

Challenges Faced by Gifted Learners in Regular Classes in Primary Schools: The Case of Chirumhanzu District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to explore the challenges faced by gifted learners in primary schools in Chirumhanzu District, Zimbabwe. The study adopted the descriptive research design which employs qualitative approach. A sample size of 20 subjects was drawn. Interview and focus group discussion methods were used to collect data from the participants. It was found that gifted learners were experiencing the following challenges: unavailability of resources relevant to their needs, irrelevant teaching methods, irrelevant curriculum, negative attitude from regular teachers and lastly lack of knowledge and skills on the side of regular teachers on how to handle them. The study recommends that the government through the relevant ministries should provide in-service training to regular teachers in order for them to know how to handle gifted learners in regular classes. Furthermore the study recommends that a number of differentiation strategies be employed to meet the needs of gifted learners such as curriculum compacting, flexible grouping, enrichment, mentoring, acceleration and many others.

Keywords: challenges, gifted learners, regular classes.

Background to the study

The Education for All declaration stipulates that every person, child, youth and adult shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their learning needs (World Declaration on Education for all 1990). This vision was reaffirmed by the World Education Forum of 2000. Zimbabwe adopted the principle of education for all through the Education act of 1987 revised 1991 and 2001 (Manyowa and Ncube 2013). Manyowa and Ncube (2013) further point out that, from 1980 up to 1990 educational reforms focused on access to education. In the same vein, the Salamanca Declaration (1994) on special needs education states that every child has a fundamental right to education. This was also confirmed by Magwa and Jenjekwa (2016) who assert that children with special educational needs have the right to be educated in full inclusive classroom and should not be segregated for any reason. Following this logic, teachers should design appropriate curriculum that meets the needs of learners. Every learner 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. In the same vein, Bernal (2003) points out that, classroom teachers should know how to work effectively with children from all sectors of ability spectrum, including gifted learners. This means that regular teachers should know how to handle learners with diverse characteristics.

However inspite of the concern with education for all, there is curious silence pertaining to the education of gifted children (Manyowa and Ncube 2013). Gifted learners are the most misunderstood and educationally neglected in schools (Awandu 2014). In this sense gifted learners sit in classrooms bored and frustrated, they are left out and are not really benefiting from an equal educational opportunity as their peers and their full potential is not considered (Eric 2004, Arika 2009, Awandu 2014). Almost similarly, the present state of gifted education is aptly described as in a “quiet crisis”(Gallagher 1998, Pfeiffer 2003). In this sense, gifted learners are not catered for in schools. Given the above facts, the researcher thought it very necessary to explore the challenges faced by gifted learners in primary schools in order to improve the management of these learners in regular classes.

Although there is substantial research in the field of special needs learners (Winebrenner 2001, Willard-Holt 2003, Bernal 2003, Pfeiffer 2003, Page 2010, Cardwell 2012, Manyowa and Ncube 2013, Awandu 2014, Alamer 2014, Magwa and Jenjekwa 2016), there is little attention on the challenges faced by gifted learners in primary schools particularly in Zimbabwe. Therefore the need for this study to explore the challenges faced by gifted learners in primary schools in Zimbabwe in order to promote the effective management of these learners by regular teachers in primary schools.

An overview of gifted learners

Heward and Orkansky (1992) define gifted learners as those whose performance is high in the areas of intellectual activity, creativity, specific academic aptitude, leadership skills and ability in performing visual arts. Almost similarly Brunswick (2007) asserts that gifted children are those identified by professionally qualified people, who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realise their contribution to self and society (Brunswick 2007; Cardwell 2012). In 1972 Sidney Marland proposed definition in Brunswick (2007) states that the gifted and talented are children capable of high performance and include those with demonstrated achievement or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination: general intellectual ability, visual and performance arts, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performance arts and psychomotor ability (later removed in 1997). In this sense gifted learners have an advanced knowledge base compared to their non- gifted peers and because of this, they need unique education that is different from that of gifted peers.

Gifted learners have the following characteristics:

- Learn new material faster and at an earlier age, than age peers.
- Remember what has been learned forever, making review unnecessarily.
- They are able to deal with concepts that are too complex and abstract for age peers.
- Have a passionate interest in one or more topics and would spend all available time learning more about it if possible.
- Do not need to watch the teacher to hear what is being said, can operate on multiple brain channels simultaneously and process more than one task at a time (Winebrenner 2001; Diezmann and Watters 2006; Brunswick 2007; Awandu 2014).

Research Problem

Although the World Declaration on Education for all (1990) and the Salamanca Declaration (1994) state that every child has a fundamental right to education, there is curious silence pertaining to the education of gifted learners. Given this fact, this study sought to explore the challenges faced by gifted learners in regular classes in primary schools.

Main Research Question

What are the challenges faced by gifted learners in regular classes in primary schools?

Sub-research Questions

1. What is the situation in primary schools pertaining the availability of relevant resources for gifted learners?
2. What are the real attitudes held by regular teachers toward gifted learners?
3. Do regular teachers have the knowledge and skills to handle gifted learners in regular classes?
4. How effective are the teaching methods used by regular teachers in meeting the needs of gifted learners?
5. Does the curriculum consider the needs of gifted learners?

Sample

The study involved two primary schools in Chirumhanzu District with different settings namely one urban primary school and one rural primary school. Distance from the researcher's work place to each of the particular schools was a factor to be considered in the selection of the schools. Learners are exposed to different environments in schools hence the need for participant representation from all types of schools within the district that is urban primary school and rural primary school. From each school, seven (7) learners, two (2) regular teachers and one (1) specialist teacher were purposively selected to give a total of 10 participants from each school. In this sense multiple view points from gifted learners, regular teachers and

specialist teachers led to a more comprehensive understanding of challenges faced by gifted learners in regular classes. Seven (7) learners from each school were selected using the progress record book. One (1) gifted learner was selected from each grade level. In view of the researcher gifted learners were most likely to give accurate information on challenges they faced in regular classes. In the selection of regular teachers, the researcher considered gender balance so that views were obtained from both males and females. Preference was given to teachers who had more years of teaching experience as compared to those who would have recently joined the teaching profession. One (1) specialist teacher was selected from each school. Specialist teachers were believed to have rich information on gifted education hence their inclusion in the study. Priority was given to those with at least five years working experience. A total of twenty (20) participants made up the sample of this study.

Instruments

This study adopted the descriptive research design which employs qualitative approach. Descriptive research design through the use of interviews and focus group discussions gave rich reports that were necessary to fully understand the challenges faced by gifted learners in primary schools. In this study semi- structured interviews were incorporated because the researcher believed that open ended questions would be the most efficient way to collect data from specialist teachers and regular teachers since it would offer the opportunity for the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response on challenges faced by gifted learners in regular classes in more detailed way. Focus group discussion was used to collect required information from gifted learners. In this study, the researcher conducted focus group discussion with seven (7) gifted learners. The researcher conducted one focus group discussion per school. Focus group discussion was used to engage gifted learners to discuss issues pertaining to their challenges in regular classes since learners are free to express themselves when they are in groups where responses cannot be traced back to them. Through focus group discussions rich information emerged on the challenges faced by gifted learners in regular classes.

Data Analysis

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

- Availability of resources relevant for gifted learners
- Attitudes of regular teachers towards gifted learners
- Relevance of the primary school curriculum to gifted learners
- Relevance of teaching strategies used by regular teachers
- Professional qualifications and competence of regular teachers to handle gifted learners.

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 school heads of the selected schools as well as voluntary informed consent from participants. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Participants were informed during process that they were allowed to withdraw from the study anytime. The researcher assured participants that the information collected would be kept confidential and used for the purposes of the study only.

Findings

Availability of resources relevant to gifted learners

The question sought to find out if primary schools in Chirumhanzu District had relevant resources to meet the needs of gifted learners. It was established that primary schools did not have relevant resources to assist gifted learners. Primary schools in the district did not have financial resources to facilitate enrichment programmes like taking children for field trips where they would meet with adults who have the same talents with them. Furthermore due to financial constraints, primary schools in the district could not procure enrichment library books and computers. It was also revealed that due to lack of financial resources, gifted children were not given a chance for mentoring by adults on job grooming. Regular teachers who were interviewed indicated that they did not have relevant resources to assist gifted learners. An experienced regular teacher had this to say:

At this school, there are no relevant resources to assist gifted learners in regular classes. Even if the resources were there, I do not know how best to use them for the benefit of gifted learners since I am not trained in gifted education.

This was confirmed by a specialist teacher who indicated that most of the primary schools in the district did not have exploratory resources which may include encyclopedias which can be found from libraries, biographies and autographics of successful people, textbooks beyond the one normally provided in the classrooms, modern technology equipment like computers, challenging games such as chess, reading novels and magazines for leisure and language development. One of the specialist teacher who was interviewed, expressed her sentiments as follows:

Most of the primary schools here in the district do not have relevant resources that provide opportunities that would stimulate curiosity in the learners.

In the same vein gifted learners during focus group discussions revealed that they were tired of completing routine and repetitious work. Almost similar to this finding (Davis and Rimm 1998, Hiuhu 2007, Page 2010, Awandu 2014) revealed that lack of relevant resources was a major challenge facing gifted learners in schools. Page (2010) further revealed that if the gifted learner is not recognised and given relevant resources, he or she quickly becomes bored and

disinterested with content taught. In this sense gifted learners must be given relevant resources that enhance the development of new ideas and concepts.

Attitudes of regular teachers towards gifted learners

The question sought to establish the attitudes of regular teachers towards gifted learners. It was revealed in the study that regular teachers had negative attitude towards gifted learners in regular classes. This was because gifted learners asked a lot of questions and needed more information about ideas than the teacher was prepared to give. This was therefore seen as a challenge to the teacher's authority. It was found that only specialist teachers had positive attitude towards gifted learners. Positive attitude of specialist teachers was attributed to their more years of association with gifted students. During interviews with regular teachers, one of regular teacher expressed his feelings as follows:

I do not know what to do with one gifted learner in my class. If he finds an error in my work, he points it out impolitely, making me to feel incompetent. I am really threatened by his questions. This learner is putting pressure on me to read everyday before conducting any lesson.

This was also confirmed by gifted learners during focus group discussions. One of the gifted learners indicated that he was not called by his teacher to give an answer or to ask a question even if his hand was up. In line with this, specialist teachers during interviews explained that gifted learners often ask questions that need more information than the teacher has prepared. They further point out that this can be seen as a challenge to the teacher's authority. The finding confirms the following research studies (Clark 2002, Caldwell 2012, Awandu 2014). According to Awandu (2014) teacher's attitude is important towards performance of learners. The perception teachers have towards their ability and work, significantly relates to the success of their learners.

Relevance of the primary school curriculum to gifted learners

The question intended to find out if the primary school national curriculum in Zimbabwe addressed the needs of gifted learners in regular classes. Findings on the relevance of Zimbabwean primary school national curriculum to gifted learners revealed that the curriculum that was used in regular classes was fundamentally irrelevant to gifted learners. The regular curriculum did not provide the learners who were gifted with opportunities to exhibit those characteristics that were instrumental in their identification as gifted individuals. Regular teachers during interviews indicated that they were not aware of the other types of curriculum appropriate for gifted learners. One of the regular teachers expressed his sentiments as follows:

I use regular curriculum for all the learners in my class.

In the same vein, a specialist teacher had this to say:

The most common curriculum adopted in almost all the schools in this district is the regular curriculum. This type of curriculum only benefits regular learners at the expense of gifted learners. The differentiated curriculum which is the most appropriate for gifted learners is rarely used in regular classes and as a result learners' motivation and performance decline after prolonged exposure to unchallenging curriculum.

Almost similarly, Willard-Holt (2003) confirms that most gifted learners are taught in regular classroom using the same standards used to teach all of the other learners. The finding also confirms the following research studies (Caldwell 2012, Awandu 2014). These studies revealed that regular teachers are not aware of the appropriate curriculum which benefits gifted learners. According to Tomlison (1999) differentiation of curriculum is necessary in order to accommodate the differences between learners and to provide learning environment in which all children who are gifted can thrive. Tomlison (1999) and Awandu (2014) advocate that a number of differentiation strategies be employed to meet the needs of gifted learners. Such strategies include, curriculum compacting, enrichment and extension competitions, mentoring, acceleration and many others.

Relevance of teaching methods used in regular classes to gifted learners

The question sought to find out whether the teaching methods that were used by regular classes were effective enough in meeting the needs of gifted learners in regular classes. It was established that due to lack of training in special needs education, regular teachers were not using effective designs in addressing the needs of gifted learners. Specialist teachers who were trained in special needs education were able to use appropriate teaching methods such as discovery and discussion methods which enhances learner participation and development of new ideas and concepts. Regular teachers were using demonstration and lecture methods which make learners to assume passive role. The methods that were used by regular teachers were not the right methods to use for gifted learners. There was no regular teacher in the district who employed discovery and discussion methods as methods of teaching gifted learners. In line with this issue, one of the specialist teachers during the interview expressed his sentiments as follows:

Discovery and discussion methods which are most appropriate methods for gifted learners are rarely used by regular teachers in this district.

Almost similarly regular teachers indicated that due to lack of knowledge and skills on gifted education they used teaching methods which did not challenge gifted learners. This was also confirmed by gifted learners during focus group discussion. Gifted learners indicated that they wanted to learn on their own without too much interference from the teacher. In the same vein Chuska (2005) asserts that gifted learners are often independent and prefer to work alone. In this sense regular teachers should use teaching methods that promote autonomy and independence in gifted learners. According to Awandu (2014) regular teachers should make modifications on

their teaching methods to meet unique needs of learners who are gifted. This means that regular teachers should not use the same teaching methods which they use to teach all other learners, to teach gifted learners.

Professional qualifications and competence of regular teachers to handle gifted learners

The question sought to find out whether regular teachers were competent enough to handle gifted learners in regular classes with the qualifications that they had. Findings of the study revealed that most of the regular teachers who participated in this study were not trained in gifted education. The regular teachers indicated that they were not competent enough to handle gifted learners in their classes. One of the regular teacher during the interviews expressed her sentiments as follows:

My challenge to effectively teach the gifted learners in regular class is that of lacking knowledge about the relevant curriculum and teaching methods that meet the needs of these learners. There is great need of staff development workshops on how to handle gifted learners in regular classes

In line with this, a specialist teacher during the interview session had this to say:

Gifted learners would be seriously underserved without specialised personnel and differentiated learning models. Regular teachers in this district have not received any special training on how to address the needs of the gifted learners in regular classes.

From the above sentiments of regular teachers and specialist teachers, it was established that regular teachers did not possess the adequate skills and knowledge necessary to address the needs of gifted learners. Furthermore no in-service training programmes on gifted education were organised for regular teachers to equip them with relevant skills and knowledge on how to handle gifted learners in regular classes. Almost similarly Knobel and Shaughness (2002) assert that gifted students can succeed in regular classroom provided that the teachers have specialised training in teaching gifted learners or that learners have access to specialists who can come into the classroom to provide assistance. In the same vein Caldwell (2012) assert that Runzulli has warned that without the supplemental services of the gifted specialists, gifted education always ends up being a smoke screen behind which bright kids get a few extra assignments and more work based on traditional models of learning. The finding confirms research studies by (Caldwell 2012, Awandu 2014, Magwa and Jenjekwa 2016) which recommend the training of regular teachers on how to handle learners with diverse characteristics in regular classes. In line with this issue, Chireshe (2013) argues that despite more universities and many teachers colleges in Zimbabwe training teachers in special needs, many teachers remained untrained in the area. Mutungi and Nderitu (2014) recommend in their study, the need for in-service training of all the teachers in primary schools in order to sensitise them on ways to cater for learners with diverse characteristics in regular classes.

Conclusion

The researcher has reached the following conclusions, there are no adequate resources in primary schools that are relevant to meet the needs of gifted learners in regular classes. It was further established that regular teachers have negative attitude towards gifted learners. As this was not enough, it was found that the curriculum that is used in primary schools by regular teachers is irrelevant to the needs of gifted learners. Furthermore the study revealed that the teaching methods that are used in regular classes do not cater for gifted learners. Lastly the study established that regular teachers do not have adequate knowledge and skills to handle gifted learners in regular classes.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study on challenges faced by gifted learners in regular classes, the following recommendations are made to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, other responsible authorities, education officers, school heads and regular teachers.

- The government through the relevant ministries should provide in-service training to regular teachers in order for them to know how to handle gifted learners in regular classes.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should design a relevant curriculum and also provide relevant resources for gifted learners in regular classes.
- Regular teachers should employ a number of differentiation strategies to meet the needs of gifted learners in regular classes.

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