

Handling Special Needs Learners in Mainstream Classes: The Case of Chirumhanzu District, Zimbabwe

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***Abstract:** The study sought to assess the provision of special needs education within inclusive settings in Zimbabwe's rural primary schools. This study examined teacher competencies, infrastructure, provision of assistive technology and the policy framework for special needs education at primary school level in Chirumhanzu district, Zimbabwe. This study adopted the descriptive survey design which employs qualitative approach. A sample size of 52 subjects was drawn. Questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion methods were used to collect data from respondents. It was found that mainstream teachers and all school heads were not aware of the provision of special needs education through inclusive education. Teachers and school heads conceptualized inclusive education as integration. Findings of the study also revealed that teachers did not have the qualifications and competencies to handle special needs learners in mainstream classes. This study recommends that the government through its relevant arms should transform the provision of special needs education through provision of assistive technologies, development of infrastructure and crafting of a supportive policy framework for all learners whether they have mild or severe disability.*

***Keywords:** special needs, inclusion, integration, education provision, hearing impairment*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Special Needs Education: A global perspective

Special needs education the world over has gone through transformation from isolation, separate provision, integration and currently the philosophy of inclusion inspires it. Regardless of the degree of disability, inclusive education demands that all children should attend the same school

with their peers who have no disability. Inclusive education has gained impetus through advocacy for human rights especially after the Second World War.

The growing concern for human rights which calls for equal treatment of people with disability in all facets of life including education has paved way for inclusion programmes in schools as opposed to categorical schools which are criticized by professionals, parents and many others for worsening the plight of the disabled individuals. Gwatima and Sibanda (2000) argue that the segregation of children in special schools dehumanizes and deprives them of their basic rights of being as close to normal life as possible. This is based on the assumption that if children with special educational needs are allowed direct contact and interaction with non-disabled children, that will counter the development of negative notions and rejection of those with disabilities by non-disabled.

In the same vein, Foreman (2001) asserts that children with special educational needs have the right to be educated in a full inclusive classroom and should not be segregated for any reason. Teachers should prepare appropriate education strategies that meet the needs of all pupils. Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs, therefore educational systems should be designed and implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs.

Resultantly there have been numerous developments around the world in the provision of special needs education. In the early 1990s significant strides were made in making inclusion a reality. In June 1994 representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organizations formed the world conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain (Salamanca statement and framework for action, 1994). They agreed on a dynamic new statement on the education of all disabled children which called for inclusion to be the norm. In addition, the conference adopted a new framework for action, the guiding principle being that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their problems related to physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions (Nziramanga, 1999; UNESCO, 1994).

1.2 Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusion describes the process of integrating pupils with special educational needs into the least restrictive environment as required by the United Nations declarations and regional and global conventions that give all children the right to receive appropriate education. 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. According to Lampton (2012) inclusion method is a basic model where both disabled and non-disabled students are educated within the same classroom. In the same vein, Wiebe and Kim (2008) posit that educational inclusion offers education geared to include all students, even those with disabilities in the same learning environment. Special needs students are placed in the mainstream education classroom and are involved in instructional settings that

may have a general education teacher. The mainstream class may consist of learners with physical disabilities, slow learners, gifted learners, learners with language problems, mentally-retarded learners, hyperactive learners, emotionally challenged learners and children from families of low socio-economic status.

1.3 Special Needs Education in Zimbabwe: A brief historical overview

Traditionally in Zimbabwe disability was viewed negatively. Jenjekwa et al (2013) asserts that in Zimbabwe just like in most African countries, the traditional pre-Christian way of life was averse to any form of disability. Physical and mental handicaps were perceived as punishment by God or the ancestral spirits for transgressions committed by the disabled child's parents; there was need to kill the child or throw away the child since such a child was viewed as an abomination (Mashiri, 2000). Mashiri (2000) further observed that if the disability was detected later, the child had to be hidden so that whatever affliction she/he had would not affect those who would see him/her. With the coming of Christianity, a small proportion of the disabled persons "took sanctuary" in missionary institutions as myths around disability got demystified (Jenjekwa et al, 2013: 22). Special schools were established to meet the educational needs of children with various forms of handicaps but the problem was that the schools were categorized by disability for example 'School for the deaf' or 'School for the blind' (Chimedza and Sithole, 2000).

Zimbabwe began to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms after almost many years of educating students with disabilities in segregated settings. The programme of inclusive education started in Zimbabwe in January 2010 (The Herald, 2011). It was rolled out with funding from the Anglo American Group Foundation in the United Kingdom. Its aim was to promote the enrolment of children with special educational needs into mainstream primary schools and was initiated following the signing of memorandum of understanding with Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (The Herald, 2011). There has been a notable increase in recent years in the enrolment of students with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools in Chirumhanzu District but this has not been paralleled by the allocation of additional teaching and care staff. Disability is fact of life and teachers in Chirumhanzu District have big chances of having special needs learners in mainstream classes.

This study sought to explore the effectiveness of the educational system in Zimbabwe in providing the facilities, resources and an appropriate curriculum for all students irrespective of disability in mainstream classes. There is substantial research on the challenges of implementing inclusion in Zimbabwe and benefits of inclusive education (Mpofu et al 2007; Kuyini and Deraï 2008; Mafa, 2012; Chireshe, 2013; Bery, 2004) There is however dearth of information and knowledge about how special needs learners are handled in mainstream classes in Chirumhanzu District.

1.4 Research problem

Disability is a fact of life and teachers in Chirumhanzu District have big chances of having special needs learners in their mainstream classes. Given this fact the study sought to explore the effectiveness of the educational system in Zimbabwe in handling special needs learners in terms of providing the facilities, resources and an appropriate curriculum for all students irrespective of disability in mainstream classes.

2.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by 5 research questions and these were:

- Are teachers in mainstream schools aware of inclusive education and its benefits?
- Do primary school teachers have the qualifications and competence in terms of handling special needs learners in mainstream classes?
- Does the primary school national curriculum address the needs of special needs learners?
- How effective are the teaching methods used in meeting the needs of learners in an inclusive setting?
- What is the situation pertaining to the availability of the resources in mainstream classes?

2.1 Sample

This study adopted the descriptive survey design which employs qualitative approach. The design was adopted because it is easy to collect bulk information within a limited time. This study involved five primary schools in Chirumhanzu District that were purposively selected. Four categories of respondents were involved, that is, twenty mainstream teachers selected randomly, twenty five special needs learners, five school heads and two specialist teachers who were selected through purposive sampling. These categories were selected because it was assumed that they had rich information pertaining to the handling of special needs learners in mainstream classes. Thus a sample of 52 respondents was made.

2.2 Instruments

Questionnaire, interview and focus group discussions were the tools for data collection. Questionnaires containing closed and open ended items were used to collect the required information from school heads, mainstream teachers, special needs learners and specialist teachers. Questionnaires were developed first then they were reviewed by the researchers several times, some of the items were added while others were modified or omitted. Interview method was also used to supplement information from questionnaires. In this study, school heads and specialist teachers were interviewed. Finally, focus group discussion was used to collect required information from special needs learners. This is because children are likely to express themselves freely when they are in groups. Focus group discussion provided a way to learn from special needs learners and it elicited views and opinions from special needs learners on how they were handled in mainstream classes.

2.3 Ethical issues

Prior to entering research sites, permission to carry out the study was sought from Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education at district, regional and national levels and from Heads of the schools concerned, as well as voluntary informed consent from participants. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Participants were informed during research process that they were allowed to withdraw from the study at anytime. The researchers assured participants that the information collected would be kept confidential and used for the purposes of the study only.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using content analysis. Researchers extracted the information relating to the critical questions from participants. A thematic approach was adopted in this study. The following themes were used in this study:

- Awareness of inclusive education and its benefits
- Professional qualifications and competence to handle special needs learners
- Primary school national curriculum in Zimbabwe for children with special needs
- Teaching designs for inclusive classes
- Availability of resources in mainstream classes

3.0 FINDINGS

3.1 Questionnaire

From the questionnaires it was revealed that 95% of mainstream teachers were not aware of the benefits of inclusive education. On the other hand, one (1) mainstream teacher (5%) who had a degree in Special Needs Education was aware of the benefits of inclusive education. Questionnaires further revealed that all mainstream teachers (100%) were not trained in inclusive education. Further to this, all mainstream teachers (100%) indicated that the curriculum was not addressing the needs of learners with special educational needs in an inclusive setting. On teaching designs for inclusive classes, all mainstream teachers (100%) revealed that their teaching designs were not effective in meeting the needs of learners in an inclusive setting. Lastly on the availability of resources in mainstream classes, all mainstream teachers (100%) indicated that they did not have resources to assist special needs learners.

3.2. Interview

Heads indicated that teachers in mainstream classes lack expertise, one Head said, *“My teachers are simply not qualified to teach children with severe special needs, they are already struggling with those who are not disabled, what do you think will happen if they are given worse cases?”*. Another Head said, *“We focus on results and this naturally affects those children who have special learning needs. History has taught us that they cannot cope, remember schools are ranked on the basis of results regardless of how many children with severe special needs we have. Let special schools enroll them, they are also looking for pupils”*.

An experienced Head said, *“We have seen this idea if inclusion through integration but the results did not come. Inclusion is the same as integration the difference is in the words only”*.

In terms of resources all heads concurred that there are no specialized resources like assistive devices for hearing and visual impairment. What is available are only special rooms with nothing special other than the name.

Mainstream Teachers` voiced concern at being given children with disability of any sort. They indicated that they are already overwhelmed with work and would not attend to children who are special class material. They felt that these pupils should simply be handled by specialist teachers in a special class or be sent to special schools. One of them said, *“Let’s not waste children’s time. Do you think Henry Murray and Copota [special schools for hearing and visual impairment respectively] were established for nothing? Let’s not pretend, we can’t just do it, even with the so-called staff development workshops we have held”*.

Another teacher had this to say: *“I am very worried to get a child with down syndrome in my class. I won’t know where to start and worse still I am personally scared of such children”*.

In the same vein, a specialist teacher who teaches at a mainstream class had this to say: *“I was trained to teach in special classes not mainstream classes. The training institutions in Zimbabwe train teachers in special education, so I have very little knowledge on inclusive education. I am trained to deal with hearing impairment learners only. I do not have adequate knowledge and skills to manage learners with other disabilities. This is not working!”*

3.3 Focus Group Discussion

Responses from special needs learners during focus group discussions clearly indicated that special needs learners were facing challenges in mainstream classes. Challenges ranged from school environment, teaching methodology and attitudes. Challenges from school environment included lack of skills on the part of teachers to provide adequate and relevant support to learners with disabilities, lack of learner-friendly physical infrastructure such as classroom and sanitation facilities. Learners with physical disabilities revealed that in mainstream schools there are no ramps on buildings to allow learners with disabilities to access classrooms and other places easily. One of them expressed his sentiments as follows: *“Classrooms that are built in mainstream schools do not create any provision for learners like us with physical impairments. We rely on assistance from other learners to enter the buildings”*.

Almost similarly another pupil had this to say: *“There are no ramps at this school, so we depend on peers for accessing the toilets.”*

The third student expressed her sentiments as follows: *“I really feel bad when classmates avoid me when I need assistance to get in the classroom. It is painful, It is not my wish to be in this state. I would also love to be like them. It is better to go back to our special schools where we would have better chances of accomplishing anything within our ability at our own pace.*

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Awareness of Inclusive Education and its benefits

The findings indicate that there are misconceptions on the concept of inclusion with those who should be at the forefront of its implementation like Heads of schools intransigently arguing that it is the same as integration. The philosophy of integration is based on prior assessment of the potentialities of the learner to determine if learners with disabilities may attend a regular class if their teachers believe that they will be successful. However their home base remains the special education setting. Results of the study showed that 95% of mainstream teachers and all school heads (100%) were not aware of the benefits of inclusive education which simply points to a situation where there should be major awareness drives to make critical stakeholders appreciate the whole idea behind inclusion. This is why Gatawa (1998) observes that the major challenge in educational policy implementation is failure to implement the crafted policies. Inclusion is very loud in public platforms like the media but on the ground the situation has barely moved. The classes are clearly “de facto exclusion zones” (Jenjewa, et al, 2013:26) for children with various forms of handicaps.

4.2 Professional qualifications and competence to handle special needs learners

There is a severe shortage of expertise in terms of special education teachers. A situation where paltry one percent (1%) mainstream teachers have the skills is worrying. The findings corroborate what Chireshe (2011) and Peresuh (2000) who established that despite the relatively high number of universities and many teachers’ colleges in Zimbabwe training teachers in special needs, many teachers remained untrained in the area. In line with this, a study by Mutungi and Nderitu (2014), revealed that lack of trained teachers in special needs education was a major challenge to inclusion. They added that there was need for in-service training of all the teachers in primary schools to sensitize them on ways to cater for pupils with special needs in mainstream classes. A study by Miles (2000) confirmed that mainstream teachers did not have adequate training on handling both the disabled and non-disabled learners in one class. This state of affairs seriously repudiates implementation of programmes before adequate preparation is done. The adoption of the centre periphery approach in curriculum implementation and change is always beset with such challenges.

4.3 Zimbabwe Primary Schools National Curriculum

These findings confirm, Hove’s (2010) study (unpublished), in Zimbabwe which revealed that the needs of students with special educational needs were not addressed in ordinary school curriculum. In line with this, a study by Forlin (2001), recommended that the development of more inclusive curriculum requires teachers to cater for different students’ learning needs through modification of the curriculum. At the moment there is a one size fits all curriculum which barely benefits those with different forms of disability. The other challenge in terms of curriculum implementation is based on the fact that teacher training institutions do not train an all-rounder specialist teacher. There is specialization in a particular form of disability. Even

those teachers who are specialist in one form of disability are inevitably non-specialist in others making curriculum implementation quite a challenge.

4.4 Teaching methods for inclusive classes

The study revealed that mainstream teachers due to lack of training in inclusive education, were not using effective teaching designs such as group work and individualized instruction in addressing the needs of students with special educational needs. The study went on to establish that it was difficult for mainstream teachers to come up with effective teaching methods since they were dealing with different abilities. In the same vein, findings from a study by Mafa (2012) revealed that lessons in inclusive classes may fail to cope with the whole range of ability and in the end teachers may use whole class instructional strategies that may not be appropriate for the different pupils and their different needs. The findings from this research echo Mafa (2012) who revealed that attempting to teach inclusive classes is like juggling several balls at the same time, a feat which requires a lot of training and practice.

4.5 Availability of resources in mainstream classes

There is general dearth of resources in terms of assistive technologies. Most rural schools in Zimbabwe grapple with shortages of resources to procure books and other critical resources. The very limited budgetary space has led to issues of inclusion being sidelined even where innovations can be made. The common excuse is that there are no funds for the resources and yet in co-curricular disciplines like sport the funds are provided. Similar findings were presented by previous studies in Zimbabwe for example Peresuh (2000); Mpofu et al (2007); Chireshe (2011); and Chireshe (2013). These studies revealed that inclusive education in Zimbabwe was perceived to be affected by lack of resources.

4.6 Conclusion

The findings confirm the prevalence of challenges to inclusive education in Chirumhanzu in Midlands province in Zimbabwe. The challenges range from resource provision, negative perceptions of disability and absence of skilled personnel (specialist teachers) in the main stream classes. The findings from this research (a survey) in Chirumhanzu district might not necessarily be duplicated if carried out in different settings. There are therefore opportunities of further research in other settings.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the study on how special needs learners are handled in mainstream classes, the following recommendations are made to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, other responsible authorities, education officers, school heads and mainstream teachers:

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and other responsible authorities should prioritise and enhance the training of education officers, school heads and teachers to teach effectively in diverse classrooms.
- There should be a complete restructuring of the educational system so that all schools would have responsibility of providing the facilities, resources and an appropriate curriculum for all learners irrespective of disability.
- The education officers, school heads and mainstream teachers should modify the curriculum to be flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of children including those with special needs.
- Furthermore mainstream teachers are urged to use effective teaching designs which address the needs of all learners in an inclusive setting. The study recommends mainstream teachers to use creative designs such as co-operation learning and individualized instruction which benefit all learners.
- There is need for active involvement of parents, local communities, local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and relevant government departments in improving and creating sufficient and appropriate infrastructure and also making sanitation facilities safe, clean and accessible to all, especially those with physical disabilities.
- There should be put in place model inclusive classrooms in every district to give direction to the implementation of inclusive education.

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