadequate knowledge with regard to instructional techniques and curricular adaptations, which contributes to decreased confidence, may be factors which influence a teacher's attitude toward inclusive education. Teachers also revealed that they could not cope with large numbers of children within the classroom situation. Attending to the child with disabilities actually became an extra burden. Consequently, these children tended to be ignored as the teacher focused on other children. Lack of such attention may mean that most pupils' educational concerns will remain unresolved and creating problems for the implementation of inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe. The class size impacts on inclusion implementation due to the difficulties that teachers have in attending to individual needs, class management dynamics and the marking load they exert on teachers.

Teachers indicated that children with low vision lacked large print books; hence, they often strained their eyes as they struggled to read ordinary print. Some teachers in the regular classes revealed that assistance from specialist teachers came in too late and there was delayed induction in Braille for children who were blind. The researcher observed that the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe was perceived to be presently affected by lack of resources needed to meet the individualised needs of such children. The teachers indicated that negative perceptions to the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities may become obstacles, as general education teachers attempt to include students with disabilities. The teachers added that parents, as stakeholders, believe that the included children may slow the pace of the teacher thus negatively affecting their children. The teachers felt that the government does not have an inclusive education specific policy, but has inclusive education related policies like the Education Act of 1996 and the Zimbabwe Disabled Persons Act of 1996 which advocates for non-discrimination in the provision of education and non-discrimination of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe respectively.

How Should These Challenges Of Implementing Inclusive Education Be Resolved From Your Point Of View?

The teachers indicated that there is need to establish a clear and concise mandatory policy and legislation, supported by an Act of Parliament that spells out the expectations and roles of the stakeholders in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities. The policy should specify how the children with disabilities should be financially and materially assisted. The teachers further revealed that the challenges of the implementation of inclusive education would be resolved if there would be adequate professional preparation and training of Zimbabwean secondary school teachers in inclusive education for children with disabilities. The teachers in secondary schools need to be trained in teaching methods that are child-centred, and using active and participative learning techniques that improve their confidence and capacity to teach children both with and without disabilities in mainstream classes. The teachers also indicated that government should provide more adequate resources, equipment, and teaching material for learners with diverse learning needs and there should be a separate budget for inclusive education so that the issue of resources can be addressed. There is need to cultivate and nurture positive attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education to stakeholders such as teachers, parents and other children with disabilities in order to improve the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in Zimbabwean secondary schools.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that most of the teachers in schools do not have the expertise to deal with disabilities in a teaching learning-situation mainstream secondary school class. It also emerged in the study that teachers in the mainstream secondary schools are not adequately trained to deal with children with disabilities in their classes. The lack of skills, knowledge and tools to help children with disabilities has a serious negative impact in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities. The present study further revealed that there was lack of material resources in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. The unavailability of trained teachers, inadequate teaching techniques, lack of resources and lack of facilities, particularly stationery and textbooks hampered the practical implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. The current study revealed that Zimbabwean secondary schools lacked mandatory policy and legislation for the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. The non-existence of mandatory policy and legislation on inclusive education provisions for children with disabilities negatively affects the teaching and learning for such children in the mainstream classes in secondary schools of Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that if inclusion is to be a practical possibility in Zimbabwe's secondary schools, there is need for the promulgation of pro-inclusive policies and effective implementation of the policies. Pro-inclusion policies will then cascade to teacher education institutions, so that pre-service teacher training focuses on inclusive teaching. Practicing teachers can be equipped with inclusive teaching skills through in-service teacher development and workshops. The secondary school children with disabilities could not fully benefit from inclusion owing to lack of adequate resources - specially qualified personnel as well as appropriate writing and reading materials. The study concluded that inclusion of

children with disabilities were not successful owing to the challenges encountered. The study further concluded that the needs of children with disabilities were not met as teachers were not adequately trained to assist these children.

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