Quality and Inclusive Education in Zimbabwean Rural Early Childhood Development Centres

Agnes Pakombwele*, Isaac Hlatshwayo, Mcelelwa Sikhangele, Rudo Gumbo, Sifiso Ncube

Baisago University, Faculty of Education, Department of Basic Education and Childhood, Botswana

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Globally, inclusive education lays a central role in improving and sustaining quality in Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings. Children with diverse needs and challenges are most vulnerable, marginalised and denied access to early education, especially in rural communities. This article explored the implementation of inclusive education towards achieving quality education in rural ECD settings of Mashonal and East schools of Zimbabwe. Grounded in the interpretivist philosophy, the study adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative data from participants were gathered though semi-structured interviews and observations. The participants included three ECD teachers from three rural schools with ECD classes. The findings revealed that inclusive education is one of the measurement of quality in ECD centres. Despite being a crucial measure, data shows that rural ECD centres in Zimbabwe are not prepared for inclusive education. Although there are existing policies and acts on disability there was also a lack of support from the centres' leadership and administration on the implementation. Our recommendations are that all stakeholders in ECD centres should support the implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: early childhood development; inclusive education; ECD teachers; centre managers; quality education; ECD centres

INTRODUCTION

Globally, different schools of thoughts view inclusive education as a practice in which all students' access and gain equal opportunities to learning. The practice creates a condition, an atmosphere, and the space for all learners, regardless of race, gender, poverty, class or impairment to be accommodated and supported in a mainstream school without any form of discrimination or labelling (Yeboah, et al 2023). Quality inclusions are educational arrangements in which teachers create learning environments and design instructional materials that embrace and support learners from diverse needs in the regular classroom (Makaya, 2022; Mafa, 2012). In simpler terms, quality inclusion should be designed such that it accommodates learners with different disabilities.

A number of initiatives the world wide have been taken by international declarations such as Education for all (EFA), Millennium Development Goals(MDGs), Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) for achieving and entitling everyone including children with disabilities to a free and appropriate education(UNESCO,2004). The declarations aim to ensure that all children, regardless of disability, need or challenge, have rights to quality education (UNESCO, 2020). Regardless of global policy progress the status of quality inclusive education for early childhood development children with disabilities remains relatively bleak due to varied implementation challenges among many countries and governments

(Makaya, 2022).

A primary goal of early childhood education is to support all areas of child development including social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development (Nitecki & Chung 2016). In Zimbabwe, early childhood education (ECE) classes accommodate learners between 3 and 5 years. In such early childhood settings, learners from diverse backgrounds practice different skills together, interact and create friendships. Likewise early childhood inclusive settings serve as a vehicle through which children with disabilities have all the opportunities to learn through observation and interactions. Despite the importance of early childhood development in the lives of children, there are no special schools to accommodate learners with different special needs (Makaya, 2022). Inclusion in ECD programs signifies including children from diverse backgrounds in early learning setups (Mahadew, 2023). In most cases learners with severe difficulties in rural areas do not attend school they are kept home by their parents (Majoko, 2016).

Background to the study

The main goal of any educational system is to ensure the availability of quality education in early childhood centres. The provision of quality and inclusive ECD programs has been identified as the most equitable practice for learners from diverse backgrounds and needs and it lays a solid foundation for life-long learning (Nitecki & Chung 2016). The practice brings together all learners of varying disabilities, capabilities, backgrounds and the vulnerable and provides them with equal opportunities to grow and realise their full potential (Yeboah et al, 2023). Quality and inclusive ECD programs pave way for holistic development of young learners as it aims to expose them to quality experiences tailor made to address their individual learning needs. Inclusion has also been described as a program that helps schools adapt to the diversity of children (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). As such, quality inclusion emphasises that teachers need to understand diversity as an element that accommodates all kinds of differences, not just disability (Mahadew, 2023). To achieve quality education in regular ECD settings, children should be allowed to participate in all activities (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

Inclusive education underpins the international and national legal texts that define education as a public and fundamental good essential for promoting poverty eradication, equal opportunities, and social justice (Díaz-Vega et al. 2021). The general focus on school inclusion can be traced back to The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education that was crafted in 1994 which underpins the global impetus for inclusion. The Salamanca document features normative principles for inclusion that recognise institutions that include every student, highlight diversity as an asset, support learning, and respond to individual needs (UNESCO 2004; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). In keeping with the Salamanca Statement, this study adopted a broad view of inclusion that calls for equal opportunities and access for diverse learners, including diversities in race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, trauma, learning styles, and disability (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2004). On the other hand, European Agency (2015) views inclusive education as a systemic approach to providing high quality learning experiences in the mainstream schools that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners in the schools. A joint position statement by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) defines inclusive education as "the values, policies and practices that support the right of every infant and young child.

Drawing from the above citations one can say inclusion means that children of all abilities are fully included and benefit in a regular classroom, not discriminated to the side because their developmental disabilities that are not the same as their peers. It allows them to access the same opportunities that their peers are exposed to. In addition, one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) of the 2023 Agenda focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Ramos et al., 2021). The goal further acknowledges the need to guarantee universal access to education throughout life for all people from the approach of inclusive education, which is based on the principles of equal

opportunities, universal accessibility, design for all and equity (Mahadew, 2023; Ramos et al., 2021). Several policies and legislation in Zimbabwe advocate for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools (Majoko, 2016). These include the Zimbabwe Education Act of 2006 (revised edition), the Zimbabwe Constitution Amendment 2013 section 75, the Disabled Persons Act of Zimbabwe of 1996, the Principal Director's Circular Number 20 of 2011 (Majoko, 2016).

In Africa, research suggests that different countries have implemented policies on inclusive education at different levels. In Botswana, the Botswana's Inclusive Education Policy (2011) advocates that all children, regardless of disability, get access to education in any school in the country (Government of Botswana, 2011). The implementation of the policy in Botswana is grossly hindered by some teachers' lack of understanding of inclusive education, resulting in many children being denied equal access to learning Nthitu (2011). Although the inclusive education system has received overwhelming support from teachers since its inception in Ghana (Opoku et al., 2021), there appears a lack of understanding of the content of the inclusive policy among some Ghanaian teachers and this poses a threat to the successful implementation of the inclusive policy (Mantey, 2017). In Zimbabwe, a study by Makaya (2022) propounds lack of teacher training and limited resources in schools were leading barriers to the implementation of inclusive education practices. Similarly, in a study done in Swaziland, Maseko and Fakudze (2014) concluded that although teachers know how important inclusive education is and are willing to do their part in the implementation process, this is affected by a lack of the requisite knowledge and skills Furthermore, a lack of in-service training on inclusion was identified as a major barrier to the implementation of inclusive education in Oyo State, Nigeria (Akanmu & Isiaka, 2016). Of all these researches in Africa, none explored on quality inclusive education in ECD.

After attaining independence in 1980, the government of Zimbabwe embarked on campaigning for Education for All (EFA) (Makaya, 2022). According to Peters (2003), the EFA goals were to ensure that no child should be left out of school regardless of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, social, physical, or cultural status. The massive campaigns lead to the creation of homes and centres for children with different abilities. These included: Kapota Home in Masvingo and St George's in Bulawayo are some of the few homes that were established to accommodate people with disabilities (Mafa, 2012).

Being a signatory of the Salamanca Convention of 1994, the government of Zimbabwe is fully obliged to ratify and implement inclusive education (Majoko, 2016). In 1999, the Nziramasanga Report on Zimbabwean education affairs reported that the quality of education for children with disabilities should reflect the same standards and ambitions as general education (Mafa, 2012). Subsequently, many policies consistent to inclusive education were pronounced including: the Education Act of 1987 and the Directors' Circular No.1 of 2004 (Mpofu, 1999). The policies advocated for equal opportunities and announcing that that pupils with disabilities were supposed to be included in sporting activities in their own category whenever those without participated. Further, the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts, and Culture, in partnership with the Leonard Cheshire Trust, launched in 2010 a campaign named "Inclusive Education for All" which targeted 1000 children with disabilities in government schools (Mutepfa et al., 2007).

In line with the effort of the government to embrace inclusive education, Zimbabwe's 2013 constitution upholds the rights of all people, including vulnerable groups and those living with disabilities (SIDA, 2012). According to Section 83 of the Zimbabwean constitution on the Rights of Persons with disabilities the state and its institutions and agencies of government at every level should assist persons with disabilities to achieve their full potential and minimize the disadvantages suffered by them within the limits of resources (Majoko, 2016; Mpofu et al., 2012; Peters, 2003). Against this understanding, the school education system should be flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of ECD children in rural areas. It is the intention of this study to explore rural teachers' preparedness on developing quality inclusive early childhood development centres particularly in Mashonal and East Province.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for the study was based on social constructivism which has evolved from the work of Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, who emphasised the significance of society, culture and language to knowledge construction (Kober, 2015). Social constructivism postulates that humans generate knowledge and meaning as mediated by their experiences and their ideas in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Most relevant to this study is that social constructivism is an educational theory with roots in cognitive constructivism (Piaget, 1969) and socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory emphasises that reality and knowledge emerge from the social context and constructed by learners as they engage with others in collaborative activities. From this end, there was an opportunity to observe the teachers' experiences on quality and inclusive education in ECD centres.

According to Topciu and Myftiu (2015), social constructivist theory supports the idea that social factors like friends, media and adults facilitate and accelerate the socio-cognitive development of the individual through social interaction. The theory explains that knowledge is constructed better by individuals through social interaction and sharing information than when constructed through an individual experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). From the above explanations, it can be deduced that social constructivism teaches that all knowledge is constructed through social interaction with others and is therefore shared rather than an individual experience. Social constructivism accentuates the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructs knowledge based on this understanding(Mogashoa, 2014; Mensah, 2015; Kapur, 2018). Schools are the sociocultural settings where inclusive education was being practiced through the use of cultural tools like: class activities, learner-learner interactions, teacher-learner interactions, learner participation and lesson delivery. Kapur (2018) says that knowledge is socially constructed and learning takes place in social cultural contexts. In this study, the ECD settings became the sociocultural settings and the classrooms were social contexts where inclusive education is being practiced. The study had the opportunity to observe the extent to which the ECD teachers' practices in inclusive settings lead to quality education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology which follows the interpretivist paradigm, which is subjective. The study provided a detailed narrative description, analysis, and interpretation of phenomena related to teachers' experiences of the implementation of inclusive education in ECD settings (Denzin &Lincoln, 2011). In tandem with the interpretivist philosophy, qualitative approaches and designs are used in this study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016; Leedy & Ormorod, 2013), focusing on phenomena in the real world and a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The study focused on inclusion as a real world phenomenon faced by social actors(teachers). The methodology provided verbal descriptions to portray the richness and complexity of events that occurred in natural settings from the participants' perspectives. The qualitative research methodology was relevant to the present study because it assisted in obtaining an account of the experience of teachers to learners who may be facing difficulties in learning (Marshal and Rossman, 2016).

Research Design

This study adopted a multiple case study research design as its aim was to explore "current phenomenon in its real-life context (Merriam, 2015). Three schools in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe with were sampled to participate in the study. The design facilitated the exploration of complex situations by allowing the collection of multiple perspectives from a variety of sources, including contextual information (Yin,

2017). The multiple case study answered the question of ''how'' (Yin, 2009), which was in line with the research questions of the study, which questioned how ECD ECD teachers implement inclusive practices in the classrooms.

Research Sampling

The study purposively sampled three (3) teacher participants from three different schools. The three female ECD teachers were all teaching ECD classes. Purposive sampling means that the researcher makes specific decisions about which participants to include in the sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The study employed purposive sampling because the teacher participants had specific knowledge relevant to the questions to be investigated. The teachers had more than five years teaching experience and it was also assumed that they had first-hand knowledge of inclusive practices and could demonstrate a deeper understanding and good inclusive practices that lead to quality education (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019).

Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered through interviews and observations. The researcher adopted semi-structured individual interviews to collect data from the participants on their experiences in implementing inclusion in their classrooms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were face-to-face with each of the participants to explore their experiences on implementing inclusion in the classroom. Each interview with the participants lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and responses were audiotape recorded to ensure accurate capturing of data. All ethical considerations were observed during the study.

Observations enabled the study to clearly define prevailing circumstances using the relevant senses and to provide a "written photograph" of the current situation under study (Leedy, & Ormrod, 2013). The aim was to observe learners participating in activities; and teachers conducting lessons so that the researchers gain a direct understanding of a phenomenon in its natural state. The lesson observations were conducted with a view to write detailed field notes to achieve thick descriptions of the phenomenon. Each lesson observation lasted 20 minutes. This was the standard time procedure for each ECD lesson in Zimbabwe as scheduled on the timetable. The purposes of the observations were to gain open-ended and first-hand information (Mukherji & Albon, 2015) on how teachers were conducting lessons in inclusive settings.

Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis in analysing the data with the goal of answering the research question. The analysis followed the six-phase guide outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were read over and over again to get a clear picture of the responses. This was followed by coding the data in a methodical manner to ensure organisation and give meaning to the data collected. The coded data was then categorised under different themes and sub-themes (Bartlletti &Vavrus, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) focusing on teachers' personal barriers towards the implementation of inclusive education in a mainstream township school. The themes were then defined to 'identify the 'essence' of what each theme was about' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study are discussed under four main themes: inclusive settings and quality education, indicators of quality education in inclusive settings, challenges faced by teachers in inclusive ECD settings. The study gathered that the indicators of quality include: total development of the whole child, play based learning, friendly environment and parental involvement in children' learning and development. The discussions of the findings are aligned the research questions.

Inclusive settings and quality education

The teacher participants agreed that there are learners in their classrooms who need extra attention. The learners have different needs and they include: slow-learners, physically challenges, hyperactive, those with development delays, e.g speech delays, autistic and the gifted among others. The advantage of including learners with diverse needs in the same classroom is to provide them with opportunities to interact and learn how to relate positively to others. These opportunities are important precursors to form friendships amongst themselves.

One of the teacher said:

In my classroom l have two learners with speech delays. These children do not participate in story telling or dramatic activities. They isolate themselves from others and are quiet most of the times. It is my responsibility to see that these learners take part in all activities organised in the classroom.

The teacher further explained that quality in inclusive early childhood classes can only be maintained if all learners are included in the learning activities. In the same view, (Makaya, 2022; Ballard, 2012) suggests that Inclusive education is when all learners, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age appropriate general education classes were they receive high quality instruction so that they succeed. One of the teachers added that some learners with emotional difficulties are challenging to handle. She said:

I need to be present in the classroom always because of one boy who always beat others. Besides beating others, during group – work activities he always wants to dominate and does not listen to other learners' views.

Teachers reported that catering for learners' needs in an inclusive classroom leads to quality learning. As an education approach, inclusive education presents an educational space in which learners' respective needs are met, affording every learner the opportunity to succeed and become responsible citizens (Yeboah et al 2023). In addition, quality education in inclusive classrooms also includes maintaining good teachers-learners relationship. These relationships are an opportunity for teachers to know their learners' needs more and better. Quality education is essential at early childhood development stage. It is during these years that a strong foundation needs to be established for children to develop into better, stronger individuals Nitecki & Chung, 2016) because children need to acquire skills which children need to acquire skills that will help them enhance the physical, artistic and emotional aspects of their life and survive in this competitive world (Mugweni,2016).

Indicators of quality education in inclusive settings.

The participants agreed that quality education is crucial in early childhood settings. Participants gave their different perceptions on indicators of quality education. These included: skill development, play-based learning, friendly environment and parental involvement.

Total development of learners

One of the participants pointed out that the major goal of ECD is developing the whole child. Teachers are expected to design activities which promote total development of learners. The participant said:

In ECD, we aim to prepare the child for formal learning. In the preparation process, learners should develop emotional, physical, social and cognitive skills. Learners need these skills in preparation for challenging work ahead of them. If learners are not engaged fully in these activities, then we say that there

is no quality education in ECD settings.

Learners were observed participating in different activities including measuring water with different containers, counting using a variety of counters and telling stories. The study observed that some of the learners were not participating fully in the activities. The teacher would take her time to plead with the learner to talk. In agreement, the other teacher-participant opined that quality education is determined by learner participation in activities only. As a result, emphasis should be put in development of skills, at this level perfection is not important. It helps the educators to figure out learners strengths' and weaknesses at a very tender age.

Play-based learning

The study gathered that teachers agreed that young children learn through play. Participants said that all lessons should include play episodes. They alluded that exposing young children to manipulate age appropriate toys to manipulate allow them to during play. The study observed that as children were playing in groups, they took turns and share learning materials. Playing with developmentally appropriate materials lead to collaboration construction of ideas. However, there were two learners who wanted to play individually and needed additional materials. They refused to share materials with other and could not be accommodated in the groups. The teacher said that such learners need special attention assisting them to develop social skills. She added:

Learners like these two are very difficult to manage in a class of forty-five learners. The learners cannot interact or play together with others. Considering the teacher pupil ratio, these learners are neglected and cannot develop social skills. The teacher-pupil ratio is very big that I have to ignore the other learners and concentrate on these two. I suspect that these two children are autistic though it is not yet confirmed. If the learner fail to play then there is no quality education.

Play is a crucial element in early childhood classes. In one of the classrooms, another child was observed playing alone and the class teacher confirmed that the child was always like that. Due to diverse needs of learners in inclusive settings, not all learners like to play at the same time. As alluded to earlier, some learners like to play alone and that play need to be catered for by the teacher. Besides the challenges teachers might face in organising play, learning through play is an integral part of a quality early years programme with many benefits, including the creation of an inclusive learning (Sollars, 2020). It is through play that young children learn and develop, as well as make sense of the world around (Nitecki & Chung, 2016). However, research participants indicated that designing both indoor and outdoor activities for learners can be challenging due to limited resources.

Friendly learning environment

The study noted that the learning environment was characterised by clearly labelled learning centres dotted around the three classrooms visited. Teachers explained that the learning centres house different learning materials used by learners during play episodes. One of the teachers said:

The environment should keep the child and keep the child busy and occupied. The classroom should be equipped with different learning centres which include: The mathematics play, language play, dramatic play, culture play centre among others.

The learning environments should be developed to promote children's independence and their ability to make decisions. The environment should be responsive to cater for learners' interests, needs and desires

from diverse backgrounds. Learners need adequate space for learners to play. One of the challenges is that we do not have enough space for all learners.

> *We once had a learner who was physically challenged and had a wheel chair. Due to inadequate space, the wheel chair could not move properly and the child is no longer coming to school. In addition it as also difficult for the child to enter the classroom due to absence of ramps. The school do not have ramps. If the learning environment is not friendly and secure then it means we are still far of talking about quality education.*

It is the teachers' duty to plan and arrange secured and safe good quality learning environment for young learners. The argument being that children cannot explore and learn in these learning centres if the environment is not secured. The environment where learners can interact freely and openly. All the learning resources should be within the reach of children despite. The term "inclusion" is not only about placing learners with impairments in regular classrooms but it is about transforming classroom into a place where all learners learning needs are recognized (Yeboah, et al, 2023). On that note, creating inclusive learning spaces is an indicator of a quality ECCE programme (Mahadew, 2023).

Parental involvement in the learners' activities

Participants agreed that it is crucial to involve parents in the activities that take place at the ECD settings. One of the participant said:

> *Parents are the ones who provide the ECD centres with children. Therefore, the knowledge and information that parents provide us about their child's needs is both useful and helpful to us. As such, it is important to invite parents to participate in decision making and goal setting for their child.*

Teachers reported that parents support the inclusive educational model when learners with diverse needs learn together. The plethora of literature document that the role of families is important in child development since the family is the first field of intervention in dealing with diversity. On the same note, Mahadew (2023) stated that involving parents and the community is an important principle of quality, both in and out of the classroom. It is even more relevant in the case of inclusive education, which is much broader than formal education and should not only take place within the four walls of a classroom.

Participants reported that inviting parents to the centre gives them the opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other. This implies that learners, teachers, families, and communities all need to work together to create inclusive early learning spaces (Adewuni & Mosito, 2019). Family involvement is important throughout the life-cycle of children with disabilities, especially in the early years (UNICEF, 2012). Collaboration gives the opportunity for parents of children with same needs to build relationships share ideas through networking (Mahadew, 2023).

Challenges faced by teachers in inclusive ECD settings

Teacher participants in inclusive Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings indicated that they often face various challenges. Some common challenges faced by teachers in such inclusive settings indicated include: limited resources, diverse learning needs and classroom management, lack of training and professional development.

Limited resources

The study gathered that the issue of resources is a cause of concern in ECD inclusive ECD settings. One of the ECD teacher participant teacher highlighted the issue of limited resources and classroom management: The teachers responded that due to large classes, they were facing lack of appropriate teaching materials,

assistive devices and specialized equipment to support children with diverse needs. They added that the limited resources were making it very challenging to provide individualized instruction and support to each child. The teacher said:

> *Managing young learners is already a problem considering the ages and characteristics of young children. They are energetic and very mobile. I have a child with hyperactivity disorder.*

Research findings by Makaya (2023) reveal that if resources are scarce managing a diverse classroom can be challenging, especially when children have varying levels of attention, behaviour and social skills. Whilst participants agreed that their role is to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment as well as maintaining discipline and ensuring the engagement of all children, they blamed the school heads for not fully supporting inclusion. They requested school heads to support them in resource mobilisation for additional infrastructure in their classrooms. Makaya (2022) found out that lack of resources and lack of involvement from administrative staff and even parents are among the challenges faced by teachers in inclusive education.

In a similar study by (Makaya, 2022), findings suggests that most centres face a myriad of challenges such as lack of teaching and learning materials, lack of trained personnel for special education, inadequate and inaccessible infrastructure. The study noted that the challenges impede the implementation of quality education in most ECD centres. A similar research by Majoko (2016) argues that inclusive education requires adequate teaching and learning materials, such as specialized chairs, books, and equipment, among others, to accommodate all learners.

Lack of training and skills

Teachers in the study reported that they face lack of training and professional development opportunities in inclusive education practices. To this end, they feel that underprepared to address the diverse needs of children in ECD classrooms and may require specialized training and ongoing support to effectively implement inclusive practices. Any specialised instruction requires specialised training and inclusive instruction in ECD classrooms in not an exception. Participants requested specialized knowledge and skills to effectively address the needs of children with disabilities and adapt teaching strategies accordingly. In such cases, the study observed that teachers end up fulfilling multiple roles and responsibilities, including providing support services that they may not be trained for. In addition Mahadew(2023) also suggests that the diverse nature of children in early childhood education classes requires teachers with specialised knowledge, skills and competencies to design daily routines that promote the early well-being and inclusion of children. Teachers in the study reported that they face lack of training and professional development opportunities in inclusive education practices. To this end, they felt that underprepared to address the diverse needs of children in ECD classrooms and may require specialized training and ongoing support to effectively implement inclusive practices. Specialised knowledge will enable teachers to consistently and creatively modify their teaching strategies in order to include all learners' learning needs(Mabasa-Manganyi, 2023).

Inadequate time

The study found out that quality inclusivity calls for ample preparation time. However, there are time constraints as teachers in inclusive ECD settings often face time constraints due to large class sizes and multiple responsibilities. One participant had this to say:

Limited time hinders my ability to individualize instruction and provide adequate support to children with diverse needs. I often have limited time to plan and prepare individualized instruction due to very high student-to-teacher ratio. Additionally, there's lack of sufficient support from school administrators and

parents to address the diverse needs of children effectively.

The study observed that twenty minutes was the official time for each lesson. Teachers lamented that twenty minutes was not adequate in an inclusive setting. They narrated that the twenty minutes include the introduction, lesson development, learners' activities and conclusion. They added that activities involve play and organising play activities takes time in an inclusive set-up. They advocated for forty minutes a lesson if quality education was to be maintained in an inclusive setting.

CONCLUSION

The major goal for early childhood education is to ensure the provision of quality inclusive education in schools for the total development of learners. In early childhood classrooms, learners from diverse backgrounds learn together in regular settings. The diverse backgrounds include learners with different developmental delays, autistic, physically challenged, hyperactive among others. Quality inclusive education happens when learners participate fully in developmentally appropriate learning environments organised by the teacher. Learners need friendly learning environments where they learn through play. Learning through play is an integral part of quality environment (Mugweni, 2016). The study gathered that the teachers' role is to create the environment where individual learners' needs are met. It is imperative for each school, despite its location, to create a learning environment which exposes learners to quality inclusive education. Evidence suggests that quality inclusive education support the total development of learners.

The involvement of parents in children's learning is one of the indicators of quality education. Evidence shows that parents brought their children to school and supplied teachers with in-depth and useful information about their children. Parental involvement gives parents the opportunity to share ideas and information about their children. Reviewed literature buttresses the importance of parental involvement in school by documenting that parents' participation in learners' education lead to positive knowledge and social outcome (Ramos et al 2021; Mahadew, 2023). Collaboration of teachers, parents and school administration was identified as one of the indicators of quality inclusive education. Mahadew (2023) suggests that teachers need to engage in collaborations and communicative activities with other stakeholders in order to learn best practices. The best practices will allow teachers to design suitable and relevant teaching methods that address learners' diverse needs.

The study gathered that there are challenges that were being faced in implementing quality inclusive education. These include: inadequate indoor space, limited resources overcrowded classrooms, lack of training and inadequate training, inadequate time to perform activities. These challenges hinder early identification of developmental delays in young children. Early childhood development lay a strong foundation for every learner. If the delays are identified early; parents, teachers and school administrators can work together in meeting the needs of learners. It is the duty of all stakeholders to play their role in minimising the challenges faced in schools.

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